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The morality of the social in critical accounts of popular music

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Talk about music, broadly understood, is commonly conducted and regarded as a neutral or transparent window on its topic. However, both vernacular and formal-analytic scholarly accounts constitute music as morally significant, and in doing so, articulate particular narratives of the social. One such contextual frame of reference for talking about music is presented and described here as 'art vs. commerce'. A close analysis is conducted of a sentence in a recent academic paper (with attention to its conceptual buttressing in antecedent texts), and of the opening of a research interview with a musician, so as to show how contemporary articulations of this framework operate, and to demonstrate that vernacular and sociological forms of such thinking are contiguous, and can be taken as analytical objects in their own right. The intellectual and cultural mechanics of this moral work conducted by the articulation of art vs. commerce are highlighted and evaluated. The argument is not that such forms of talk or writing about music are to be 'cleared out of the way' so that music can finally be attended to, but rather that these forms of talk serve to constitute the fields of meaning within which music is understood.

Keywords

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Abstract

Talk about music, broadly understood, is commonly conducted and regarded as a neutral or transparent window on its topic. However, both vernacular and formal-analytic scholarly accounts constitute music as morally significant, and in doing so, articulate particular narratives of the social. One such contextual frame of reference for talking about music is presented and described here as 'art vs. commerce'. A close analysis is conducted of a sentence in a recent academic paper (with attention to its conceptual buttressing in antecedent texts), and of the opening of a research interview with a musician, so as to show how contemporary articulations of this framework operate, and to demonstrate that vernacular and sociological forms of such thinking are contiguous, and can be taken as analytical objects in their own right. The intellectual and cultural mechanics of this moral work conducted by the articulation of art vs. commerce are highlighted and evaluated. The argument is not that such forms of talk or writing about music are to be 'cleared out of the way' so that music can finally be attended to, but rather that these forms of talk serve to constitute the fields of meaning within which music is understood.

Keywords: Critique of Neoliberalism, Discourse Analysis, Ethnomethodology, Marxist Sociology of Culture, Popular Music, Sociology of Aesthetics, Sociology of Popular Music, Talk about Music, Talk-in-Interaction, Texts-as-Read

Introduction

The following paragraphs are largely centred on this sentence, which is drawn from a recent chapter by David Hesmondhalgh (2013: 141):

In a series of articles and chapters Matt Stahl has brought legal, political and cultural theory together to suggest that the incorporation of subjectivity into capitalism acts as a kind of pacifying device in the era of neo-liberalism and that popular music's democratic promise that 'you can do this too' is a particularly salient way in which 'liberal society' promises an end to alienation and appropriation by promising independence and autonomy (Stahl, 2006: 23).

For ease of reference, the same sentence can be found in Hesmondhalgh (2010: 271), [available online](#). It is an example of one of the genres in which academics produce descriptions of music as a 'problem'; the cultural, intellectual, and political means through which academics problematise music, and the manner in which these means are interwoven. The warrant for the argument to follow is that moral frameworks are developed and deployed in talk and writing about music. Attending closely and explicitly to these frameworks is of interest, as a means of understanding how music signifies socially and how this is expressed and managed socially, and it is of interest as a means of understanding the range of discursive practices that make music intelligible (and morally so) as a social and cultural form.

The interest is, then, in the moral work the sentence above conducts: the socio-logic of the sentence, and how we might draw out and interrogate this

socio-logic, and make explicit what it tacitly mobilises and elides. By 'moral work', I mean the particular means by which it 'gets things done'. It exhibits or expresses senses of the social world: senses of how it is, and how it could be, which have a moral cast. We can see by looking at the sentence what it deems morally good, and what it deems morally bad. We can even see that it exhibits morally approved ways of validating claims as to what is to be deemed good and bad.

This moral work can be shown through indicating the various ideas, theories and texts the sentence invokes to make the sense that it makes: how it is nested in this way atop a kind of palimpsest of textual representations of intellectual perspectives. The approach in what follows is informed by ethnomethodological orientations to talk and text (Garfinkel and Sacks 1986; Watson 2009; Wieder 1974). The objective of the exercise is to highlight the roles played by the genres or discourses, modes of talk, ways of writing, referential frameworks, within which music is embedded and described. As such, this is part of a broader project about how people make sense about music, how music is produced, mobilised, and invoked in orderly ways in talk and writing about it: the ways in which discussions and descriptions of music function as both practical and professional sociologies.

Attending to these sociologies has some benefit, as a way of highlighting the role of discourse and talk in producing and ascribing meaning for music, and in foregrounding accounts of the social world as they are expressed with respect to, or more precisely *through* discussions and descriptions of music. The aspiration for what follows is one of practical analytical adequacy with respect to the mechanics of the accounts considered, rather than an argument for demonstrably extensive applicability for the analysis. Attending very closely to how we might unpack particular instances can hopefully facilitate some reflection on taken-for-granted and widely used contemporary critical frameworks for discussing music and thereby providing it with a particular moral sense.

