

CONCLUSION: POPULAR MUSIC, AESTHETIC VALUE, AND MATERIALITY

Popular music has been accused of being formulaic, homogeneous, manufactured, trite, vulgar, trivial, ephemeral, and so on. These condemnations have roots in aspects of the Western aesthetic tradition, especially its modernist and expressionist branches, according to which great art innovates, breaks and re-makes the rules, expresses the artist's personal vision or unique emotions, or all these. Popular music has its defenders. But they have tended to appeal to the same inherited aesthetic criteria, defending some branches of popular music at the expense of others—valorising its artistic, expressive, innovative, or authentic branches against mere 'pop'. These evaluations are problematic, because they presuppose all along a set of criteria that are slanted against the popular field. We therefore need new frameworks for the evaluation of popular music. These frameworks need to enable us to evaluate pieces of popular music by the standards proper to this particular cultural form—to judge how well these pieces work *as* popular music, not how successfully they rise above the popular condition.

To devise such frameworks we need an account of popular music's standard features and of the further organising qualities and typical values to which these features give rise. Popular music normally has four layers of sound—melody, chords, bass, and percussion—and each layer is normally made up of repetitions of short elements, these repetitions being aligned temporally with one another, with whole sections of repeated material then being repeated in turn to constitute song sections.

This repetitive mode of construction means that the elements of popular songs are not generated out of one another by a logical development. Not being so generated, the elements are relatively independent of one another, leaving popular musicians with considerable scope as to which of numerous possible combinations of elements to adopt. That lee-way is expanded further by popular music's constitutive pluralism—it works with a range of harmonic systems and sets of norms, for example for which chords can follow which other chords. In sum, the elements of any particular song come together contingently: this particular combination is just one of many possibilities, and may be literally stumbled upon by chance. But this doesn't reduce popular songs to being mere sums or aggregates. Typically a popular song *is* a whole—but its wholeness arises from how its elements coalesce, something that—beyond satisfying certain minimal harmonic and rhythmic constraints—they do insofar as their connotations qualify and interact productively with one another to generate higher-level structures of meaning. These structures bind songs together into meaningful wholes. In this way, popular songs are typically so configured that their materials generate their forms.

Popular music is also structured in ways that intensify its rhythmic dimension. Each element of each layer of sound has a rhythmic quality, and these qualities are enhanced by their relations with the percussion layer, as they pull either with the latter (i.e. normally to stress the backbeat) or against it (i.e. normally to stress the metrically accented beats). When these patterns of pull and counter-pull are repeated many times over, their rhythmic momentum builds up, and the tension between metric accent and rhythmic stress on the backbeat becomes intensified. As a result the music makes a palpable appeal to our bodies, affording us the opportunity to move in time with the music in ways that realise our bodies' inherent intelligence and creativity, as we make sense of the music's rhythms by directly mapping them in our bodily movements.

Furthermore, popular music has characteristic ways of handling meaning. Songs' meanings arise in a semiotic way: they are implicit, have an affective dimension, and emerge from the relations among stylistic elements and between these elements and extra-musical phenomena, including through their pitched and rhythmic aspects. This makes popular music continuous with the bodily-based realm of human infancy, in which the semiotic first obtains. The typical popular-musical approach to lyrics is consistent with this. Although popular songs usually have words, their semantic content is heavily constrained by their semiotic qualities, that is,

their rhythmic, pitched and other sensory qualities as these carry specific connotations that relate to those embodied by the non-verbal layers of sound. The constraints run from semiotic to symbolic more than they do the other way around. Furthermore, most popular song lyrics are located on a continuum from the formulaic to the unique. At both ends of this spectrum, lyrics' symbolic aspect—their semantic content—is treated as secondary to semiotic processes of meaning-making. This is either in that the content is treated as unimportant—only the sound and its qualities matter—or in that the content is treated as being important just in articulating meanings conveyed at the music's semiotic level. While including lyrics, then, popular music not only remains fundamentally continuous with the semiotic realm, but also treats the symbolic as being dependent on the semiotic.

Flowing from these organising dimensions of popular music are several ways that it presents us with truths about the importance of materiality in human life. By deriving form from materials, popular music presents form as dependent on materials and materials as capable of generating form, having a kind of agency in their own right. By giving salience to rhythm, popular music appeals to our bodies and takes on a bodily, energetic character. It thereby presents the truth that our bodies are creative and intelligent agencies in their own right, and that it is good for our bodies to achieve self-realisation, as they can when we move creatively to music. By giving priority to semiotic meaning, popular music presents the truth that bodily-based meaning is prior to symbolic meaning, and thus again that material, bodily processes are the root source of explicit meaning and intellectual understanding.

This gives popular music aesthetic value in a sense that derives from Hegel, for whom phenomena have aesthetic value when they present us with truth in a sensory form. Specifically, for Hegel, aesthetic phenomena do this when their materials are so organised as to embody the truth and make it available to be apprehended. Hegel has in mind the truth that the idea, as a rational structure, organises the material world, as in a beautiful aesthetic object its form organises the distribution, shape and make-up of its materials. Reversing that form-matter relation, a popular song's materials typically generate the song's form as a meaningful whole, thereby presenting the truth that matter is the source of form. And because that whole is meaningful in a semiotic way, with lyrics in secondary place, the truth is also embodied that bodily-based meaning precedes and preconditions explicit understanding. Finally, because the materials are so organ-

ised that their rhythmic aspects are heightened, the truth is presented that intelligence has somatic roots, as when we make sense of the rhythmic dimension of the music in bodily movement.

This has been my account of the positive aesthetic value of popular music. To be sure, it is only one of many possible accounts of popular music's aesthetic value. I intend it not to be definitive or exhaustive, but to open up consideration of other possible senses in which popular music might have aesthetic value, and of how to understand that value without presupposing that popular culture ranks below art.

On my account, the value of the form *popular music* is multi-faceted—it derives from several interrelated sources: the material-formal, rhythmic, and semiotic—and different songs and genres realise this form and its attendant values in varied ways. Not all popular songs and genres have aesthetic value, nor do those that have that value do so equally or in identical respects. For example, I criticised progressive rock for distancing itself from materiality, compared to many other popular music genres, through its usual approach to rhythm, form, and sound. Nonetheless, prog conveys this distance primarily through stylistic devices—that is semiotically—and as such it does embody one typical source of value in popular music. Some might argue that prog does so to such a high degree that it has just as much aesthetic worth as other genres that, say, are stronger on danceable rhythms but are let down by trite meanings. Others might argue that these meanings are trite because the primacy of the semiotic is being affirmed. The point is, there is still ample scope for discussion about which songs and genres have greater or lesser value and why, matters on which listeners are unlikely ever to reach any stable consensus.

Popular songs can also have value by participating in other musical forms, as with folk-rock or jazz-rock, or by sharing in some features and values of classical music, in the case of some prog. The popular music form need not be the only source of value in popular songs. Still, insofar as songs belong to the popular music field, this form is a potential source of their value, which, crucially, means that these songs can have value at least in part *because* they are popular music.

My aim, then, has not been to argue that certain popular songs or genres have or lack value, but rather to suggest a framework within which such arguments can be conducted and popular songs judged by the standards of the form to which they belong. Songs need not be judged *only* by those standards—if they hybridise with, for example, jazz or folk. But insofar as songs are part of the popular music field, the standards proper

to this form should normally be central in these songs' evaluation, and these standards need to be articulated in their own right. Once we have an account of popular music's aesthetic value, we can assess popular songs by the standards of the cultural form to which they belong—not by inappropriate standards that enshrine prejudices against popular music at the outset.

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