

The Value of Popular Music

Alison Stone

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An Approach from Post-Kantian Aesthetics

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CONTENTS

1	Evaluation, Aesthetics, and the Unity of Popular Music	1
2	Tracking Popular Music History with an Aesthetic Map	35
3	Adorno and Popular Music	69
4	Matter and Form in Popular Music	109
5	Rhythm, Energy, and the Body	141
6	Meaning and Affect in Popular Music	173
7	Meaning in Sounds and Words	213
	Conclusion: Popular Music, Aesthetic Value, And Materiality	249
	Bibliography	255

Discography	275
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Index	279
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LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 1.1	Lady Gaga, ‘Paparazzi’, vocal melody and synthesiser, timing ca. 00:39–00:42	8
Fig. 2.1	Ramones, ‘Judy is a Punk’, vocal melody, electric guitar, and bass guitar, timing ca. 00:14–00:25	48
Fig. 2.2	Wire, ‘1 2 X U’, riff (electric guitar), timing ca. 00:09–00:11	51
Fig. 2.3	The Human League, <i>Reproduction</i> , cover art	58
Fig. 2.4	Heaven 17, <i>Penthouse and Pavement</i> , cover art	59
Fig. 2.5	The Human League, ‘Don’t You Want Me’, drum-machine, percussive synthesiser, and bass synthesiser, timing ca. 00:20–00:22	61
Fig. 3.1	Beethoven, Symphony No. 5 in C Minor, First Movement, measures 1–2, first violins	73
Fig. 3.2	Beethoven, Symphony No. 5 in C Minor, First Movement, measures 57–66, first violins	74
Fig. 3.3	The Chords, ‘Sh-boom’, vocal melody and electric guitar, timing ca. 00:06–00:11	83
Fig. 3.4	Chuck Berry, ‘Sweet Little Sixteen’, vocal melody and electric guitar, timing ca. 00:13–00:24	86
Fig. 3.5	U2, ‘Sunday Bloody Sunday’, vocal melody and electric guitar, timing ca. 00:51–55 and 01:05–01:10	87
Fig. 3.6	The Prodigy, ‘Firestarter’, vocals, electric guitar, bass synthesiser, and drums, timing ca. 00:51–00:58	88
Fig. 3.7	Tubeway Army, ‘Are “Friends” Electric?’, A-section riff (synthesiser)	99
Fig. 4.1	R.E.M., ‘Losing My Religion’, vocal melody, timing ca. 00:17–00:26 and 01:14–01:30	123

Fig. 4.2	R.E.M., ‘Losing My Religion’, mandolin and acoustic guitar, timing ca. 00:01–00:17	126
Fig. 5.1	Michael Jackson, ‘Billie Jean’, cabasa, drums, bass guitar, and synthesiser, timing ca. 00:20–00:24	144
Fig. 5.2	New Order, ‘Blue Monday’, drums, timing ca. 00:00–00:03	147
Fig. 5.3	U2, ‘I Will Follow’, drums, timing ca. 00:15–00:21	147
Fig. 5.4	The double backbeat	148
Fig. 5.5	The Motorik beat	148
Fig. 5.6	The Winstons, ‘Amen, Brother’, drums, timing ca. 01:26–01:28	148
Fig. 5.7	New Order, ‘Blue Monday’, drums, synthesiser, and bass synthesiser, timing ca. 00:47–00:49	160
Fig. 6.1	Madonna, ‘Like a Virgin’, vocal melody, timing ca. 00:38–00:46	177
Fig. 6.2	The Rolling Stones, ‘(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction’, riff (electric guitar), timing ca. 00:00–00:03	181
Fig. 6.3	Joy Division, ‘Transmission’, drums, timing ca. 00:14–00:16	186
Fig. 6.4	Bruce Springsteen, ‘Born in the U.S.A.’, riff (synthesiser), timing ca. 00:01–00:05	200
Fig. 7.1	U2, ‘With or Without You’, first riff	217
Fig. 7.2	U2, ‘With or Without You’, second riff	218
Fig. 7.3	U2, ‘With or Without You’, third riff	218
Fig. 7.4	Neon Neon, ‘I Told Her on Alderaan’, vocal melody, timing ca. 01:11–01:18	227
Fig. 7.5	Buzzcocks, ‘Orgasm Addict’, vocal melody, timing ca. 00:01–00:06	228
Fig. 7.6	The Smiths, ‘This Charming Man’, vocal melody, timing ca. 00:16–00:19	229
Fig. 7.7	Lily Allen, ‘The Fear’, vocal melody, timing ca. 00:21–00:25	230
Fig. 7.8	Pulp, ‘Babies’, vocal melody, timing 00:37–00:47	237
Fig. 7.9	The Beatles, ‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds’, vocal melody, timing ca. 00:11–00:27	238

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.1	Chord sequences in John Denver, ‘Country Roads, Take Me Home’, Lady Gaga, ‘Paparazzi’, and U2, ‘With or Without You’	5
Table 2.1	Wire, ‘1 2 X U’, song structure	50
Table 3.1	A model of repetitive construction	90
Table 3.2	Tubeway Army, ‘Are “Friends” Electric?’, song structure	100
Table 4.1	The Beatles, ‘A Day in the Life’, song structure	112
Table 5.1	New Order, ‘Blue Monday’, first section, structure	158
Table 6.1	Joy Division, ‘Transmission’, song structure	184
Table 7.1	U2, ‘With or Without You’, guitar, structure	219

INTRODUCTION: IN DEFENCE OF POPULAR MUSIC

POPULAR MUSIC, VALUE, AND THE BODY

In this book I argue that popular music of the era since the Second World War—since the emergence of rhythm-and-blues and rock-‘n’-roll—is a form of culture that has aesthetic value. Its value is to affirm the central importance of materiality and the body, challenging the Western tradition of ranking reason and the intellect above all things corporeal. It might sound as if that is an ethical value, or an epistemic one, but it is aesthetic too. For post-war popular music affirms the priority of materiality to the intellect not by making explicit statements about that priority but rather by *enacting* or embodying this priority in how this music is typically organised. Post-war popular music *shows* us the primacy of what is material and bodily in how its components are arranged, thereby presenting us with a truth about the importance of materiality in an embodied and implicit manner—a mode of presentation that is characteristic of aesthetic phenomena, I will claim, following Hegel.