Specifying a frame of reference

In order to contextualise what follows, it might help to start at the beginning. More specifically, at the beginning of an interview, conducted by my colleague Annalise Friend ('I' in the transcript) in November 2011:

DM550023

1. I: uh:m↑SO (0.3) tell me about you and music↓your
2. involvement in music
3. (0.4)
4. R: ['h h h h °music°] (1.12)
5. I: [uhh huh huh]
6. R: music as an↑industry↓or music as an↑a:rt form↓
7. (0.1)
8. I: a:h both (0.4) >why don't we start< with ↓industry

This is a rather unremarkable opening to an interview about music. As will be shown presently, this is why it provides a useful starting point from which to begin an exploration of the sentence quoted above. It is in its ordinariness that we can see what kinds of work go in to framing music as a topic, and how its topicalisation is also immediately its contextualisation (whatever nominated context that might be). The opening solicitation is followed by a pause, and the response at line 4 is a sustained out-breath with a quiet and ruminative echo of the word 'music', overlapping with a chuckle from the interviewer. Lines 4 to 6 inclusive are significant, and can be taken as interactional trouble. In a sense both parties are here 'feeling their way in' to the intersubjective space of the interview, with the participant initiating an exploration of what an interview account of 'involvement in music' might sound like and how it might begin.

In other instances in our interviews, some participants initiate biographical narratives as context at or around this juncture, with words to the effect of 'it started when ...'. This is an orientation the participant in this extract elected to pursue later on in the interview, discussing her mother's relationship with music. But here, after another pause, at line 6 the participant 'reframes' music in another interrogative, and thereby reformulates the question in specifying possible frameworks within which the topic can be addressed. The initial question is therefore problematised; it is oriented to as containing insufficient contextual information and requiring clarification through respecification. The question, effectively, is 'dispreferred', and returned to the interviewer in a revised form.

In the context of the interview, the question at line 6 can be understood as doing some 'identity work'. Finding herself in the opening sequence of an interview, the participant is obviously aware that she has been selected to be interviewed on the basis of her being assigned and/or claiming membership of some category (in this instance, 'musician'), and that, as such, she will be expected to reflect out loud on her experiences as an incumbent of that category. The response thus furnishes senses, in what we can call a frame of reference, in which the participant is competently interviewable, and elicits a preference from the interviewer as to which should be prioritised in the upcoming flow of talk. The choice offered to the interviewer in this return is a binary, soliciting her assent to the proposed contextual frames and her prioritisation and sequencing of them – which the interviewer supplies at line 8, nominating the proposed sequence as it was initially formulated. To endorse this frame by accepting the proposed contexts and topic order, as the interviewer rightly does, is also in this instance to accept the construction of music (and all that this particular construction implies) being talked into being in the way the participant has proposed. And of course, the contexts made available to the interviewer in the frame are:

music as an[↑]industry[↓] or music as an[↑]art form[↓]

A longstanding dualism is immediately invoked, with all of its attendant cultural and political implications, a frame which, for the sake of convenience, we can describe as 'art vs. commerce'.

Perhaps the most immediate implication of this framing for the business at hand of the interview itself is that the two contexts are mobilised as distinct: they cannot, in the immanent local reasoning of the interview, be addressed simultaneously because they are not the same. Both can be discussed, but only one after another, because musical creativity and artistry and 'the music industry' are essentially incommensurable. The immediate pragmatic implication of the iteration of this contextual frame, then, is a proposed topical structure and order for the talk to come. Note also that the sequence – industry first, artistry second – can also be said to do some work, insofar as it foreshadows the possibility (acknowledged and pursued by the interviewer) of some insight into what it is like to actually work, for money, as a musician, and the possibility also that this information might be of particular value.

In this sense, the context of the talk (an interview), the contextual frame for the topic (the senses in which music might be discussed), and the sequential structure of the talk (the coproduction of the topic question and frame across turns) are interrelated. This is not incidental (Watson 1997). I draw attention to the local production of contextual frame in this doubled sense (the local context of the interview, where some sequential and procedural sense must be sketched as to how talk is to be done, and the context of music and how to discuss it, where some framework is required and consequently mobilised so as to begin to 'make sense' of music itself), because this is a constitutive feature of how music (and indeed other and perhaps any objects of talk at large) is made intelligible as an interactional resource; how it is 'framed' in its topicalisation.

This dichotomy can be the focus of analytical interest: why talk about music in that way, at that time? What does this sort of talk accomplish? How do interactants make their sense of these sorts of statements explicit to their interlocutors? As Schegloff and Sacks famously ask: *why that now?*: 'a pervasively relevant issue (for participants) about utterances in conversation is "why that now", a question whose analysis may also be relevant to find what "that" is' (1974: 241). After all, a framework such as art vs. commerce is 'culture in action' if anything is, a recognisable resource, a component in a well-established and highly developed repertoire for doing talk about music, and thereby for doing valuation and categorisation in and through such talk.

