This essay examines some of the methodological problems associated with the analysis of popular music in an academic context. As it is currently conceived, interdisciplinary thought tends to reduce the specificity of its object by subordinating it to the demands of already-constituted methods and disciplines. I argue that, in the case of popular music, a productive interdisciplinarity would instead recognize the primary importance of the act of musical inscription, or phonography – the technological processes of recording and sound manipulation – for its analysis. Popular music’s fascination with the phenomenality of sound, from Elvis Presley through dub reggae and on to ‘post-rock’ and contemporary electronic music cannot be thought in terms of existing disciplinary methods. Instead, doing justice to the object calls for new intersections between disciplines and new ways of thinking the spaces between traditional disciplines that popular music inhabits.

trajectory of a word tossed like a screeching phonograph record
(Dada manifesto, quoted in Cormack 1998: 199-200)

I

Despite the rhetoric of interdisciplinarity that seems to be everywhere in the humanities today, there can be no doubt that what Derrida terms ‘ways of proceeding, socio-institutional practices, a certain style of writing’ (Derrida 1983: 35-36) appropriate to particular disciplines have not disappeared. Indeed, while the Sokal hoax brought the question of interdisciplinarity to the fore, what it demonstrated was not only the incommensurable difference between ‘ways of proceeding’ in the sciences and (in the case of Social Text) the social sciences, but perhaps the impossibility of the traditional concept of interdisciplinarity. The mutual incomprehension and mistrust between both sides in the debate centred on the questions of disciplinary competence and methodology, that is, the authority of non-scientists to intervene in ‘scientific’ debates, and the legitimacy of the interdisciplinary usage of scientific theories. Stripped of what one could call their ‘empirical foundation’, such theories become no more than ‘models’ or ‘metaphors’ for interpretation; likewise, extracted from their context, the abuses of science that Sokal and Bricmont endlessly cite become an excuse for a wholesale dismissal of post-structuralist thought (Sokal and Bricmont 1998). The
interaction between two disciplines, two ‘ways of proceeding’ becomes an interdisciplinary argument in which each side can think the other only in terms of caricatures by reducing the specificity of the other discipline, fighting over already-constituted borderlines and, finally, demonstrating that despite its rhetoric, interdisciplinary thought at present appears to re-inscribe disciplinary borders in such a way that, once more, they cannot be transgressed.

Interdisciplinarity in this sense proceeds ‘outward’ from pre-existing disciplines; yet, as Derrida suggests (with regard to philosophy), while there remains ‘the necessity of discipline, of something specifically philosophical, that we should not dissolve philosophy into other disciplines […] we need at the same time interdisciplinarity, crossing the borders, establishing new themes, new problems, new ways, new approaches’ (Derrida, in: Caputo 1997: 7; see also Derrida 1995: 109-114). This ‘crossing the borders’ in an attempt to go beyond traditional disciplinary legitimation is, however, ‘not simply interdisciplinarity’ in its accepted sense: ‘interdisciplinarity implies that you have given, identifiable competencies – say, a legal theorist, an architect, a philosopher, a literary critic – and that they work together on a specific, identifiable object. That’s interdisciplinarity’ (Derrida, in: Caputo 1997: 7). Resistance to the institutional framing of disciplines also resists the traditional sense of interdisciplinarity, which ‘confirms (rather than deconstructing) disciplinarity by establishing lines of communication among already constituted disciplines’ (ibid: 67). Putting the traditional concept of interdisciplinarity in question means rethinking the intersections between disciplines, their ‘lines of communication’, so that interdisciplinarity begins to occupy a borderline, a space (and time) of intersection between disciplines; interdisciplinary thought must begin to work on the gaps and spaces, the objects that do not fit disciplinary thought as such, that are not legitimated by current disciplinary practices. Deconstruction would perhaps be an example of an interdisciplinarity that occupies a contested space within the academy precisely because of its borderline status, its differential relationship to, for example, ‘philosophy’ or ‘literature’. The ‘intersection’ of deconstruction would therefore be interdisciplinary, if only we could agree what deconstruction actually was and if we could agree whether it was a method, an operation, merely a person (derrideconstruction?), or even a country. Perhaps deconstruction is interdisciplinary because of this refusal of definition, of conceptual closure, its perpetual placing of disciplines and concepts under erasure; despite the eloquent attempts of Rodolphe Gasché, for example, to rescue deconstruction for philosophy, the intersection of deconstruction and literature certainly opened literary studies to methods of reading that constituted the object as it proceeded, that did not apply pre-existing conceptual schemata to texts and did not reduce those texts it read to immaterial phantoms of meaning (see Gasché 1979).

The threat of deconstruction to the discipline, the institution, of literary criticism is summarised by Paul de Man in an essay from the late-1960s: de Man writes that ‘the main critical approaches of the last decades were all founded on