In putting forward this thesis I focus on popular music as it has evolved since, roughly, the early 1950s in Anglo-American contexts. Popular music in this post-rock-‘n’-roll setting is only part of the still broader field of popular music, taking that to be music made in a commercial setting for entertainment and enjoyment. From the 1800s onwards, such music has been defined against both ‘art’ and ‘folk’ music, the latter regarded as pre-modern or made outside the monetary economy.¹ Increasingly, music that is identifiable in broadly these terms as being ‘popular’ rather than ‘folk’ is

made across the ever-more globalised world. But for manageability's sake I focus on the West.

I do not claim that every single piece of popular music of the post-rock-'n'-roll era has aesthetic value, but neither do I selectively uphold the merit of certain genres, albums, or songs. Rather, I argue that post-war popular music, for all its breadth and variety, is nonetheless a unified cultural form, and that it is intrinsic to this form to affirm the body's importance, an affirmation that has aesthetic value. Popular songs, albums, or genres, then, can have aesthetic value *as* instances of the post-rock-'n'-roll form of music, not *despite* belonging to it. These songs might have value on other grounds too—folk-rock songs might have value by participating in the form of folk music as well as that of rock. But, crucially, the post-rock-'n'-roll form is a source of aesthetic value in music, not aesthetic disvalue. Given the hugely varied character of post-rock-'n'-roll popular music, this claim that it is a unitary musical form may seem dubious or false. Nevertheless, I'll argue that post-rock-'n'-roll popular music—hereafter 'popular music' for short—*does* have a level of unity that is compatible with its variety, hybridity, and porous boundaries.

An account of popular music's aesthetic value is needed because, despite this music's ubiquity, assumptions that it has little or no aesthetic worth remain widespread. Supposedly it is banal, salacious, formulaic, trivial, disposable, ephemeral, produced merely for profit to appeal to the 'lowest common denominator', and so on. Such assumptions have a long history. Critics condemned the Beatles' 'She Loves You', with its 'yeah, yeah, yeah' refrain, for its banality and decadence; the eminent Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm was confident that the Beatles would be forgotten 30 years later (Maconie 2013: 58–59).² Popular music has risen in cultural standing since then. The Beatles' oeuvre now has a high aesthetic standing, as do those of, say, The Velvet Underground, David Bowie, and U2. Yet many who rate these bodies of work highly do so by distinguishing them from branches of popular music that are deemed formulaic and unimaginative. Listeners often valorise 'rock' over 'pop'—or, in another variation, US radio station WBUS proclaims 'No rap, no crap', instead offering 'timeless music from the 50s to the 90s'. So even if relatively few people today dismiss popular music outright, most people still discriminate *within* this field using the same criteria—authenticity *versus* triteness, originality *versus* formulae, integrity *versus* commerce—by which earlier critics condemned this whole field.³

An alternative view is that divisions between high and low culture have collapsed, replaced by the stance of the omnivore whose tastes range eclectically over all of culture.⁴ But there are various ways to interpret the omnivore. If she holds all cultural products to be equal or thinks that cultural judgements just reflect personal taste, then popular culture has not obviously risen in status; instead all cultural products have been levelled. If the omnivore likes popular culture *as* ‘trash’—feeling cultured enough to ‘slum it’—then older hierarchies remain intact. Or maybe the omnivore judges that some popular culture really has as much aesthetic worth as some high culture. But on what grounds? If the grounds derive from the history of avant-garde aesthetic practices—if, say, The Prodigy’s ‘Firestarter’ is valued for being transgressive, shocking, assaulting our senses—then older aesthetic categories and hierarchies may still be supplying the grounds of judgement. In sum, we still need to clarify the grounds on which popular culture can be valued *as* popular.

Furthermore, not everyone is an omnivore; traditional aesthetic hierarchies have not wholly disappeared.⁵ Explicit condemnations of popular music have issued, for instance, from Allan Bloom (1987), Julian Johnson (2002), Roger Scruton (1997, 1998)—as, earlier, they issued from Theodor Adorno. His attack on the ‘culture industry’ still cannot be ignored, for it continues to feed, however indirectly, into many evaluations of popular music, for instance when counter-cultural ‘rock’ is valorised over mere commercial ‘pop’. The terms on which Adorno condemns the culture industry—as a branch of capitalism—continue to frame many evaluative contrasts of this kind.

It is against this uneven background that I uphold the positive value of popular music as a unified cultural form, and locate this value in popular music’s affirmation of materiality.⁶ I am not alone in linking popular music and materiality; this connection has often been made. To give just one example, John Sinclair, the manager and spokesperson for the rock band the MC5, declared: ‘The MC5 will make you feel it. ... The MC5 will drive you crazy out of your head into your body. The MC5 is rock and roll. Rock and roll is the music of our bodies, of our whole lives—the resensifier’ (Sinclair 2011: 28–29). Ironically, some opponents of rock hold similar views. For Allan Bloom, rock is rhythm-based and ‘has the beat of sexual intercourse’ (1987: 73). As such, Bloom laments, rock is void of intellectual content and is part-and-parcel of a cultural decline in which Mick Jagger and his ilk have assumed the authority once reserved for truly significant figures. Bloom writes on the back of a long tradition

of condemning rock-‘n’-roll for being savage, primitive, and mindless (on which, see Ehrenreich 2007: 1–9). For good or ill, then, popular music is widely seen as being linked to the body and affects.

However, some popular music theorists have criticised this view of popular music as ‘body music’. In *Performing Rites* Simon Frith argues that the view rests on a racist logic that runs as follows: Africans and people of African descent are more primitive and ‘natural’ than Europeans, so African music must be more instinctual and bodily than European music; much African music prioritises rhythm, so rhythm must be the instinctual and bodily factor; and rock-‘n’-roll too draws largely on black musical traditions and gives prominence to the ‘beat’, so rock-‘n’-roll too is primitive and savage (Frith 1996: 127).⁷ This *is* a problem with some versions of the body music view—including some of the celebratory versions, as when the (white) MC5 embraced the supposed raw primitivism of black masculinity as an alternative to an effete civilization. And they were not alone in doing so: popular music history is full of white appropriations of the alleged raw energy of black musical styles—as when Patti Smith sings ‘Baby, baby, baby is a rock-‘n’-roll nigger’ (on *Easter*), embracing the ‘outsider’ location of black Americans as a way to challenge the hierarchies of white America (Duncombe and Tremblay 2011: 37). Indeed, such appropriation was fundamental in initiating rock-‘n’-roll in the first place, as white musicians began to make music modelled on the rhythm-and-blues that black musicians were then producing.⁸

Further problems beset such ‘body music’ views. Sometimes those taking this view assume that popular music’s rhythms, energies, dynamics, and sheer loudness force listeners back into their bodies in some kind of pure, pre-cultural, and non-intellectual state. Similarly the body is sometimes envisioned as a reservoir of energies repressed by civilisation but breaking out at times—at rock concerts, raves, music festivals, clubs. But actually our bodies are not pre-cultural: they participate in culture through and through; we take on the habits, gestures, and behaviours that are expected in the cultures around us, and our bodily activities thereby become infused with cultural meanings.