Reading the social off

The statements in this interview opening are useful to consider, in terms of their interactional effects, and thereby their effects for the production of meaning within the context of the interview. The binarisation in this instance of talk presents a good counterpoint with which to illuminate the distinctive nature of the contemporary academic articulation of art vs. commerce, as it can be seen in the Hesmondhalgh quote. To elaborate briefly on the justificatory underpinnings of this: the professional sociology of music and the vocabularies and registers of its texts can be taken to be more specialised articulations of the vernacular, laic or practical sociology of music, as articulated by listeners, musicians, and other interested parties (rather than ordinary language being taken as a degenerate, imprecise, or corrupted version of academic discourse).

In sociological use, as in other uses, this framework facilitates the production of a narrative for describing what musical activity is and how it should be understood, which in turn mobilises particular ideas of the social and what that is and how that should be understood. Hence, the sentence in question:

In a series of articles and chapters Matt Stahl has brought legal, political and cultural theory together to suggest that the incorporation of subjectivity into capitalism acts as a kind of pacifying device in the era of neo-liberalism and that popular music's democratic promise that 'you can do this too' is a particularly salient way in which 'liberal society' promises an end to alienation and appropriation by promising independence and autonomy (Stahl, 2006: 23).

This takes the layered form of a story about a story. That is, it is a story about popular music, being itself a (misleading, or untrue) story about capitalism. By way of justification, rather like a kind of *mise en abyme*, this story, too, is couched by being a reference to work by Matt Stahl, where that work is assembled out of an integration of 'legal, political, and cultural theory'. The grounds for the assertion are in this sense displaced: dispersed across the writings of Stahl, which themselves in turn synthesise entire ranges of 'theory'. What constitutes 'theory' is not here specified, but by name and by modifier ('legal, political and cultural'), it seems to legitimate the argument that follows its mention. This is itself indicative of a kind of lay theory; a tacit value system for how to 'do' epistemological warrant.

The story being told (about how popular music tells a story about capitalism) can be told, because Stahl has in a series of places shown us the story (rather than telling it in one sitting, so to speak). In an interesting way, the 'truthiness' of the account is bolstered by there *not* being a direct reference for it, it is, rather, something which is coming to light to and through the work of Matt Stahl, because it can be perceived somehow where legal, political, and cultural theory are brought together.

This story, about popular music revealing something of capitalism or being a sort of latent symptom of it, is a sense-making resource, an instance of a genre of interpretive talk. As a frame of reference, a construct to think with and through, it is also a medium of sociality: it facilitates and imagines a 'solidary we' of readers: this is a further sense to the moral work of the sentence as an element in a text-as-read. A formally developed, culturally authoritative, intellectually expressed iteration of the art vs. commerce dichotomy is used to invoke, describe and critique a 'bigger picture' context in which the meaningfulness of musical practice can best be understood – in which it can be understood for what it really is. What social universe does the sentence point at, and how does it accomplish this?

It can be broken into its various clausal components so that this can be shown. The top and tail of the sentence:

In a series of articles and chapters Matt Stahl has brought legal, political and cultural theory together ... (Stahl, 2006: 23).

The reference given is to Matt Stahl's doctoral dissertation. A range of publications by Stahl is available however (2004, 2008, 2009, 2012). The 2012 volume contains material from the 2004 and 2008 book chapters. In the interests of chronological development, consider the 2004 chapter, the first

publication from Stahl. In this chapter, Stahl writes compellingly about *American Idol*, arguing that one of the key features of the reality TV/singing contest genre, and presumably at least in part the basis of its appeal and success, is how it articulates and dramatises precarious conditions of employment:

The music industry becomes a metaphor for the new economy: in recent decades, workers at all levels of the occupational structure have been learning first-hand some of the institutional realities faced by performers since the advent of mass culture: that employment insecurity and pressure constantly to expand skill sets in careers punctuated by regular, consequential auditions are the rule rather than the exception (2004: 173).

Where does this 'becoming a metaphor' take place? It takes place, initially, within Stahl's written argument, as a kind of theoretical and intellectual manoeuvre, which is simultaneously an aesthetic and political judgement. The 'new economy' can be 'read off' from the music industry. That this can be done is evidence of the fact that the 'becoming' has transpired, albeit, at this stage, through a glass darkly. Here, as elsewhere where we encounter art vs. commerce, 'the music industry' is the harbinger of 'industry' at large, most significantly, in terms of its use of labour and the human costs of this use. It is not just that art has been corrupted or collapsed by commerce.

