On the aesthetics of popular music

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Pop, aesthetics and the aesthetics of music

Adorno (1941, 1962) dismissed popular music as aesthetically inferior to so-called art music and deplored its extremely questionable effects on society; from then on, scientific analysis of pop music has been faced with a dilemma in trying to refute these accusations: either it takes pop seriously from an aesthetic perspective and as music, but only rarely explores really popular music, the tremendous sales of the charts and thus their social significance; or the analysis adheres to the perspective of cultural and social science and is mainly interested in what is really popular and does not say much about the aesthetics of the music. Scientists either write analytical books about progressive rock, Dylan, Zappa and the Beatles with astute remarks on „A Day In The Life“ but nothing on the simple „Twist And Shout“ – or they address questions of identity formation, social boundaries and so on, whereby the music itself unfortunately remains rather interchangeable and nothing of substance is said about the music and its contextual function. Trends in English-language
research in particular clearly favour a perspective of reception, sociology and cultural studies, whereas the disciplines of analysis and aesthetics are seen as work-oriented and ideologically biased. A reason for this general trend may be an (understandable) rejection of traditional musicology with its self-image as a science of art studies exclusively where neither „normal“ everyday music listening nor the social function and basis of musicology itself were ever addressed in an adequate way.

The image of aesthetics is negative, not only in pop music research: it is seen as normative, and with its concepts of immanent timeless values, disinterested pleasure and contemplation too far removed from the realities of customary music listening. Music aesthetics – although a discipline of systematic musicology – appears to be closer to the conventional middle-class, well-to-do, highly cultured musical historian who legitimates his art music canon in this way, compared to a more liberal and progressive systematic musicology that often addresses musical forms of greater social relevance.

One of the serious consequences of this current direction in pop music research is that many pertinent questions related to aesthetics have not been explored in connection with pop music. Examples are a theoretical discussion of appraisals by fans or professional reviews, or an analysis of the underlying guiding tendencies, or a review of historical changes in such tendencies and a search for parallel tendencies in other arts. And if it is part of the mission of aesthetics to systematically reflect on questions concerning the nature and significance of arts for human beings, then it will not do to neglect such a wide-spread aesthetical practice as listening to popular music.

Today, basic research into musical preferences and the question which sensory, intellectual, emotional and physical attractions music may offer

– that is which value music has for us – is mainly empirical and follows music-psychological and music-sociological perspectives, which may without doubt produce significant results. Research of this kind has told us, for example, how minorities or majorities can influence public opinion, how opinion depends on age and stereotype gender roles, and how significant personality traits like neuroticism or personal arousal needs are (Crozier 1997; Russell 1997; Kloppenburg 2005; v. Georgi et al. 2006). We know that we represent ourselves socially via music, and that as a consequence our opinion depends on whom we mention it to in which context. However, such aspects may complement an aesthetic approach in a meaningful way but they cannot replace it. They illuminate the problem from a completely different perspective; they do not cover the concerns of aesthetics, as Peter Faltin pointed out in 1977 (without specific reference to popular music):

„Psychology, and today sociology in particular (…) divided the original object of aesthetics up between themselves. What was lost in this process was the object of aesthetics itself, the special nature of the aesthetic artefact which makes the difference to all other social and psychological phenomena. The aesthetic, a comprehensive and singular principle of a specific way of processing the world that humans have was dissolved in the hoped-for objectivity and exactness of those disciplines that actually address the conditions and preconditions but not the singularity of the aesthetic“ (Faltin 1977, p. 99, quotations in italics by RvA).

Aesthetics pursue different methods and different objectives that psychology and sociology cannot or will not address. The intention of aesthetics is not to document the status quo, nor to indicate how individuals handle their aesthetic perception at a certain time and place and under certain conditions. The objective is rather to understand on a widest-possible basis the significance and meaning aesthetic practice may have for individuals, independent of the specific historical or local context. Aesthetics are moreover interested in what cannot be reduced to simple
social and psychological uses like mood management, relaxation or distinction. Music has more to offer.

