



MUSIC AND CRITICISM TOWARD THE 1980S: A TIME TO REVISIT

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ABSTRACT

The author recalls the events and the social climate that fostered his approach to popular music criticism toward the end of the 1970s, which ushered in the publication of *Musica e pubblico giovanile* (1980 and 2014), the first attempt to outline a comprehensive critique of the impact of British and American pop, rock, jazz, and avant-garde experiments on the rapidly changing youth culture in Italy. Many years later, it is possible to look at 1970s rock as it were classical music. In the case of Pink Floyd, their classical status is indeed a *fait accompli*. The music of those times is revered today, but what is missing is the immediate relevance that music had in the lives of pretty much everyone back then, when music was the facebook of an entire generation. However, there were hard lessons to learn in the capitulation of rock to pop. Because artistic hierarchies mean little in pop, transmutations from indifferent pop songs to relevant artistry are always within reach. There is an almost anonymous, tapestry-like subjectivity operating the transition from, say, the original recording of Vangelis and Jon Anderson's «State of Independence» to Donna Summer's majestic reworking of the same song. Pop music does not need to be avant-garde to be, always, at the forefront of what's happening.

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It's not that when you
get old you forget things. The fact is that you are
so old no one knows what the hell
you are talking about.

Jay Leno, *Real Time with Bill
Maher*, HBO, January 9, 2015

THE EDUCATION OF A CRITIC

In the late spring of 1975, at the age of twenty-one, I participated as an amateur singer-songwriter in the third *Re Nudo* Music Festival, an independent, alternative musical meeting held in Milan and organized by *Re Nudo* (literally, Naked King), the then-leading magazine of underground culture in Italy. On that occasion, someone told me that L'Orchestra, a newly formed co-operative of folk, rock, and jazz musicians was welcoming new talents and suggested me to get in touch with Franco Fabbri, leader of the progressive rock group Stormy Six and one of the founding members of L'Orchestra. One month later, I went to a Stormy Six concert and introduced myself to Fabbri, who encouraged me to visit L'Orchestra's headquarters in Corso Como 6, which now is a very fashionable location, but it was quite rundown at that time. After a few weeks, I had a part-time job as press agent of the record label, writing press releases and establishing contacts with journalists, radio stations, cultural and political associations. I was also asked to write newspaper and magazine articles about L'Orchestra and the alternative musical movement in Italy, which I did with the enthusiasm of someone who had found not so much a pulpit but a home.

Toward the end of 1976, the editors of *Cineforum*, a film studies journal, asked me to contribute with a few articles on the "cultural politics" of left-wing parties and groups in connection with the growing interest in music among the young generations. Music had clearly become the cultural mediator of the day, possibly even more so than film, and in those days, the sheer number of grass-roots musical events, conferences, round-tables about music, the social and political role of music was simply staggering. As a traveling folksinger and singer-songwriter, and as press agent of an independent, alternative record company, I was constantly called on to participate in debates in Italy as well as in England (the initial stages of Rock in Opposition, 1977) and Germany (the Tübingen Folk Festival in 1978 and 1979). I was therefore in an ideal position to report on the matter. I had first-hand knowledge of the national, local and even obscure literature on the subject, and I could offer a comprehensive view of what was going on in the musical field and how political organizations were dealing with the role that music was playing in the life of their sympathizers. My first contribution came out in February 1977 and the collaboration lasted more than four years. From the *Cineforum* articles, I drew the structure of *Musica e pubblico giovanile*, the book that I completed in December 1979 and came out six months later (Carrera 1980 and 2014).

Why was an established film studies journal interested in contributions on music? In 1977 Italy, no “serious” music journal was open to publishing articles on popular music. *Cineforum*, however, had a readership that went beyond film critics and film buffs. It was distributed to a large network of film clubs all over Northern Italy, whose attendants looked at the journal as a source of qualified criticism, not necessarily confined to film. The first scholarly music journal that opened its doors to popular music was *Musica/Realtà*, founded in 1980 by musicologist Luigi Pestalozza, and my first article for *Musica/Realtà* (on singer-songwriters and their audience) appeared in the journal’s second issue and is now part of the new edition of *Musica e pubblico giovanile* (Carrera 2014). In 1977, I was also invited to take part in the first major Italian conference on free jazz and free improvised music at Teatro La Fenice in Venice. It was my baptism of fire as a music critic, since all the most reputed jazz scholars were there (or, at least, the few jazz scholars who did not dismiss free jazz and improvised music as unbearable noise and arrogant posture). The paper I gave, on the aesthetics of free music, was my first attempt to blend philosophy and music criticism and, three years later, it became a key chapter in my book.