As with the story-within-a-story that is the sentence from Hesmondhalgh, this is a particular way to 'read culture', and to 'write culture', metonymically. It is perhaps the canonical way of doing so: 'to rewrite the surface categories of a text in the stronger language of a more fundamental interpretive code' (Jameson 1981: 60). Presumably, when something 'becomes a metaphor' for something else, this happens at the ideational or discursive level, where the latter is the final arbiter of what social practice means and how it is to be interpreted. Culture becomes (is) a metaphor for social relations. The becoming-a-metaphor, the discovery of the metaphoricality, implies seeing what something is really about, as when Geertz comes to understand what the Balinese cockfight is really about, which is to say: what it is a metaphor of (1973). The transposition of something like 'practice', through some process of becoming, into metaphor, is a significant move *up* or *out* from a less contentious observation, such as the following from Stahl's second publication:

American Idol cultivates a reserve army of institutionally oriented proletarian peddlers of entertainment labour power on the absurdly remote promise of stratospheric stardom (Stahl 2008: 233).

This move up or out has been characterised as follows:

to think about or to analyse the complexity of the real, the act of practice of thinking is required; and this necessitates the use of the power of abstraction and analysis, the formation of concepts with which to cut into the complexity of the real, in order precisely to reveal and bring to light relationships and structures which cannot be visible to the naked eye, and which can neither present nor authenticate themselves (Hall 1980: 67).

Like Veblen's famous analogy from 'the learned class' to the priestly class, it is the peculiar role of the intellectual here to see into the beyond, to penetrate the veil (2007: 238-239). The relationships and structures of interest cannot present themselves to us, and so also cannot authenticate themselves – or be authenticated. We could consider this kind of reading/writing 'anti-empirical'.

Periodic references are made to empirical phenomena, but they are secondary to the argument overall. Highly specific forms of critical argument regarding labour, creativity, and commodification are in this mode the ultimate arbitration. In a sense, empirical matters are means to this particular end, which is honoured as the most moral end to scholarly writing. There may be truth-like narratives, which 'cut into the complexity of the real' and thereby presumably help illuminate this, but they themselves seem to have the same status as the becoming-metaphors they identify.

There is, then, a 'secret' of sorts: viewers do not really know why they like *American Idol*. They might not even know why they like any of the 'quality' cultural material they consume – that is, whatever remaining forms of cultural expression exist which are not irremediably incorporated by capital. Stahl does not discuss what such 'authentic' forms might look or sound like, in the same way that Hesmondhalgh does not really elaborate on what is meant by 'neoliberalism', but such forms are implied by the logic of the argument. After all, how does the critique of commercial music refer if there is no space imagined outside of the commercial?

Interestingly, whether viewers do know why they like things Stahl might also approve of does strange things to the argument either way. If they do know why they like the 'quality' material – we could call it 'art' – it is unclear how they can recognise and differentiate it, and if they do not, it is unclear how the commercial is to be differentiated from it. Nor does this problem go away if the argument mobilises 'quality' art as entirely manufactured in much the same way as *American Idol*. There are tacit and unexplicated criteria of value here.

According to the argument, *American Idol* 'speaks to' viewers because they can somehow discern their own predicament in it; culture is a distorted, murky reflection of the realities of production. Viewers insensibly recognise (more precisely, they misrecognise) how the show is hailing them. Even worse, though, the show does not just present something informative and pertinent, however obliquely, about the predicament we are collectively in. The way in which it does so, and the salvation that it offers (recursively, itself as a narrative dynamic of such salvation, which viewers may then inspect their own surroundings for instances of, into which they might optimistically insert themselves), is something of a con. The promise Hesmondhalgh describes is illusory – as Stahl puts it, 'absurdly remote'. Sadly, most or many people apparently continue to be drawn in by it, and presumably misguidedly continue to hope that it will be borne out. The distinctiveness of the critical academic position is, firstly, that the metaphoricality of cultural form can be clearly made out and named, and secondly, that it can be subject to moral judgement – that just the sort of moral work being unpacked here can be conducted through framing the show in this sort of way. This moral work implies the existence of people who have not (yet) grasped the metaphorical status of cultural form, and, by extension also *us*, the readers, writers and knowers who have.

Astute readers might here ponder the risk of a kind of naïve verificationism doing damage to the line of argument I am trying to develop here. For anything to be seen or understood by anyone, anterior 'assembly work' must have been

conducted to give that 'anything' precisely the discrete and unitary thingness or *haecceity* which then makes it appear to be something about which understanding could come about (Neyland 2012). Much the same process occurs in any verification that can be conducted. The argument here is not only that it makes a difference that there is no particular way to confirm or refute the assertions of the critical reading tradition we are considering, it is that the assembly work that goes in to delineating where (for instance) the beginning and ending of *American Idol* are (or the beginning and ending of particular interpretive and critical traditions for understanding media and culture) is wholly tacit. That is a 'complexity of the real' that would bear scrutiny productively.

Invoking neoliberal subjects

Thinking, talking, and writing about music, is here a way to think, talk, and write about the social, what the social is, and what it could be. It is a way to *enact* versions of the social. There are specific means of doing this work: rendering 'liberal society' as such, for instance, suggests that whatever the referent is for that, it is perhaps not so liberal or societal after all. Things are not what they seem.