Unfortunately, however, institutionalised musical aesthetics have not looked into popular music so far, so that we cannot hope for stimuli from this end. We must look to philosophical aesthetics for useful approaches, since this field has changed considerably over the past three decades, so that clichés and resentments as described above are no longer applicable. Starting with the early 1970s, philosophical aesthetics are no longer limited to art of a high cultural level, as was the case in the time of Hegel, Nietzsche, Gadamer or Adorno. In the introduction to a recent collection of essays, Christoph Menke and Joachim Küpper use the term „aesthetic turn“; for them the guiding term of this discipline is no longer art but rather „aesthetic experience“ (Küpper & Menke 2003, p. 9; cf. Bubner 1989). Today, like 250 years ago when it was first established as a science, this discipline is generally concerned with aesthetic experiences of the individual wherever they occur: in nature or in a museum, a football stadium, a disco, or in bed.

Aesthetic perception is seen as a specific case among all sensory perception. In everyday life perception is a tool for survival, for orientation in the world. There it works according to interests, observation and aspects and assesses the world in the service of our current needs: we inspect the stain on the carpet carefully in order to find a way to remove it; we look to the sky to decide whether to put the washing out to dry; we look to the right and left in order to avoid being hit by a car; or we scour the masses on the beach for those dark-haired guys who promised to bring the beer. The aesthetic appearance of the carpet, the sky, the street or the beach in all their unreduced, sensory richness is usually not what we are interested in - unless we yield to the temptation, forget our original intention for a moment and contemplate the colourful scenario of the Bordeaux oozing
slowly into the white woollen carpet, or pursue the sun rays peeking through isolated clouds on their way into the softly rustling treetops, are fascinated by the continuously changing play of light and shadow in the street, or enjoy the murmuring glittering sea, the indescribably deep blue of the sky, the sight of the sunbathers or the hubbub of voices on the beach.

This type of perception has its own value, is not disinterested nor without purpose – but it does not seek any external usefulness; the way is the goal. Aesthetic perception also and always process-oriented and is an end it itself (compare Seel 2003, p. 44ff.). Moreover, it frequently contemplates the world not only from the perspective of that specific aspect that is relevant to a pursued purpose – that is, it is not dependent on aspect, but far more global in nature and often synaesthetic. Conclusions from perceptions in everyday life may be formulated without difficulty – for example: dark clouds, so better use the tumbler! Or: Car approaching, so better stop; whereas the essence of an aesthetic perception can never be fully expressed in words, it cannot be replaced by description, as what is involved is the richness of the moment and the simultaneous character of different sensory stimuli that even the most detailed description could never reflect comprehensively.

Musical aesthetics should address the question in how far music in general encourages such an aesthetic mode of perception before the aesthetic particulars of the respective musical sphere are examined in some detail. How to determine our aesthetic interest in music, and also in popular music? What is the attraction of music that we willingly ruin our hearing or even run the risk of imprisonment for illegal downloads? Why do we listen to music? And has this anything to do with art?
Three dimensions in the aesthetic experience of popular music

I shall outline three different answers with reference to Martin Seel, in particular to his two most important publications on aesthetics, Eine Ästhetik der Natur (1996a) and Ästhetik des Erscheinens (2003). Seel himself, by the way, does not refer to music much, neither popular nor other music – just like most representatives of current philosophical aesthetics. I shall explore the possible contribution of this general theory to an understanding of the delight in pop music, and assess the general validity of the theory that Seel substantiates with a number of examples from the fine arts and literature with a focus on pop music.

In the above-mentioned publications Seel proposes a phenomenology of aesthetic perception. He describes three different types of aesthetic perception and thereby three functions of the aesthetic: aesthetic contemplation, aesthetic correspondence, and aesthetic imagination. Or in other words and with reference to music: the merely sensual attraction of music; the significance of music in everyday life; and what is generally referred to as art.

In contrast to the frequent use of the term in musicology, Seel does not understand contemplation as analytical listening, which Adorno (1962) lists as an ideal in his listeners’ typology. It does not mean sitting still in a concert or with earphones in order to take in the structures and contents of music, but rather the opposite: Seel’s term of aesthetic contemplation also implies something like losing or immersing oneself in the object of perception, but it does not involve deliberate thought nor understanding of meaning, which for Seel (1996b, p. 260ff.) is a matter of theoretical contemplation and not to be confused with aesthetic contemplation. Aesthetic contemplation does not try to understand, interpret or define any-
thing; it is not interested in meaning but in the purely sensual appearance of an object or a situation.