Musica e pubblico giovanile addressed the impact of American and British popular music and jazz on Italian young audiences and youth culture. My initial frame of reference owed a debt to phenomenology, hermeneutics, and post-Gramscian Marxism. Was 1960s European Marxism, still heavily influenced by the Frankfurt School’s disdain for popular culture, useful in assessing the importance of pop music among the baby boomers on both sides of the Atlantic? Was phenomenology appropriate in outlining the aesthetics of avant-garde jazz and other genres of black music that owed little to the European tradition? How was I to evaluate the contrasting aesthetics of the folk revival movement, torn between authenticity and innovation?

When I speak of “young audience” and “young culture”, I am not referring to teenage lifestyles in a way that would make one think of an Italian equivalent of *American Graffiti*. Post-War Italy was a heavily politicized and partisan environment, sharply divided between Catholics, Communists, Liberals, and Socialists, not to mention the radical wings on both sides of the aisle, and with all the possible alliances and *mésalliances* among the various sides. Political consciousness started at a very early age, in fact in high school, even before the 1968 upheavals shook things up all over Europe. “Young audience” meant *politicized* young audience, and “young culture” described cultural preferences that often stemmed out of political orientation. My ambition was to map the intersections and inevitable clashes between the emerging political stances and political orientations in their opposition to what was then called the “establishment” and/or “culture industry”. But it was also a book on *music*.

At the time of the book’s publication, jazz criticism in Italy was largely conservative and folk music was the precinct of old school ethnomusicologists (with the relevant exceptions of a few politically oriented, highly skilled researchers that I discussed in the book). Criticism of *musica leggera* (or “light music,” as pre-rock songs were called) dated back to the early 1960s, but it was overtly ideological and highly dismissive of everything

the recording music industry produced (see for example Straniero et al. 1964). Umberto Eco was dismissive as well, but his notes on pop songs in *Apocalittici e integrati* (1964) were more nuanced. In fact, Eco hinted at popular music as a possible field of studies, although limited to sociological analysis. However, and despite his friendship with Luciano Berio (who was aware of developments in rock music, from The Beatles to Grateful Dead), Eco did not have a lasting interest in music, and soon dropped the topic.¹

Rock criticism had a breakthrough in 1973 with the publication of Riccardo Bertoncelli's *Pop Story*, a highly idiosyncratic, bizarrely written, and very personal account of "pop" (meaning 1960s and 1970s rock) versus 1950s "rock," which in the opinion of the author was a forgettable prehistory (Elvis Presley included), if compared with the true revolution that the 1960s had started. Whimsical as it was, Bertoncelli's book provided a strong and fascinating narrative I tried very hard to distinguish myself from, lest I became one of his many imitators. Only a small number of foreign books were available in translation. I relied on Carl Belz for 1950s rock and roll and on Rolf-Ulrich Kaiser for the 1960s and beyond. In the summer of 1979, however, I took a trip to the U.S. and I was able to get hold of non-translated material that helped me make my book less parochial. Yet I could not get over entirely the biases I inherited from the first authors I read. Bertoncelli's snobbery surfaced here and there in my approach, and Kaiser's dismissal of rhythm and blues and soul as purely commercial music affected negatively my judgment of black music.

In the first chapter, «The Need for Music», I asked whether music was an "interest" or a "need" for the generation born in the 1950s. The distinction was crucial to the post-Lukács Marxist school, quite influential in Italy at the time. According to Ágnes Heller, who in those years was championing her "theory of need," the concept of "interest" was inherently *bourgeois*. The working class did not have interests, only needs (Heller 1976). Yet, if such was the case, why did so many working-class young men and women care so much about music, given that demand for music does not seem to compare with the need for food, shelter, and a job? I analyzed the then current literature on the dialectics that posited the recurring crises of capitalism against the organization of the productive forces, and my answer was that the analysis of commodity consumption in the available Marxist literature was, at best, outdated.