To return, then:

the incorporation of subjectivity into capitalism acts as a kind of pacifying device in the era of neo-liberalism

The 'incorporation of subjectivity into capitalism' is distinct from 'alienation' in the classical sense. It implies doubly alienated subjects, alienated from their own alienation. The derivation is more Foucault than Marx. Subjectivity, personhood, the production of discrete selves and their contemporary contours, is absorbed into the process of capitalism. That is to say, a presumably social psychological process of some sort, the development of individual subjects, comes to be incorporated or subsumed by capitalism, generally understood to be an economic process of capital accumulation. How this happens and what it means, insofar as this is given, will be attended to presently.

This assimilation is 'pacifying', which is to say, presumably, that it minimises dissent, and this process is of particular note in the contemporary era of neoliberalism, which is, evidently, a political process. Neoliberalism advances, and potential obstacles to it encounter pacifying devices, either because of, or at least at the same time as, subjectivity is incorporated into capitalism. Subjectivities or subjects, perhaps at some previous point (more) sovereign, are now incorporated, 'bought in' to capitalism in the very process of their subjectification, of their becoming-persons. The sentence thus requires some anterior work, in terms of what are to be rendered internalities in 'the problem' that is popular music: subjectivity, economy, politics, are one problem.

This narrative too is a story involving the complicity of music. The political project of neoliberalism has benefited from music, in that music is a cultural form involved in the incorporation described. Drawing on Boltanski and

Chiapello (2005), Hesmondhalgh (2008) develops this argument as follows. Music is first positioned historically as a form of artistic critique:

[the artistic critique], which is rooted in the invention of a bohemian lifestyle, draws above all upon ... on the one hand the disenchantment and inauthenticity, and on the other the oppression, which characterise the bourgeois world associated with the rise of capitalism. This critique foregrounds the loss of meaning and, in particular, the loss of the sense of what is beautiful and valuable, which derives from standardisation and generalised commodification, affecting not only everyday objects but also artworks (the cultural mercantilism of the bourgeoisie) and human beings. It stresses the objective impulse of capitalism and bourgeois society to regiment and dominate human beings, and subject them to work that it prescribes for the purpose of profit, while hypocritically invoking morality. To this it counterposes the freedom of artists, their rejection of any contamination of aesthetics by ethics, their refusal of any form of subjection in time and space and, in its extreme forms, of any kind of work (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005: 38).

In the classic formula: '[All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned](#)'.

There was, according to the argument, a political critique, contemporaneous with the artistic critique, which was sidelined in part by the apparent endorsement of its artistic counterpart. The next step is that this artistic critique was appropriated and co-opted by the forces of capitalism. We can think of phenomena like the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as the archetype for this (The Sex Pistols' [response](#) to their induction is informative in this respect), but anything with musicians selling commodities will suffice.

The social consequences of the appropriation of this artistic critique developed into what we currently inhabit. Neoliberal capitalism is said to produce a 'connexionist' society:

where the self is an individual enterprise, and where transitory relationships and commitments are considered more legitimate than stable ones because rapidly changing one's connections can supposedly lead to personal growth and greater self-realisation. In this connexionist society, individuals are increasingly expected to take responsibility for themselves, even though those selves are borne down upon by all kinds of social pressures (Hesmondhalgh 2008: 334).

All that is solid melts into air, and any remainder is yoked into the privatisation of profit and the socialisation of risk. Public issues are rendered explicable only as personal troubles, and not only managing these troubles, but succeeding (in a social, political, and economic context over which they have no control), becomes a moral obligation for individuals.

The artistic critique was appropriated and deployed particularly in the reconstitution of work. The horror and drudgery of work is made more horrible still, as hierarchical controls come to appear relaxed, such that workers are free to assume 'ownership' of their responsibilities, fulfilling them 'creatively' and becoming 'autonomous' and 'self-realising'. The social is liquidated, as work is refigured as a sinister doppelgänger of the romantic or bohemian ideal of *art*. In turn, any appearance of the fragmentation of capitalism as a totalising order is actually evidence of its becoming thoroughly implicated within the very fabric from which the individual subject is constituted. This is the precarious subject who goes on to endure the precarious working conditions to which Stahl draws

attention, and who, the argument goes, is mockingly given hope by the absurd false promises of popular music. This subject is simultaneously rendered in the image of neoliberal capitalism, and in consequence singularly ill equipped to deal with it in any politically effective way.