Despite these problems, I believe that popular music *does* have connections with the materiality of the body and that rhythm is important to these connections. I aim to make these connections without assuming that the body is natural, devoid of intelligence, or affected by popular music by brute causal impact. My view instead is that popular music presents us with a truth about the importance of bodily materiality in how it

typically handles matter-form relations, rhythm, and meaning. To present this truth is to make an intelligent contribution to our collective thinking about human existence. And when we are drawn to move with the rhythms of popular songs, this is because our bodies are the sites of the practical, everyday intelligence with which we navigate the world. Rather than affecting the body with brute force, popular music reminds us that explicit intelligence is rooted in the latent intelligence of our bodies.

I'll focus on four ways in which popular music presents us with truths about the importance of bodily materiality, in how this music is typically organised.

1. Generally popular songs do not have the structure of a necessary musical progression. They are structured repetitively, not progressively; and their elements are contingently brought together then adapted until they coalesce into a whole. These songs' unity typically emerges *from* the interactions among their parts, rather than governing how the parts evolve out of one another from the outset. Songs' material components typically generate the form of the whole, not the other way around.

The idea of 'necessary musical progression' may seem puzzling. As I'll explain, necessary progression is something that some major music theorists—Adorno and Hanslick, for example—have valorised. On such theories, a piece of music exhibits a necessary progression if its elements (notes, chords and their groupings, with their rhythms and timbres) arise by explicating the harmonic and other relations embedded in earlier elements, ultimately going back to an initial motive, such as the famous 'short-short-short-*long*' motive that opens Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Popular music is not organised by this type of developmental logic, but rather repetitively. Each element presented at each layer of sound is repeated a given number of times, their repetitions aligning with one another and comprising sections, which in turn are repeated to make up whole songs.

For its part, necessary progression is possible on condition that there is a set of background norms or rules of harmonic 'grammar' that specifies fairly closely what options for musical development are possible at given points. Popular music is not devoid of norms, but it is a particularly pluralistic and hybrid form. It draws on and brings together norms and practices from the blues, early jazz, folk, Tin Pan Alley pop, and pre-

modernist classical music, while forging additional norms of its own. As a result, popular-musical norms regarding which musical elements can be put together, and how, are flexible. In any given song, there will typically be a range of musical elements that can be brought together, each option making roughly equal grammatical sense. This flexibility is increased further by the absence of a developmental programme. In a typical popular song, then, one of many possible sets of components is assembled and these components are then adapted into a unified ensemble: thus, the whole form arises out of material parts.

2. Rhythm is important in enabling these material parts to coalesce. Virtually all popular songs have explicit rhythm: a constant layer of unpitched (or, more precisely, indefinitely pitched) percussion. In relation to this layer, the rhythmic qualities of all the other layers of sound—vocals, melodies, chords, bass-lines, and so on—are heightened. For example, the bass guitar might emphasise different beats to the snare-drum so that their rhythms pull against one another. Rhythmic interrelations and tensions of this kind help to bind songs' layers of sound into a whole and to give songs a pronounced rhythmic character. This pertains to the body because rhythm has special connections with the body. We make sense of music's rhythmic dimension at a bodily level, by moving in response to it. This is not a matter of music having brute causal impact on us but of our engaging with its rhythms through the latent intelligence of our bodies. In giving central importance to rhythm, then, popular music implicitly affirms the body's centrality in our existence and encourages us to embrace that centrality by moving and dancing.
3. Just as popular songs' forms typically emerge out of their material parts, so do songs' overall meanings, including their emotional qualities, evocations of atmosphere, and articulations of social identities. These meanings arise as the connotations of the individual material parts of a popular song coalesce together. These are *semiotic* meanings, I'll argue, following Kristeva.

For Kristeva, the semiotic realm is where meaning emerges for the young infant, as its bodily energies and impulses becoming patterned through the routines, gestures, and interactions of everyday life, especially those unfolding between the infant and its main care-giver, usually

the mother. The infant discerns structure in these interactions by apprehending relations—of similarity, contrast, causal expression, and other kinds—among the phenomena around it, centrally including the mother’s speech. Pitched and rhythmic relations figure importantly here, as when an abrupt, high-pitched utterance by the mother conveys alarm. As the infant participates in these interactions, its energies become organised into affects—for example, a slowing-down of energy might comprise an affect or feeling of depression—where affects arise just as bodily energy come to be patterned and embody meanings. Thus, meaning first arises for the infant in the shape of affective patterns that embody, rather than state, meanings.

The semiotic realm persists throughout our lives as one mode in which meaning obtains around us. Advertisements; clothes; visual images; street furniture and architecture—all communicate meanings semiotically, that is indirectly, by how their components—say, the details of a sartorial style—figure into networks of relations, such as contrasts and similarities, with other details elsewhere. But music, including popular music, has particular continuities with the semiotic because of the additional role of pitch, rhythm, and affect in both domains. In sum, popular music’s meanings typically arise through semiotic processes. This gives popular music pronounced continuities with the bodily-based realm of infancy, continuities that qualify it as material.

4. However, most popular music has lyrics. Doesn’t that suggest that explicit verbal meaning shapes which material components are used in popular songs, so that these songs prioritise conceptual understanding over bodily-based, semiotic processes after all? I think not. Usually the content of lyrics is either treated as unimportant compared to the sounds of the words and music or, when lyrical content is given importance, this is because it is used to articulate meanings already embodied in the music and in the words *qua* sounds. Either way, explicit meaning is treated as secondary to semiotic meaning, and conceptual understanding as dependent on and emergent from material processes.