To me, it was not crucial to ascertain whether music was an interest, a need, or a desire (although I can say now that it was all of the above). I understood music primarily as universe of signs, a communicative code. I was in disagreement with the ultra-utopian and often violent dreams of the "autonomous", radical left, which was gaining momentum in Italy toward the end of the 1970s (the heyday of bipartisan terrorism). I was also in disagreement with the stubbornness of the Marxist critics who followed the tenets of the Frankfurt School and who would depict the "culture industry" (as Adorno defined it) exclusively in the garb of a vampire bent on sucking the blood of creativity from unsuspecting urban youths (Adorno 2001). I am not claiming that I was

¹ See Eco (1964). The English edition (1994) does not include the chapter on pop songs.

anticipating Keith Negus's provocative counterargument, namely, that culture produces the industry and not the other way around (Negus 1999, p. 19). I was rather inclined to advance the notion that the culture industry contributed to create the same new trends that the same industry would subsequently exploit. The culture industry was like the recording studio, part and parcel of the music it eventually put on tape. In the conclusion, I expressed the fear that the "need for music" I had discussed at the beginning of the book was being replaced by an anonymous "need for sounds," an anodyne ambient which one could slide through unobtrusively instead of living it (It is perhaps ironic, or maybe not, that in the 1980s I became quite interested in minimalism and ambient music).

In the second half of the 1970s, Italian literature on popular music was ripe with Bertonecelli's look-alikes who wrote passionate, baroque reviews in trendy music magazines (*Ciao 2001*, *Gong*, *Muzak*, *Musica 80*), and whose style was heavily influenced by the most emphatic postures of Beat Literature or, sometimes, the latest trends in French critical theory. A growing number of topical, collective, instant books, halfway between fan prose and radical left-wing stranglehold ideology were also available. All these books and pamphlets were the effort of small publishing enterprises such as Arcana in Milan, and Lato-Side, Savelli, and Stampa Alternativa in Rome. Neither musicians nor the rock critics assumed that major publishers were interested in such a flimsy topic as music marketed to the young.

Feltrinelli, however, was an exception. A large publisher with an expanding chain of bookstores, Feltrinelli was at the forefront of political literature and political analysis of culture. By the end of the 1970s, they virtually published a book *every day*. They bet on my book, which immediately sold 5,000 copies. As I saw during my travels, it reached all the "cultural operators" (as they called themselves) who were active in the business of bringing music to "the people" or, as they were wont to say, to "the masses." Reviews were many, and one is worth quoting. Umberto Fiori in *Laboratorio Musica* (No. 18), a monthly magazine directed by Luigi Nono, pointed out that the twists and turns in the history of music appreciation, as I had chronicled them, showed that no history of popular music in the traditional sense of the word was possible. Popular music was now too vast a subject to be constrained in a linear narrative and every attempt to do so was tantamount to writing the biography of a Disney character.

Then, in the space of one year or little more, everything came to a halt. Despite the positive reviews and adoptions in sociology departments, the book was never reprinted, for a few reasons that had nothing to do with the book and other reasons that had *everything* to do with it and the cultural-political climate in which I wrote it. In the first months of 1982, Feltrinelli went through a severe crisis of overproduction and had to cut down. Furthermore, the cultural-political landscape was changing so fast that even by 1982 the book would have needed a thorough revision. In Italy, the early 1980s were the years of the "receding tide" (*riflusso*), marked by a strong disillusionment toward leftist utopias. By the mid-1980s, the public conversation about music was unrecognizable to

anyone who was still approaching it with the political and aesthetic categories of the 1970s. A mere sequel of the book would have been unthinkable.