This way of conceptualising music is very common in popular music studies. The understanding of neoliberal capitalism (and also of subject formation as an element in these narratives) is also an orthodox one, familiar from contemporary work in the sociology of culture and in cultural studies. Patricia Ventura's recent definition is indicative in this context:

Neoliberalism at one level is a set of economic and political policies and ideologues favouring corporatism, privatization of public enterprises, and the reduction of state power and intervention. But neoliberalism is also a governmentality – that is, the way subjects think about the collection of practices, techniques, and rationalities used to govern them and which they use to govern themselves, neoliberal government represents the populations wellbeing as intimately tied to individuals' abilities to make market principles the guiding values of their lives, to see themselves as products to create, sell, and optimize ... Neoliberal culture as a structure of feeling impels us to extend the market, its technologies, approaches and mindsets into all spheres of human life, to move the ideology of consumer choice to the center of individual existence, and to look to ourselves rather than larger social-welfare structures or society as the source of our success or the blame for our failure – indeed, to define 'success' and 'failure' in market terms. In short, to become entrepreneurs of ourselves as Foucault terms it (2012: 2).

With this excursus on board, we have a better grasp of why

popular music's democratic promise that 'you can do this too' is a particularly salient way in which 'liberal society' promises an end to alienation and appropriation by promising independence and autonomy

The most popular genres of the last fifty years, according to the framework, are in the tradition of the 'artistic critique', and can be said to be very much 'about' individualism, authenticity, and creativity as forms of rebellious or subversive critique, forms of 'speaking truth'. These themes, expressed in this way, are what have been incorporated into the bigger con game of neoliberal capitalism; they are its ideological form. Moreover, the culture of music consumption particularly is implicated (or *may* be, the argument is in the conditional), in cultivating practices of self-fashioning closely analogous to those favourable to the successfully 'connexionist' subjectivity:

music, with its strong links to the emotions and to values of personal authenticity, may well have become bound up with the incorporation of emotional self-realisation, authenticity and creativity into capitalism, and with intensified consumption habits (Hesmondhalgh 2008: 330).

The ideology of popular music (for the sake of argument imagined here as unitary and consistent) has become the ideology of work. Think of the classic punk injunction, normally paraphrased as 'here's three chords, now start a band' (Sideburns 1977: 2). Productive responses to this directive are evidence of precisely the kind of Thatcherite entrepreneurial spirit required for the subjectivities desired and produced by neoliberal capitalism: 'Those who sacrifice themselves nowhere else can do so fully here, and here they are fully betrayed' (Adorno 1990: 280).

So, the cultures of paid work take on the guise of the ideology of rock (the music industry is bad in and of itself, because it is exploitative, but also a con, which colonises labour itself outside of the music industry), and the culture of music consumption, obviously enough, is consumerist: we are in a closed loop between production and consumption. They are two sides of the same flipped coin, spinning into the gutter that is the future. Music, in its commercial forms, in its aspect as a commodity, is bad because music is a technology of experiential interiority, ergo, consuming it (like much else) makes us like unto commodities ourselves. The straws we grab on to are themselves not only in the clutches of the forces of darkness: they *are* the forces of darkness. The apparent means of un-alienating ourselves (the pseudo-autonomy of art as a model) turn out to be more bitter tricks, making us yet stranger and more distant to ourselves, another veil of lies laid over the veil we mistake for reality.

A number of standard questions arise as responses to this position, though the debates around them will not be rehearsed here. They include: if this process is so successful in producing neoliberal subjectivity, how are some people able to see 'through' it? Whatever subjectivities were available prior to the advent of neoliberal capitalism, how were they produced, were they 'better' or 'worse', and if so, why? Were there at some point *authentic* subjectivities? If not, why does it matter? If subjectivity is being produced in such a way as to facilitate tacit endorsement of the status quo, would that subjectivity not be, as it were, subjectively true to its context, such that the self and the ideology of neoliberal capitalism would be aligned, and it could no longer be said that any promise was illusory? How can there be illusions in worlds where people are made in their image? One might additionally ask: people also consume and literally incorporate various products (e.g., Coca-Cola), why concentrate on cultural ones of this sort? If music can have these effects, can it also have others, such as those argued for by those who would like to see it censored? And so on.

There are two related issues arising from recent scholarship that help to provide some context for how this framework for understanding popular music came to take the form it has, and came to have the success and appeal it has. The first is the perception of a need for distance from that literature investigating popular music as a means of self-fashioning, showing how individuals actually do use music to structure and shape their lives (DeNora 2000 is probably still the finest exposition of this). This literature is now seen to be aligned with that body of work concerned with active audiences, where engagement with media texts was thought to be a sign of agency:

Accounts of popular culture in which shoppers twit shopkeepers, say, or sitcom viewers think subversive thoughts, or fans of boy bands grow suspicious of patriarchy are to be celebrated and affirmed for their democratic implications (Frank 2002: 7).

This earlier orthodoxy is now to be avoided. The pendulum has swung the other way.

The second issue, which puts teeth on the first, is the fact that this literature, with its acknowledgement of the capacity of people to do things with (cultural commodities like) music (as indeed the research in question does), is deemed unnervingly close to 'consumer culture theory', a body of work deemed to be in

the service of Mammon outright ([here](#) is a recent example). As Meier understates it: 'scholars developing critical perspectives on promotional culture must worry about producing work similar to, and hence even contributing to, consumer and marketing research' (2011: 406). There is therefore a danger here of contamination by proximity. There is also the dismaying possibility that the critique itself, like the critique popular music seemed to promise, is not really outside of, autonomous from, and critical towards capitalism.