To clarify, then, I do not claim that popular music affirms materiality in the sense of giving primary importance to music’s physical constituents—overtones, frequencies, the shapes and temporal properties of sound-waves, and suchlike. Nor does popular music affirm materiality in

the sense that when we listen to it sound-waves have causal effects on our ears and the rest of our bodies—which is true of any auditory phenomenon. Rather, popular music affirms materiality in that (i) it gives organising primacy to the manifold *parts* of songs, which are material in contrast to the forms that unify songs; (ii) in that our bodies and their energies are invited into movement and creativity through popular music's *rhythmic* dimension; and (iii) in that popular songs' parts generate meaning in a specifically *semiotic* and thus material way—that is continuously with the processes by which affects and meanings first precipitate out of bodily energies during human infancy. What is affirmed here is that materiality has primary importance in human life relative to its explicitly intellectual aspects, partly because materiality and its processes are themselves generative *of* the explicit meanings with which the intellect is concerned.

Thus, popular music affirms materiality in a range of ways from more abstract to more concrete. In sense (i) 'materiality' is relatively abstract—as the manifold components of popular songs—while in sense (ii) 'materiality' is the concrete materiality of living, moving human bodies. In sense (iii) 'materiality' is somewhere in-between—a mode of meaning-generation with continuities with the concrete, bodily-based realm in which meaning emerges in human infancy. These several senses interconnect, in ways to be explored.

No doubt this schematic initial statement prompts many questions, some warranting immediate attention. One might object that, while popular music might have the typical *organising features* that I've identified, it does not follow that such music *affirms* anything at all, about materiality or anything else. An object might have organising features—for example my desk has four legs, a flat rectangular surface, and no adornment—but the desk does not thereby affirm any truths (one might say). I disagree: the desk *does* uphold certain principles just in its organisation: its parts are arranged to facilitate it functioning as my work-space; its sensory qualities are subordinated to its function. The desk is so organised that it effectively upholds the principle 'function over form', implicitly affirming its truth. An environment containing many such desks likewise tacitly upholds the principle 'function over form' in its spatial and physical organisation. This can be so even if the designers have never heard the Bauhaus slogan 'Form follows function' and only wanted their designs to work ergonomically or admit of cheap production. By analogy, popular songs can be so organised that they affirm the priority of materiality to the intellect, whether or not the individuals who wrote those songs took this view of matters. This is

not to say that individual song-writers' intentions are never relevant to songs' meanings, but their intentions do not exhaust the meanings. And among these meanings, songs can, implicitly, affirm truths.⁹

One might now accept that popular music affirms a truth—that materiality is fundamentally important in human life including as the root of the intellect—but object that this gives popular music *epistemic* and not aesthetic value. Indeed, the value *is* epistemic, but it is aesthetic as well, under a particular understanding of the aesthetic which I derive from Hegel. For Hegel, works of art—'fine' art, but also popular-cultural artefacts in my extension—along with some natural things embody truths in a specifically aesthetic way, in that they do not state these truths but *present* them in how their materials are organised. These truths are presented, *dargestellt*, not represented, *vorgestellt*. Presentation of truth is the hallmark of the aesthetic, for Hegel. On this basis I will argue that popular music's value when it affirms bodily materiality is aesthetic: popular music is typically organised so as to embody a priority of materiality, thereby presenting the truth that that priority really obtains.

The aesthetic so understood is not the same as the semiotic, although, on my view, both aesthetic and semiotic phenomena convey meanings implicitly and their modes of operation overlap. Semiotic phenomena such as popular songs convey meanings of various kinds, through processes of a particular type, involving relations among micro-elements, including pitched and rhythmic relations, and generating meanings with an affective aspect (as explained above). For their part, aesthetic phenomena present truths—following Hegel, truths of significant scope and scale—and do so in how they are organised, that is how their part-whole relations are configured, including the relations between their different types of parts (e.g. verbal and non-verbal). The fact that popular music has semiotic meaning contributes to, but is not the same as, its aesthetic function of presenting truths about materiality. For since it is typical of popular songs *that* their meanings emerge through semiotic processes, this treatment of meaning forms part of popular music's typical organisation, through which the music, whatever songs' specific meanings, presents a global truth—that meaning fundamentally obtains at a material level prior to that of explicit concepts.¹⁰

One might have doubts about this picture of aesthetic value. Why should the value of popular music be located in its *meaning* at all, rather than in its materiality just as such? Some theorists of popular music, Robert Grossberg for one, maintain that popular music affects us in a directly

corporeal, visceral way that short-circuits the intellect altogether, where this is valuable because it subverts—indeed reverses—the West’s traditional hierarchy of mind over body (Grossberg 1990: 113). This is a sophisticated variant of the ‘body music’ position mentioned earlier. In contrast, my view is that popular music affirms the intelligence of the body: the implicit, practical intelligence of our bodies as the seat of our agency, and the role of our bodies as the source of more explicit, conceptually based forms of intelligence that arise out of and depend on its more implicit, corporeal levels.

Some might think that here I am still effectively presuming that intellect is superior to ‘mere’ materiality, and that this presupposition descends from Hegel. Indeed, Hegel’s account of aesthetic value is often rejected, particularly on the grounds that he wrongly subordinates art to philosophy.¹¹ Nonetheless, I use Hegel’s account, first, because I believe that he is right to connect art with truth—although this connection need not be confined to fine art, and by broadening it beyond fine art we can simultaneously avoid subordinating art to philosophy. Second, Hegel’s account enables me to claim that when popular music affirms materiality this gives it aesthetic value. For many others have also claimed that popular music expresses the body and its pleasures, feelings, and energies. But this is not usually taken to be an *aesthetic* value of popular music, and so leaves unanswered critics who deem popular music low in aesthetic value, however ‘useful’ it is for our bodily self-realisation, social identity or sense of communal belonging.

Others might concur that popular music has (positive) aesthetic value but reject my understanding of what aesthetic value consists in. I make no claim to provide the only viable account of popular music’s aesthetic value. I offer just one way of giving theoretical underpinning to broader convictions that this form of music has value, in the hope of opening up further possibilities for exploration along the way.

THEORETICAL SOURCES AND APPROACH

In developing my account of popular music I will draw on continental European aesthetics. As I’ve indicated, I draw on Hegel, despite the problems with his approach, and on Kristeva, again despite her condemnation of the supposed oppressive world of mere entertainment (Kristeva 2002: 101). I draw, too, on phenomenological treatments of the body by Simone de Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty and, finally, on Adorno’s

work. For although he condemns mass culture, he offers an important critique of the Western trend for the intellect to dominate materiality, and an equally important account of how art can resist that domination.¹² Unfortunately, Adorno denies that popular music can contribute to that resistance, but we can use his own aesthetic theory to correct that misconception. Thus, with Adorno, Kristeva, and Hegel, I turn their ideas against themselves: these ideas provide intellectual grounds for valuing popular music, but only after critical transformation. We might wonder why I turn to their ideas at all if they require such overhaul. I do so because there is considerable merit in Kristeva's account of the semiotic, Adorno's stance on behalf of materiality and against the tyranny of the intellect, and Hegel's view that art is no mere adjunct to the serious business of life but *is* deeply important—even in play—because it presents truth.