Example: Imagine a student looking at a mathematical formula he will never be able to understand, written in chalk on a blackboard. As soon as he gives up any intention to understand the meaning and perceives what is written no longer as meaningful signs, as soon as he only registers the thickness and structure of the chalk marks and admires the elegant lines or sees an interesting abstract pattern if he squeezes his eyes almost shut, then he is merely interested in appearance. Or imagine yourself in your office with a noisy copying machine in the corridor outside. Perhaps you forget your work for a moment and listen to the continuous rhythm of the machine. This is also contemplative attention to mere appearance – provided you do not try to analyse what you hear in order to find out if the copier does not work properly again.

What is an exception in everyday life is far more significant in music: melodies, rhythms, sounds, harmonies want to be pursued and heard with attention. They have been created to carry the listener away from his normal surroundings into the world of a particular piece of music with its own temporal rules and laws which he does not and need not understand. All this may be perceived not only contemplatively, of course; music has much to offer if we want to understand. But normally, music listening does not involve the need to understand meaning. Music has a purely sensual attraction so that we forget all considerations of purpose for a short while in order to just listen and yield to the music and its own laws. Those who are not musicologists nor play an instrument have a certain advantage here, like a listener to lyrics in languages that are not his own. Apart from melodies, rhythms, harmonies and their combinations, lyrics may also be heard as pure sound without attention to their meaning: this applies to foreign-language texts, of course, but also to meaningless syl-
lables („A wopbop a loo bop a lop bam boom“), cut-up texts etc. It also applies to Rap, where apart from the semantic level the sound level is important (for example with numerous internal rhymes, end-rhymes, alliterations etc.) so that you may be fascinated by a Rap without understanding a single word.

Sound is also important in this respect, as it requires even less semantic interpretation than lyrics or melodies. This is what Tibor Kneif (1978, p. 17) refers to when he says:

„In rock music it is possible to listen in the sense of original aesthetics, that is in a sensual way, and to give up aesthetical contemplation as an educated, trained attitude. It even has a tendency to focus on subtly refined and presented sound, while the abstract, form-related layer of the composition is often interchangeable.“

For Kneif, aesthetic listening in the original sense is what Seel defines as contemplative listening, listening merely for sensual characteristics without interpretation of meaning. There is not much to understand about the roaring of a distorted guitar, a booming bass, hissing and clashing cymbals. We have reached the last step to a level of absolute lack of meaning and an excellent opportunity for contemplation when we pass from sound to noise and rustling – the perfect setting for contemplation in nature as well as in art. In nature we have a splashing stream, rustling trees in a forest, or the roaring surf of the sea. In music we think of the noisy improvisations of Velvet Underground in White Light/White Heat, of Lou Reed’s Metal Machine Music, Neil Young’s collage Arc – and many examples from heavy metal and techno with high volume and speed and a large percentage of deliberate noise, that aim to overtax the senses and stimulate some loss of physical control, which makes it easier to listen with the senses only. There is much to hear in that music but hardly anything to comprehend.
Therefore, the attraction of popular music is in part based on the value of aesthetic contemplation. Essentially this is the experience of freedom – freedom from the obligation to interpret meaning and from the logical and temporal constraints of everyday life. The end-in-itself attention for sensual abundance, the wealth of the moment enables music listeners to free themselves from their conventional ties to external purpose. Sensual openness to mere appearance creates distance from all purpose and all significance, from all that is functional and pragmatic, that determines our acts and thus ourselves. Moments of mere contemplation may illustrate how confined our normal „perception“ and interpretation must be, and how many more possibilities exist. Contemplation permits us to leave the normal course of events and experience the rare freedom to watch from a distance what otherwise appears given and as a matter of course. It releases us (although never absolutely) from the demand to understand and to maintain control.