The whole “music and politics” issue had become suffocating. I needed a breath of fresh air or maybe *old, very old* air. I immersed myself in the study of ancient musical cosmologies, Renaissance Neo-pythagorism, and the literature on music and psychoanalysis. I came back to the “music and young audiences” theme for the last time in an article I published in *Quaderni piacentini* (Carrera 1982). In 2014, however, while I was working on the book’s new edition and I was undecided whether to add the article as an appendix, I re-read it for the first time. I found it dismissive, even a little arrogant, and I decided to leave it out. By 1982, I was clearly eager to move away from the “debate on music” and toward a more comprehensive understanding of “music.”

In the spring of 2014, however, thirty-four years after the first publication, Odoya, a Bologna-based publisher with a passion for retrieving lost books, to my surprise approached me with the intention of publishing a new edition of *Musica e pubblico giovanile* in a “cult book” series (we will all be cult, fifteen minutes each). The world has changed so much that I cannot even say that it was too late. I was just glad that I had the chance to add four chapters on folk-revival songwriters that I could not include in the first edition for reasons of length (no re-release is complete without bonus tracks). I also wrote a new introduction that made me go back to the critical debate on popular music with the proverbial 20/20 hindsight. It was worth the trouble. The years between the 1970s and the 1980s gave shape to the aural landscape that we still inhabit. The new, all-encompassing notion of “pop” was already transcending both pop art and pop music. It was on the cusp of becoming the equivalent of a Google Translator, easy with easy signifiers and mercilessly unfair to all signifieds that could not be translated promptly.²

MR. FLOYD AT LA SCALA

A few years ago, in an Italian cinema class, I showed my students Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Zabriskie Point* (1970), a period piece if there ever was one, so dated now that it has become endearing. I emphasized the role of the soundtrack, especially in the final scene when the explosion of the Mojave Desert house is accompanied by a Pink Floyd instrumental track. An East-Asian student wrote in his paper that he found «the classical music composed by Mr. Floyd» quite interesting and appropriate to the scene.

Of course, it was classical. There was an organ, and no singing. How could not it be classical? I had to grade the student’s paper, and I suddenly felt very *old*. The same year (March 1, 2007), Hans Graf, conductor of the Houston Symphony Orchestra, asked me to participate in a performance of Dmitri Shostakovich’s *Suite to Words by Michelangelo*

² The second paragraph of this article is an adaptation from my new introduction to Carrera (2014). For a more complete translation of the same introduction, see Carrera (2015).

Buonarroti Op. 145a, one of the composer's late masterpieces. Sitting in front of the orchestra, on the left side of the stage, my task was to read Michelangelo's sonnets in Italian before Mikhail Svetlov sang them in Russian with the English translation running in the surtitles. A few minutes before the beginning of the concert, I was wandering backstage among the players who were coming in one by one and taking their instruments out of their cases, the men adjusting their bow ties and the women smoothing an occasional wrinkle in their long skirts. I overheard two violin players engaged in a friendly, intense conversation, whose subject was, well, Pink Floyd.

With the complicity of true fans, possibly more deeply felt than the professional admiration for the Shostakovich piece they were about to perform, they were excited that David Gilmour, Pink Floyd's lead guitar, would give a concert in Gdańsk, Poland, accompanied by an orchestra conducted by Polish composer Zbigniew Preisner, and that the record would be released soon (*Live in Gdańsk* came out in 2008). One of the two pointed out that Preisner had already collaborated with Pink Floyd, and his tone let out that he regarded the event with the utmost respect.

My student was right; it was classical music after all. It wasn't classical when I wrote my book. To tell the truth, I had been pretty harsh with "Mr. Floyd" (*he* wasn't avant-garde enough; nothing was avant-garde enough for me at that time), but now it was, and a lot more so than the worn-out imitations of serialist avant-garde that one could still hear in contemporary music festivals.

But, in a way – and I am not bragging by saying it – I already knew that. The history of arts is made of adventurers looking for something that apparently possesses no value until the exploration team comes back the Golden Fleece and manages to get the attention of the world. My research on the musical debate in 1970s Italy was not the only reason why I had the feeling that non-classical music was destined to gain a degree of cultural attention that no one, not even among the most incendiary rock critics, could ever imagine. There was something else at play.