The other body of scholarship on which I draw is popular music studies. Philosophers have so far contributed relatively little to this interdisciplinary field, with notable exceptions including Jeanette Bicknell (2015), Theodore Gracyk (e.g. 1996, 2001, 2007), Bruce Baugh (1993), John Andrew Fisher (1998, 2011), Bernard Gendron (1986, 2002), and Richard Shusterman (1991, 2000). Most academic philosophers, though, continue to focus on classical music, that is, the broad tradition of Western art music (see, e.g., Stock 2007).¹³ That focus is either explicit or, more often, implicit—with philosophers concentrating on problems that have been shaped by engagement with classical music and where it is neither obvious nor discussed how those problems bear on other traditions of music. The problems principally concern (1) the ontological status of musical 'works', which is especially puzzling when they are notated and performed, (2) how music without words can be expressive of emotions, and (3) how listeners are emotionally aroused by such music and how this arousal relates to the music's expressiveness (see Kania 2014). Philosophical work on these questions may well bear on popular music. Nonetheless, I want to examine popular music directly, in its own right, so the literature with which I engage is largely drawn from popular music studies. I shall not address philosophy of music directly, except for philosophers who have tackled popular music explicitly.

In concentrating on popular music in its own right, I do not deny that it has continuities and overlaps with other musical forms—classical, jazz, folk, and so on. These arise not least because popular music is hybrid, drawing on and bringing together a plurality of traditions. Nor is popular music's value necessarily unique to it: the values of other musical forms

may well overlap with those of popular music. Plausibly, for instance, emotional expression is central to all forms of music, even if its several forms achieve their expressiveness in characteristically different ways. These commonalities and differences lie beyond the scope of this book, although hopefully my study of popular music in its own right will provide useful material for such comparisons.¹⁴

Turning to non-philosophical scholarship on popular music, we find—with important exceptions including Frith (1996) and Hesmondhalgh (2013)—that theorists often bracket questions of value, doubt that objective value-judgements are possible, or approach evaluative practices sociologically, that is, as means by which some social groups assert or shore up their power or ‘distinction’ over others (informed by Bourdieu 1984).¹⁵ Even so, contributors to popular music studies have a shared goal ‘to rescue popular music from being treated as trivial and unimportant’ (Hesmondhalgh and Negus 2002: 6). The whole enterprise of studying popular music rests on the conviction that at least some of this music has value and does so *as* popular music, not despite being popular. I aim to provide one line of philosophical support for that conviction.

Initially, much work in popular music studies drew on sociology and cultural studies with little musicological input. In response, some scholars including Richard Middleton (2000), Allan Moore (2001), Robert Walser and Susan McClary (1990) called both for more musicological engagement with popular music and more engagement with musicology from popular music scholars. As of 2015, much more scholarship of both types now exists, a development entwined with the rise of Critical Musicology during the 1990s. This family of approaches attends critically to how social power relations bear on music and the evaluative hierarchy among forms of music—roughly classical/jazz/folk/‘world’/popular—rejecting musicology’s traditional preoccupation with classical music (see, e.g., Griffiths 2010–11).

However, important questions that figured into the earlier stand-off between musicology and popular music studies deserve philosophical re-examination. Among them is the question of how popular music has meaning. Earlier on, popular music theorists tended to think that musicology could only analyse songs’ formal properties without shedding light on what those properties mean. To access meaning, it was suggested, one must study interactions among audiences, musicians, industry practitioners, critics, and other parties—the musical ‘texts’ being only part of the story (see, e.g., Shuker 2001: x). The role of social mediations

is particularly evident in popular music, given that recorded songs are produced and received along with videos, fashion and dance styles, and cultural and sub-cultural groupings and activities, which do much to differentiate popular music genres.¹⁶ Others, though, re-affirmed the centrality of the ‘primary text’ (e.g., Moore 2001).

My argument will be that ‘secondary’ social mediations, such as audience responses, certainly come to bear on what songs and genres mean, but they do so in response to meanings already embodied in songs’ ‘primary’ stylistic features.¹⁷ Consider David Brackett’s discussion of stylistic differences between two singles released in 1983: Michael Jackson’s ‘Billie Jean’ and George Clinton’s ‘Atomic Dog’.

‘Atomic Dog’ presents a much denser texture with many more fragmented musical ideas overlapping with one another than ‘Billie Jean’. While the beat and ‘groove’ are very clear in both examples, ‘Billie Jean’, due to its sparser texture, presents a ‘cleaner’, ‘lighter’ groove. The resulting groove in ‘Atomic Dog’ is ‘heavier’ and feels more complex. Listeners may experience ‘Atomic Dog’ as pulling them physically in several directions simultaneously, whereas ‘Billie Jean’ offers a more unilinear, straightforward pull. (Brackett 2002: 73)

In sum, ‘Atomic Dog’ contains a lot of syncopation, ‘Billie Jean’ only a modest amount. (Brackett defines syncopations as ‘rhythms that produce tension against the basic background pulse’ [75].) Brackett notes further differences in timbre, melody, and vocal delivery, but the rhythmic differences are central. Brackett then argues that these stylistic differences were significant factors in the songs achieving different levels of chart success. Both reached number one on the ‘Black’ chart (since renamed ‘R&B/Hip-Hop’) but only ‘Billie Jean’ crossed over to the Hot 100, reaching number one there too. Hence, ‘the *sound* of “Atomic Dog” and “Billie Jean” is an important part of their story—how one remained in a musical ghetto while the other received an entrée to white, middle-class America’ (79). For Brackett, then, stylistic details—for example levels of syncopation—contribute to the overall meanings that songs acquire in social contexts.