Coming around again

Have we been here before? To say that music can be understood as an art form, or that it can be understood as a commercial activity, and to develop the latter way of 'saying', is to advance an idea of the utopian potential of music, and to point to an idea of its dystopian, fallen current state. This kind of lamentation is of long standing and excellent pedigree. Attali, for example:

music is illustrative of the evolution of our entire society: deritualise a social form, repress an activity of the body, specialise its practice, sell it as a spectacle, generalise its consumption, then see to it that it is stockpiled until it loses its meaning (1985: 5).

Like better-known exponents Adorno and Bloch, Attali perhaps tends towards elitism. If this is so, it is not difficult to find a contemporary spin:

Advertising has learned much from the success of popular music's viro-tactics of hook engineering. In 2001, Kylie Minogue's "I Can't Get You out of My Head" captured this potency on two levels as her voice intensified the insinuating refrain. In the economy of attention and distraction of viral capital, marketing force fields traverse bodies from every angle, implanting earworms. Earworms are the virological vectors onto which sonic branding latches (Goodman 2010: 146-147).

These arguments use music to do moral work, where we can understand this as conjoining the intellectual and the political. Music here is an abstract social and cultural system, which is in turn embedded in and used to describe other abstract social and cultural systems (for example neoliberalism, or capitalism, or their totalising 'force field' conjuncture). It is *put to use* in these accounts, where it is described as being *put to use* in these systems; where the critic can see this latter use, it can be used to tell us how these systems work, and so facilitate the critique of the social order. Music is in the service of capital. The force of music and the force of capital are rendered synonymous. Because this is (held to be) bad, we can imagine a good alternative, where music is not in the service of capital (where music is 'art', autonomous). If, as is suggested, capitalism is ever-encroaching into our very subjectivities (and music is being used to effect this), it seems important to consider some point, most likely in the past, where music was not in the service of capital, or was less in the service of capital than it is now. There is, then, a (presumably historical, empirical) question regarding the extent to which it can reasonably be asserted that the 'artistic critique' as expressed by music occurred somehow symbolically or actually 'outside' of capitalism:

the very existence of popular music as we know it depends entirely on a material, economic and technical framework of commodification. There was no jazz, no rock, no hip-hop, no soul, no funk, no disco, no house that ever really existed outside of a framework of commodity-circulation ... this is clearly something more than a case of creativity surviving *despite* the

culture industry. Many of these musics could never have achieved the impact or the levels of creative innovation that they have done without the capacity to cross borders (between places, times, communities and generations) that is the unique capacity of the deterritorialised commodity (Gilbert 2008: 122).

These conventional critical remarks and responses are raised here so as to engage with and elucidate the academic variant of art vs. commerce. At another level, they are raised also to highlight the communicative and discursive elements of the framework. Like everyday vernacular accounts mobilising the art vs. commerce frame, scholarly accounts similarly have a *point* and a *purpose*:

In natural language, speakers/hearers do not organise their activities and constitute the activities of others by reference to grammatical or abstract models, but by reference to 'point' and 'purpose' as displayed in such local organisational matters as the placement of utterances *vis-à-vis* other utterances (Lee 1991: 209).

My point, in exploring this, is not so much to argue whether it is more or less 'right' or 'wrong' to deploy such a framework to make sense of (some particular) music. I do not find this framework compelling, but it is more or less contextually appropriate, persuasive, and productive, depending on contextual relevancies and the purpose in play. It gets things done, not least in terms of how it positions the writer and the reader. The emphasis here, though, is on how, as a kind of discourse genre, these sorts of frames of reference enact and constitute their object morally in particular fields or networks of meaning.

American Idol, for example, according to the critique described above, is not just aesthetically bad and not 'quality'. It is also, in its 'industrial' aspect, morally bad, and for more than one reason: it is some kind of corruption or deformation – in the vernacular, a sell-out – of the 'democratic promise' of popular music (what we might call 'art'), but as such it is also involved in a process of 'pacification'. It is not just a corrupted version of its purer, truer form (existing somewhere outside of commercial activity, or perhaps in some kind of commercial activity with adequate remuneration and good working conditions). It is also a version put to bad ends: morally contaminated in its 'industrial' debasement, *and* in its instrumental service of ignoble social goals. Note, however, that morally troubling as *American Idol* might be by such accounts, it is certainly *useful* as a vehicle through which this critical narrative of the morally problematic social structure (neoliberal capitalism) can be set in motion.