Another reason why we like a landscape, an easy-chair or a piece of pop music may be that the object somehow corresponds to our interests in life in a positive way. It either suits the moment, and therefore expresses our current mood, or it corresponds to our character or self-image and therefore expresses how we see ourselves or would like to be seen. It is not a mere usefulness but a concord of personal ideal and the aesthetic atmosphere of the object in question: if you are freezing you will find a warming woollen pullover useful but not necessarily corresponsively beautiful. It will only be beautiful to the wearer if the pattern is not embarrassing, if the slightly worn material and the frayed sleeves articulate that hers is not the world of accurate, ironed, well-ordered, clean and whole things. Or if the garment is from Sweden and reminds her of her time there, of her penchant for Scandinavian lifestyle and that specific atmosphere of dark evenings in front of an open fire – what for her is the good life. Accord-
ingly she will probably find military uniforms or national costumes in Bavarian style correspondingly ugly, and prefer the Cardigans or the Kings of Convenience CDs to groups like Rammstein or Kraftwerk. Correspondingly beautiful is what illustrates the idea of a good life vividly – more vividly than words may express the idea.

This may be due to the situation or due to long-term specifics. Examples for a situation are hits for the carnival season or typical summer hits, Reggae music at a barbecue party, or soft rock for an intimate date.

From a long-term perspective, we seem to prefer music that reflects what we see in ourselves: there is much empirical proof that the preference for certain musical styles correlates significantly with certain character traits (compare Gembris 2005; v. Georgi et al. 2006; Kloppenburg 2005; Schwartz 2002). The chosen music can demonstrate to ourselves and to others a non-conformist attitude, for example, toughness or emotionality, a basically positive or negative outlook on life and so on. This is why music often plays an important role in getting to know someone more intimately. Visiting new acquaintances, we all try to find out who the host is by furtive glances at his CD collection or his books. Pierre Bourdieu (2000) and Gerhard Schulze (2000), however, exaggerate this dimension of the aesthetic practice considerably: they often reduce the aesthetic attraction to a potential gain in distinction promised by possession of the object. The effect of our taste on others certainly plays a role, but the world would be a sad place if all decisions on preference were nothing but a way to show off, to underline the complicated things we understand, or the expensive things we can afford.

The appeal of music may be explained in part by the value of aesthetic correspondences. Alertness for such correspondences conveys to us and others a vivid picture of ourselves and helps to find our place in society.
Music creates a space where we feel good and helps in specific situations but also in general to perceive and recognize ourselves in this performed space. In this way it helps to satisfy basic human needs for safety and comfort, orientation and self-recognition.

What has interested us so far are general aesthetic functions that apply to the perception of nature as well as of music. This is not true, however, in the case of the third dimension, where music listening is considered an art. In contrast to nature, each object of art provokes an effort to understand – whether this will be successfully concluded or not. The underlying idea is not a strictly defined concept of art that would help to decide which works are masterly, but there are more basic questions. In how far is popular music generally qualified for art, and in listening, do we perceive music not only on a contemplative and corresponsive level, but also as art?

Just as objects of contemplation or of a corresponsive experience become such only through pertinent perceptive attitudes, there is no art if we do not consider it as such. This sounds trivial, but what it means is that there are no material characteristics to identify works of art unequivocally. According to Seel’s aesthetics an object becomes a work of art through an observing attitude that sees it as a sign; a sign which does not only represent something that might be conveyed in a different manner as well, but which presents something that cannot be translated comprehensively into words and that can only be ‘understood’ if we direct our attention to the individual constellation of what is presented sensually (Seel 2003, p. 179f.).

It is therefore a characteristic of any reception of art that it is equally interested in contents and in the ways these contents are presented. To simplify this idea, we might use the formula: form and contents = mean-
ing; but in the case of music, even more so with instrumental music, it is hard to decide what is form and what is contents; moreover, the true aim is the aesthetic experience a piece of music offers, and not meaning defined in words.