These details and their meanings—popular music’s ‘primary’ layer of meaning—will be my concern in this book. To what extent do these features have their meanings by virtue of social conventions? Only partially so, I will argue; non-conventional factors also play a role. I’ll explore this

in relation to the processes by which songs' overall meanings precipitate from the connotations embedded in their material elements. When I speak of 'elements' I draw loosely on Philip Tagg's notion of 'musemes': 'basic units of musical expression' (Tagg, quoted in Björnberg 2000: 356). However, although I sometimes use the term 'museme' interchangeably with 'element', my sense of 'museme' differs from Tagg's. First, with Richard Middleton, I take it that 'the nature and size of the museme need to be regarded flexibly' (Middleton 1990: 189). Thus, an 'element' of a recorded song is any identifiably distinct component occurring at one of its constituent layers of sound. That component might be a bass-line, riff, phrase of melody, percussion rhythm pattern, or recurring sound. Such components are repeated many times over to make up a given layer of sound (its bass layer, for instance). The norm is that these various elements are brought together into a popular song contingently—they are not derived logically from one another. Second, Tagg takes it that these small-scale components always signify culturally and socially. While I agree with him that these components are significant and contribute to songs' overall meanings, I do not think that these meanings are entirely socio-cultural; non-conventional factors are also at work.¹⁸

Given this interest in how meaning emerges from stylistic details, I analyse some individual songs in detail—by Chuck Berry, the Beatles, the Supremes, Wire, Joy Division, Michael Jackson, U2, R.E.M., and Lady Gaga, among others. Rather than survey a vast range of popular songs, I discuss a few songs in some detail—hopefully still enough songs to support my general claims about popular music.¹⁹ Indeed, musicologists may find my descriptions unnecessarily lengthy, but I think that it is important to provide such descriptions because non-musicologists often struggle to identify songs' stylistic features. Yet we need such description to provide a sound basis for interpretation. Again because I want to communicate with non-musicologists, I've tried to avoid technical terms and to explain basic musical concepts in endnotes. I have included some notation, based on my analysis of recordings, but sometimes informed by existing sheet music arrangements to an extent. However, most published sheet music arranges popular songs for performance on particular instruments rather than attempting to capture songs exactly as they sound on record. Furthermore, notation has limitations with respect to popular music (see Middleton 2000: 4). Western musical notation—which assumed more-or-less its modern form by the seventeenth century—is ill-equipped to deal with timbre or slight nuances of pitch and timing, which are often

crucial in popular music. Other important factors—modes of recording, mixing, and production, including how stereo sounds are distributed spatially; sampling and intertextual reference—are not readily notated at all. Above all, popular songs exist first and foremost as recordings, and whenever we translate from that original medium—recording—into another—notation—we inevitably interpret (see Cook 1989: 121–2). Notwithstanding, it can be helpful to see songs represented visually; hence I use notation, for all its imperfections.

Some might think some of the songs analysed (e.g. Wire’s ‘1 2 X U’) are too simple to merit the attention. Yet popular entertainment has often been dismissed for its supposed lack of complexity.²⁰ To do justice to popular music, we need to suspend these hierarchical assumptions and be open to the possibility that simple artefacts can have as much value as complex ones and that simple songs can still be rich in meaning and interest. Rather than defend such songs by claiming that they harbour hidden complexities—which they may nonetheless do—we should allow that simplicity can have positive value in its own right and can also be a source of meaning—for example by conveying directness, honesty, or confidence.

TERMINOLOGY AND CHAPTER OUTLINE

I have used ‘popular music’ as shorthand for ‘popular music since the era of rhythm-and-blues and rock-‘n’-roll’. A possible alternative is ‘rock’, as used in, among others, Stephenson’s *What to Listen For in Rock*, Zak’s *The Poetics of Rock*, and Everett’s *The Foundations of Rock*. Yet rock is a set of genres *within* the broader field of post-war popular music. Rock encompasses progressive rock, glam rock, hard and soft rock, indie rock, punk rock, heavy metal, and many others. Borthwick and Moy therefore label rock a ‘metagenre’ (Borthwick and Moy 2004: 3). Genres of rock are connected because they descend from one another—albeit often by reacting critically against one another—and because they share certain features: the central role of the electric guitar; frequent use of riffs and distortion; self-positioning in opposition to ‘pop’, and sometimes to rap and electronic dance music (EDM) too. Pop is another metagenre: although pop is sometimes taken to contain all that escapes any other genre classification (e.g. by Frith 2001: 95), more commonly pop is subdivided itself, into (say) soul, disco, synth- and electro-pop, girl group- and boy band music, dance-pop, national varieties of pop, and so on. Arguably rap and

EDM are metagenres too. We might treat rhythm-and-blues as another metagenre encompassing 1940s and 1950s rhythm-and-blues, soul, reggae, funk, disco, and ‘contemporary’—post-1980s—rhythm-and-blues. Calling all these metagenres ‘rock’ is problematic and produces ambiguities about exactly what music is being referred to.

Calling the whole field ‘rock-‘n’-roll’ or ‘pop’ instead of ‘rock’ is problematic for similar reasons. Another alternative is ‘pop-rock’, as in Everett’s *Expression in Pop-Rock Music* (2000a). ‘Pop-rock’ at least captures the continuities between pop and rock, but omits mention of other metagenres such as rap and EDM, falsely suggesting that the rock/pop continuum is the only central one.

One alternative option would be to speak of ‘post-rock-‘n’-roll music’, but the disadvantages are that this is not an expression in everyday use; it risks privileging rock-‘n’-roll over all that has come after it, and over rhythm-and-blues; and it is cumbersome. This leaves the alternative ‘popular music’. Its advantage is that it does not falsely single out any genres or metagenres as if they exhausted the field. The problem is that ‘popular music’ is a broader category than the still vast array of genres that descend from rock-‘n’-roll. Since the nineteenth century, ‘popular music’ has figured into a tripartite division. This is between (1) ‘art’ music, (2) ‘folk’ music, supposedly the traditional music of the people rather than the elite, stemming from rural and pre-modern contexts, and (3) ‘popular’ music, also non-elite but this time aimed at the urban masses in industrial, modern, commercial contexts. ‘Popular’ styles and practices have therefore included cabaret, music hall, vaudeville, minstrelsy, community bands, jazz, blues, and country (although arguably the last two originated as kinds of ‘folk’ while jazz and blues have since migrated into ‘art’). The ‘popular’ has also included the mainstream pop of Tin Pan Alley and big band music. In sum, the post-rock-‘n’-roll field by no means exhausts popular music. But for purposes of this book I simply stipulate that ‘popular music’ refers to that field. We can then benefit from the non-exclusiveness of this expression compared to ‘rock’, ‘pop’, and ‘pop-rock’.