I am not contesting the idea that the contemporary social world is an unjust and inequitable place. I am not querying arguments about neoliberal capitalism because I think neoliberal capitalism is wonderful. I am rather emphasising that these arguments are narratives for imagining the social and thereby constituting ideals of it, and that they use music as the springboard for doing so. They intend to tell us something about music, but actually they tell us about something else as well. It is not that the arguments gyp us out of a conversation about music that we are hoping for, finding ourselves instead embroiled in a conversation about neoliberal capitalism. It is that these kinds of arguments are themselves part of the discursive field of music and operate in such a way as to constitute it:

people talk about music, and ... music interacts with naturally occurring verbal discourse, not only in song texts, verbal art, and the prosodic, musical structuring of speech, but also in the

interpretive, theoretical, and evaluative discourses surrounding musical experiences (Feld and Fox 1994: 32).

We do not, then, learn about music (only), in attending to these frameworks. Whatever we learn about music from engaging with this particular framework, we learn something also about the political and aesthetic commitments that are held to be in line with it. We learn about how mobilising this framework enacts a critique of the social order, using particular intellectual resources and discursive and semantic strategies to 'normalise' the critique, not merely as true, but as scholarly critique, as truth revealed, as revelatory, and as morally edifying. We learn how this moral work, positioning the social world in certain ways, and positioning the reader/writer in certain ways, is conducted in such a way as to generate stable ground for this critique. Perhaps most importantly, we learn how music is ultimately inextricable from the social and moral work of its contextualisation in discourse. Strathern puts this succinctly: 'ideas write or describe one another; the very act of description makes what is being described a part of something else e.g. the description' (1992: 204). We can go a little further, in proposing that music is not and never can be outside of such frameworks, waiting to be understood 'in itself'.

Conclusion

Another way of phrasing this is to say that we are accustomed to reading these sorts of texts as though we were somehow looking *through* them: we see, *through* the critical account, the world, and we see it anew. The text operates as a channel to a world outside of it, a channel through which the world comes into view differently. The text, though, can also be evaluated in terms of how it imagines the world, talking around music in such a way as to talk about the morality of the social. It can be read with an eye to its 'solidary we': how it draws on music to critique the world, and in so doing produces reassuring readerly positions not subject to the ideological inveigling in the world it describes.

As it is put to us by the text, we are shown the world *as it really is*, but oddly enough, in this unveiling, we become other than ourselves, or other to ourselves. Liking music *a lot*, for instance, is transfigured as 'intensified consumption habits'. This is problematic because it might, for instance, be significant economically and politically to 'the music industry', and to neoliberal capitalism in general, if 'intensified consumption habits' entailed widespread digital piracy. But this would not be straightforwardly in line with the 'intensification of consumption habits' required by the framework, and the models of the social and the subject this intensification implies. Through this sort of elision, and this kind of 'objective' distancing on the surface of the text ('intensified consumption'), the critique shores up as consistent. Diverse practices are generalised and unified in their description: order is imposed. At the same time, these techniques are precisely those that bring the world into its strange new focus.

Rather than look *through* to the world as pictured by this framework, I am trying to look *at* it, at its framing of the world, and to gesture at the contours of this frame (Best and Marcus 2009). I do this in the hopes that, where we can

begin to understand some of the things we talk about when we talk about music, and what gets done with these sorts of talk, we will be in a better position to understand what is happening when talk about music transpires, particularly when that talk refers to actions that might be advocated for or done with, to or around music (for example, condemning it, judging it, defending it, praising it, subsidising it, regulating it and so on). It is not that this kind of talk is 'in the way' of our understanding of music, although we can certainly foreground the particularity of how it imagines the social, as I have tried to show. It is that such talk about music must be brought into the domain of analysis if music is to be adequately understood; the understanding of music does not happen outside of this talk, and so the talk also must be subject to analysis.

In particular, it seems important to consider the moral aspects of this kind of discursive framing, the senses in which music is occasioned in its description as an essentially moral activity, which is morally accountable and has moral implications; which expresses moral content and articulates moral context.

Furthermore, the deployment of some or other framework or context with which to discuss music is itself a moral matter: insofar as the deployment of one precludes the deployment of some other at that particular juncture, there is as it were an opportunity cost to whatever the selected context might be – as when our interviewee mobilised the art vs. commerce dichotomy, and in so doing queried which side would be most salient in terms of proceedings. In this sense, sequentialising possible frameworks and then moving through them entails as a consequence that, wherever we begin and however we proceed, each successive contextual and sense-making frame 'laminates' the development of our understanding in a certain way. Through these laminations, we produce the object of inquiry, music, and produce it as a thing being (foremost) within this or that nested frame narrative:

music as an[↑]industry[↓] or music as an[↑]art form[↓]

Where it transpires in academic sociological analysis that the conversation to have about music is foremost a conversation about (a critique of) its relationship with neoliberal capitalism, it transpires also, as the consequence of a particular politico-intellectual imperative, that a universe of social interaction, feeling and practice which does not really seem immediately relevant as grounds for a critical account of the capitalist order is de-topicalised and occluded. Perhaps that is a conversation to have at another time.

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