The interplay of presented situation and artistic procedures encourages imaginative participation in the outlook of others. Artistic literature, specifically lyrics, is concerned not only with content of words but with the way something is uttered – formal structure, verse, rhyme, dark or light vocals, soft or hard consonants, metaphors etc. all influence the way in which we imagine the presented outlook; the same thing happens in music, and not only in so-called serious music:

If Eric Clapton told us in private about the heavy blows that affected his personal life the impression on us would remain rather faint. But if we attentively follow the multidimensional effect of his song „Tears in Heaven“ with its powerful, suggestive metaphors, if we yield to the simultaneous richness of the emotional characterization resulting from vocal sound, harmonies, rhythm, melody, dynamics, formal structure of instruments and sound, then we meet a dense image of the present – provoked by the musician through these parameters – that conveys in aesthetic perception how it feels to lose a beloved person. A verbal description of the content and substance of this song is not enough to reflect what we have experienced as attentive listeners in the appearance of his performance. Consequently, reviews or interpretations of a piece of music can never replace attentive listening; both can only point out what is worth looking for. We do not have to experience personally what is presented – we experience it playfully as listeners, we can absorb outlooks, irrespective of real contexts. In this way, art permits experiences that we have believed to be impossible and cannot put into words: „Everything In Its Right Place“ by Radiohead for example gives me per-
sonally a disturbing impression of how emotions of composure and excitement, sense and senselessness, order and chaos, security and bewilderment may coincide without levelling out each other.

In the manner described above, art permits us to follow its performance with our imagination and thus not only reflects real and unreal, well-known and unknown human relations to the world but opens them to its recipients. In general, popular music has not less to offer than other art forms, provided it meets the basic demand to make a world view experienceable through the interplay of its elements. The issues addressed are not less existential compared to other art forms: love and human relations of all kinds, the restless world of youth, one’s own body, the rage, the loneliness, the monotony of everyday life, ageing, death. The intensity of the conveyed experience is certainly not smaller, if we think of intensive bodily experiences in techno or heavy metal, or frequently described goose-pimple effects. It is true that the procedures of popular music are not advanced in many cases. Elements of harmony, rhythm, melody and form are well known, whereas we may detect innovations above all in the sound arrangement, with immediate appeal to the senses, and in the skilful use of the most up-to-date means of sound production and recording. Frequently the recipients are no „enlightened listeners“ who know exactly how their favourite songs produce their effects. The musicians mainly strive for immediate understanding and do not presume knowledge in art history. Understanding is often initiated by lyrics, singing and music provide atmospheric and emotional dimensions and personal significance for the content. Aesthetics on the part of listeners and producers often is an aesthetic of expression that requires an „authentic“, not performed expression. Individuals who have experienced everything in arts and specifically in music and now look only to abstract and self-reflective avant-garde motives may not find much in popular music. But the
pleasure in professional skills, in structural complexity, innovation and original ideas cannot be generalized, must always be seen in relation to the experience and knowledge of the audience and is of no relevance to the question whether a piece of music may be perceived as art or not. From the artist’s perspective, music is successful for those to whom it conveys experiences felt to be of personal significance - irrespective of reviews that may declare contents and performance as banal. If a reviewer does not gain any disturbing experience and calls a piece of music unremarkable then this is not relevant for a listener with a completely different experience and outlook. A review may induce him to follow the critic’s recommendation and try and perceive how and what the expert hears – but as a rule he will adhere to the opinion of those with a similar outlook to his own.

Even if we feel that the current number one in the charts is banal and commonplace: as soon as the combination of content and form provides an existential experience to someone we cannot deny that for this individual this music is art.

A generally valid decision (either democratic or based on expert opinion) on criteria for a piece of music to be declared art is impossible – although those works that receive social recognition as art are highly dependent on institutions that define the discourse, like feuilletons, music journalism and musicology. But no argument or scientific discussion can convince anybody of the art character of a certain piece of music, since personal experience is the decisive factor.
Conclusion

I summarize what Seel’s differentiation between contemplation, correspondence and imagination contributes to an understanding of the reception and assessment of popular music:

1. Music is an excellent motive for aesthetic contemplation. The sensual appeal of its melodies, rhythms, timbres and sounds is a temptation to forget the usual functions of our senses as instruments of purpose-oriented recognition and action temporarily and instead to focus our attention on the wealth of the moment which is normally dismissed as irrelevant. This performance-oriented form of perception as an end in itself raises the moment out of the passing time and thus satisfies our need for “experiences of presence” (Gumbrecht 2003, p. 201ff.). Music seduces us to forget all intentions for the time being, to yield control of the situation to some degree, and to submit our perceptions to the play of what appears. This experience of being moved and letting things happen conveys a special feeling of freedom.