Further questions surround ‘song’, which I’ve treated as popular music’s basic unit. First of all, this choice of word indicates that my focus will be exclusively on popular music as music, and in fact as recorded music. I will not be looking in any systematic way at popular music as it is performed live, or at its visual side—clothes, videos, sleeve art, posters—although these are inseparable from the music for many listeners. The reasons are that I take it that recording is prior to performance in

popular music, as I'll explain; and that I regard the musical side of popular music as primary, which is not to deny that visual elements can contribute to the meanings of songs. But why focus on individual songs and not genres? Despite genres' undeniable importance, my aim is to identify popular music's overall form and positive value and to do so with reference to detailed concrete instances, that is individual songs. Hence I move directly between general claims about popular music and discussion of individual songs. Questions remain about how the overall form *popular music* becomes differently realised in different genres, but these are beyond my scope. Of course, it might seem over-ambitious or premature to theorise the whole form *popular music*. But if I upheld the aesthetic value of a single genre or group of genres then detractors could reply that the others still lack aesthetic value. I need to generalise about popular music, however provisionally, to defend its aesthetic worth as a form.

Another complication of 'song' is that ordinarily it means a vocal melody with or without accompaniment.²¹ That meaning may seem to fit the bulk of popular music perfectly well: after all, most popular music has vocals and these vocals are usually melodic to some degree (although not always—rapped vocals can be wholly non-melodic). Instrumental tracks, too, generally have melodies, provided by the electric guitar or synthesiser. But are the other layers of sound rightly conceived as *accompanying* these melodies? Certainly melodies and/or vocals are often foregrounded in popular music. Nonetheless, I'll argue that typically all the layers of sound in popular songs interact with and qualify one another so that, in principle, each layer is equally integral to the whole. On this view, pieces of popular music are wholes to which melody and chords contribute without having a priori privilege over other components. It is these wholes that I call 'songs', using the term in an extended sense.

Others have rejected 'song' for the different reason that the term occludes the essential place of recording in popular music, whether on vinyl, cassette tape, compact disc, or digital audio file. Better alternatives to 'song' might be 'track', 'record', or 'recording'.²² Yet 'track' and cognates don't mention *what* is recorded: music. A recording needn't contain only music; 'found sounds' (e.g. dogs barking, glass breaking, tyres screeching) are not uncommon, as are distortion, feedback, and other 'noise'. Nonetheless, the heart of these recordings is generally a composition of layers of sound—melody, chords, bass, percussion—which function under the musical parameters of pitch, rhythm, timbre, dynamics, and texture and are organised into a finite whole: a song.

Another complication is that in ordinary language musicians can re-record an existing ‘song’ with new instrumentation, mix the sound in a new way, and provide a new style of vocal delivery. Conventional wisdom has it that the result is not a new song but a new recorded version of an existing song. So perhaps we should distinguish tracks—particular recordings—from songs, where the latter are relatively abstract entities realisable in manifold ways. Thus Allan Moore identifies (1) *songs* by their metric and harmonic structures, melodies, and lyrics, arguing that songs are then (2) *performed* in the studio with those performances (3) recorded to constitute *tracks* (Moore 2012a: 15). Likewise Andrew Kania defines rock songs as ‘very thin structures of melody, harmony, and lyrics’ which are manifested in different ways in tracks (2006: 404). On such views a ‘song’ remains essentially a melody plus accompanying chords. I understand ‘song’ differently, to refer to the song-*as*-recorded—roughly equivalent to Moore’s ‘track’ (see Chap. 4). This is not to deny that we can identify melodies and sets of chords that are common to, say, the different recordings of ‘Always on My Mind’ by Elvis and the Pet Shop Boys among others. But I am reluctant to identify those recurring elements with ‘songs’ lest that imply that melody and chords are the most fundamental part of any piece of popular music. In fact they are just part of the whole, I’ll argue. Hence I prefer to use ‘song’ to refer to those wholes, although this usage deviates somewhat from ordinary language.

To outline the chapters to come: in Chap. 1 I expand on the pervasive and problematic impact that aesthetic values have had on the reception of popular music. I also identify some features common to popular music, thereby suggesting that it is a unified cultural form. In Chap. 2 I turn to the impact of aesthetic values on the making of popular music and especially on the division between ‘rock’—supposedly serious, authentic, and creative—and ‘pop’—supposedly manufactured, formulaic, and ephemeral.²³ Although aesthetics has had this problematic effect on popular music, the pervasiveness of its influence also means that we cannot set aesthetics aside. We need instead to find non-traditional ways to identify aesthetic value in popular music.

I begin this task in Chap. 3 with Adorno’s aesthetic theory. This may seem an odd starting point given his critique of popular music, but, as I explain, Adorno powerfully criticises the dominance of intellect over materiality in the West. He locates resistance to this dominance in art, and this view extends to parts of popular culture, including popular music—so that by his own standards Adorno should have valued it. He did not,

though, but condemns popular songs for having the structure of a mechanical assemblage, in which interchangeable parts (e.g. chords, bass-lines, rhythmic cells, melodic fragments) are slotted into a fixed framework, with the whole dominating the material parts. Despite himself, Adorno helps us here to conceptualise popular songs' typical organisation: their structure is *repetitive* and not progressive; and it is typically a matter of *contingency*, not logical necessity, which elements are brought together in a given song. But, *contra* Adorno, this does not entail that those elements are interchangeable or the framework fixed; once contingently brought together, musical elements are adapted to coalesce into a whole to which each makes an integral contribution. The shape and significance of the whole thus emerges out of the interactions among particular material parts. I elaborate on this 'coalescent' unity of popular songs in Chap. 4.

In Chap. 5 I turn to rhythm, which plays an important organising role in popular songs. Moreover, due to the essential connection between bodily and musical rhythms, the pronounced rhythmic dimension of popular music means that it invites our bodies to move creatively. In this way too, as with its typical matter-form configuration, popular music gives priority to bodily materiality. I identify another way that it does so in Chap. 6, in which I look at how meanings emerge in popular songs semiotically. In Chap. 7 I explain how the centrality of the semiotic in popular music is consistent with most of it having lyrics: generally, the explicit meanings stated in lyrics are treated as being secondary to songs' deeper levels of semiotic meaning. To conclude, I tie these strands together to stress the importance of evaluating popular songs by the standards of the cultural form to which they belong, not by alien standards unsuited to them.