2. The atmospheric power of music helps us to shape our surroundings so that they correspond to our current and general ideals in life. Music shows us and others how we are feeling and feel in general; it offers vivid images of personal identity, general character traits and attitudes, and it has the power to express, alter and intensify our experience of the moment.

3. The combination and interplay of musical and lyrical parameters stimulates the imagination to discover links between them and associate them with an underlying concept. But apart from the peculiar fascination of decoding music as a symbol, such a perception of music as art contributes much to our orientation in the world. Whether we are able to name a semantic substance as a unifying principle or not: attention to artistically formed appearance permits encounters and involvement with strange experiences and outlooks in a sensual richness that is not possible outside art. Art may summarize and highlight individual experience and thus ensure us of our own outlook, or it can break up “conventionally settled modes of understanding, experience and perception“ (Wellmer 2002, p. 173) and thus open up new perspectives.

We have thus won a terminology and methodology to understand our own and others’ judgements and to explain the various dimensions of our interest in popular music.
This discussion parts from the assumption that the value of music is determined by its function to fulfil basic needs for presence experience, atmospherically charged construction of our environment and imaginative encounter with the world. If we accept that these needs exist and that music has the potential to meet them, then we may deduce an ethical obligation to create and/or adhere to cultural structures which permit and support the production, conveyance and reception of musical styles that fulfil one or all of these functions. Up to this point, the normative character of the understanding of aesthetical practice as developed in this context should not be controversial.

Difficulties and suspicions of ideological bias emerge only if one school of aesthetics tries to bring the three dimensions of aesthetical practice into a hierarchy and then to pass judgement on the immanent value of specific musical styles according to this hierarchy. My point that the art character of a certain piece of music may only be defined on the basis of individual experience may serve to refute any such attempt a priori. Any musical style can provide a valuable experience of art too somebody – even if I personally feel no attraction because the essence of this music does not concern my way of life or because it does not contribute anything new or original to me.

The idea cannot be to list and propagate a strictly limited catalogue of musical master pieces; instead, we should support a wide range of musical styles in production and media presentation that acquaints as many people as possible with those three functions of music: a choice of music that is not primarily sales-oriented nor conforms to the lowest common denominator nor provides an audience only for music that repeats well-known elements with a minimum of variations. We must also offer a
stage to what is new, daring and unknown. Currently we see much conformity in radio channels, in the music industry, print media and on TV; what we need is variety and music critics who take music seriously on all three aesthetic levels and do not rashly categorize all new musical publications according to different life style sections. Music reviews should be based on analytical skills as well as a reflected conception of art, and should offer interpretations to the audience.

In addition we need musical education that teaches to youngsters and adults alike the significance of all three levels of musical experience; musical education that conveys the necessary skills for productive and receptive engagement with the artistic appearance but without artistic value as the overriding criterion, and with a proper appreciation of contemplative and corresponsive practice.

**Summary**

The discipline of musical aesthetics has always been neglected in the history of popular music research. Due to (understandable) reservations against tendencies in musical aesthetics to underline timeless values, alleged unbiased research and presumably immanent qualities, aesthetics have become the enemy for pop researchers with their strong orientation towards cultural and social science – with the unfortunate result that pertinent questions as to the specific aesthetical attraction of popular music have not been addressed so far.

In order to reduce this „blind spot“ of popular music research at least to some extent, this paper tries to apply more recent theories of philosophical aesthetics to the field of pop music. Current publications by the German philosopher Martin Seel in particular might be used for an understanding of the assessment and customary reception of popular
music, and also to answer questions about the aesthetic functions of this musical style and its attraction and significance to pop music fans.

References


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**THIS ARTICLE CAN BE CITED AS:**