NOTES

1. On the art/folk/popular triangle see Tagg (1982: 42).
2. Hobsbawm wrote as Francis Newton in the *New Statesman* in 1963 (see Newton 2007).
3. Venrooij (2009) argues that these discriminations, especially between rock and pop, have weakened even within the popular field. Plausibly, though, these discriminations have actually been revitalised in reaction to competitions such as *Pop Idol* and *X Factor*.
4. On the 'omnivore', see Peterson (1997); on the 'no-brow', see Gendron (2002: 326–7); and on the postmodern 'degree zero' of

- eclecticism, Lyotard (1984: 76). Peterson's omnivore thesis, which has spawned much debate, is pitted against Bourdieu's view (1984) that socially dominant groups affirm their cultural credentials and so power through their preference for high culture, especially in music.
5. Critics of the omnivore thesis—Bryson (1996), Washburne and Derno (2004), Savage and Gayo (2011)—have found that 'omnivores' continue to employ good/bad discriminations, often rejecting heavy metal, rap, and smooth jazz.
 6. David Hesmondhalgh (2013) also examines music's value, but ultimately for him most of popular music's contributions are social and political: it offers lyrical commentary on sex and romance, fosters forms of sociability, and furthers processes of democratisation. Popular music also helps to integrate body, affect, and mind, for Hesmondhalgh, and I agree.
 7. Criticising the MC5's logic, see Waksman (1999: ch. 6). Frith is criticising his own earlier view that 'Rock is ... primitive. ... Whereas Western dance forms control body movements ... with formal rhythms ... black music expresses the body, hence sexuality, with a directly physical beat and an intense, emotional sound—the sound and beat are *felt* rather than interpreted via a set of conventions' (1981: 14–19).
 8. For some (e.g. Shaw 1978) rock-'n'-roll just *is* rhythm-and-blues as practised by white musicians: the genre distinction here is basically racial. This raises a question about whether, in describing popular music as descending from rock-'n'-roll and not rhythm-and-blues, I'm already overplaying white musicians' contributions. Notwithstanding, I've stuck with 'rock-'n'-roll' because it is so standard to treat it as the start of a new musical era. Nor do I mean to imply that appropriation is necessarily objectionable—as the Patti Smith case shows, its politics are complicated (see Gracyk 2001). Philip Tagg (1989), however, cautions against classifying musical forms and genres as 'black' and 'white'. Yet in certain genres—for example soul, reggae, and funk—(1) many key practitioners have been black; (2) these genres have been important to the identities and political consciousness of black people; and (3) the principal stylistic reference points for musicians in these genres are other 'black' genres, for example gospel and rhythm-and-blues for soul musicians (those two in turn being 'black' in

terms of features 1–3). Along these non-essentialist lines we can identify certain genres as ‘black’ and others as ‘white’, relatively at least. Otherwise we risk making invisible the enormous contribution of black musicians to popular music’s evolution.

9. To clarify, *one* way in which cultural artefacts can embody meanings or make tacit truth-claims over and above their makers’ intentions is through semiotic processes, but semiotic processes do not exhaust the possibilities. That art- and cultural works can embody meanings beyond what their actual authors intended is widely accepted in the humanities today, often inspired by Barthes’s ‘The Death of the Author’ (1977: 142–8). Notwithstanding the hyperbole in certain statements of the author’s ‘death’, I assume that the general principle is well-established.
10. Presentation is somewhat heterogeneous for Hegel, just as there are different ways in which art-works can operate. They can offer a symbol or likeness of some content, or they can more directly put forth an item that instantiates or is an example of that content.
11. An alternative view of aesthetic value in the Anglo-American tradition is that things have aesthetic value based on their aesthetic qualities (e.g. gracefulness), which supervene on things’ physical properties (e.g. the shape and arrangement of a deer’s limbs and movements); see Sibley (1959), Brady (2003). On other Anglo-American positions on aesthetic value, see Stecker (2006).
12. Others might have doubts about such large-scale claims about Western thought. Certainly there are many counter-currents, but the dominant current has been to favour intellect and reason over body and affect, a bias visible even in the history of aesthetics (see Chap. 2).
13. Gracyk (2008) appraises the state of philosophical interest in popular music more positively, noting its growth and increasing legitimacy. One instance is the range of music books in Open Court’s *Philosophy and Popular Culture* series covering, among others, U2, Bob Dylan, and rap (see, e.g., Darby and Shelby 2005, Harris 1993, Wrathall 2006). Yet the growth and legitimacy of philosophical study of popular music are still not at the levels one might expect given popular music’s dominance in the contemporary world.
14. A stronger view is that no viable distinctions can be drawn between such putatively different forms as popular, jazz, classical, and so on. I argue against this view in Chap. 1.

15. On popular-musical preferences as matters of taste see, for example, Partridge (2014: 22–27) and Moy, for whom ‘aesthetic judgements can never be objective’ (2007: 83).
16. On popular music genres as distinguished by contextual as well as stylistic factors, see Borthwick and Moy (2004), Fabbri (1982), and Railton and Watson (2011: 41ff).
17. I allude to Lucy Green’s distinction between ‘inherent’ and ‘delineated’ meanings in music, the latter conferred on stylistic details through the social processes of their reception (2008).
18. Nor do I understand the semiotic in the same way as Tagg. On Tagg’s method for analysing how *musemes* signify see, *inter alia*, Tagg (2000), and, for critical comment, see Cook and Dibben 2010: 56–57; Middleton (1990: 180–3, 233–5). Middleton’s looser view, to which my view is closer, is that popular songs are composed of a range of manifold musical elements, each drawn from prior networks of meaning (1990: 16).
19. However, I draw on the findings of De Clercq and Temperley (2011), Everett (2008), Moore (2001, 2012a), and Stephenson (2002), who do examine large bodies of popular songs.
20. Much twentieth-century art has likewise been simple in sensory appearance—Donald Judd’s ‘minimalist’ sculptures, for example. But the valued trait of complexity remains, having migrated into the art-work’s underlying concept. See Danto (1986).
21. Bicknell adds that song has *words* and that this distinguishes song from other kinds of music (2015: 1). However, she rejects the ‘hybrid model’ that songs are composites of words and music, arguing that sung words are already musical. I agree, but unlike Bicknell, I also want to shift the meaning of ‘song’ away from vocal melody.
22. On ‘track’, see *inter alia* Kania (2006), Moore (2012b), and Zak (2001), and, on ‘recordings’, Gracyk (1996).
23. I am by no means the first to criticise these hierarchies as they manifest themselves at once in aesthetics, popular music, and social power relations; so have Bannister (2006), Blacking (1981), Dettmar and Richey (1999a), Frith (2001), Frith and McRobbie (2007b), and Leach (2001), among others.