While I was traveling all over Italy to participate in music panels, round tables, and conferences in my capacity as press agent of L'Orchestra, I was leading a double life. In addition to the time I spent analyzing the fire and brimstone prose of the most radical pamphlets and their attempts to justify the natural right of the popular masses to crash rock concerts and attend them without paying the ticket, I was also writing my college dissertation on the relationship between poetry and music in Arnold Schönberg and Viennese expressionism. I was dealing at the same time with a music very much talked about and with another music, not much talked about – a music that seventy years after it came into the world still scared the casual listeners. And yet, Viennese expressionism survived two world wars, Nazi accusations of being degenerate art and Stalinist charges that it was tainted with bourgeois decadence. Despite having always been between a rock (no pun intended) and a hard place, early twentieth century avant-garde still refused to die like an insect pressed by mistake between the pages of a music history textbook, and to me that was a reason for great admiration.

Too much audience is as harmful as too little; heated passions are as dangerous as utter indifference. But music, any music, will live if it deserves to live because, as Duke Ellington put it, «if it sounds good, it is good». Or maybe because all music that survives the generations that created it becomes classical.

And yet, and yet... Nowadays music is no longer the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, no one leaves in solitary expedition to search for the source of the music's river. Music is so available, just a click and an app away. It is in danger of ending up as one of the many things that should be important to anyone and are important to no one. In another classroom anecdote, I teach a class on apocalyptic themes in contemporary culture and I show my students Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* whose soundtrack is mostly taken from the Prelude of *Tristan und Isolde*. I take pain to explain the Great Meaning of that sublime piece of music, which can be heard in the film at the beginning and at the end, when the audience is served several minutes of Wagner before our world ends in a collision of melancholy planets. Then, as usual, I receive the papers, and I notice that according to a seraphic female student, «the film ends in perfect silence».

What did she hear? What did she *not* hear? Did *Melancholia* end in perfect silence because there was no dialogue, just as Mr. Floyd's music in *Zabriskie Point* was classical because it was instrumental? If five minutes of loud Wagnerian orchestra did not reach the student's ear, what will she ever be able to hear, or not hear, in the future?³

Such lamentations, it is understood, count for nothing. Certainly not more than similar complaints I heard from older music critics when I was young. But the fact about music remains: the more it is available, the less people talk about it, except than in specific venues and definitely with more competence than I can remember in my youth. Yet such outcome is precisely what “we” did not want thirty-six years ago, when everybody was talking about music without knowing a thing, but we talked about it because it was important. And not just because music was a metaphor for political discourse. Music was, primarily, a form of joy.

In the heavily politicized environment of 1970s Italy, a very much-repeated slogan was that one had to be “red and knowledgeable.” I knew a lot of people who wanted to be very red, not much knowledgeable, and totally stoned. Others did not need that kind of helpers; to them, politics was a strong enough drug. The great divide was between those who believed in the politics of ecstasy and those who believed in the ecstasy of politics. Both beliefs were recipes for disaster, no doubt, but also indispensable requirements for the erotic enjoyment that occurred when the body of the political activist, by becoming one thing with the current political theology, would change into a resurrected, immortal, glorious body.

³ Maybe the sound of silence. However, a few months after the completion of the course another student e-mailed me that he had been so impressed by *Melancholia* that he started listening to Wagner and reading Wagner's writings on Beethoven. He then began exploring Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms. He asked me where he could go from there. I suggested Bruckner and Mahler. He has now progressed to Schönberg and Webern.

It didn't take much. The adrenaline rush you experienced the first time you ran away from the clubs and shields of the police matched the moment when you entered the city stadium where a star-studded rock concert was about to take place. The field was crowded with people just like you who were impossible to meet in any other circumstance. The saturated yellow lights circling above the high seats melted into the blue sky. The critical distance vanished, the metamorphosis took place.

Up there on the stage the lure of art as absolute utopia, untouchable by disappointment and unreachable by criticism (what I say applies to the moments *before* the concert began, the way foreplay compares to actual sex), drew our gaze, irresistibly. The keyboards lined up like castle walls, the racks of guitars as tall as trees, the terrifying amps the size of trucks—the entire apparatus of music as a metaphor of capitalist, technological power was displayed in front of our adoring eyes. For a moment, but even one single moment was enough to stain our purity, we forgot that we were there, supposedly, to “fight the system”. On the contrary, the system had us in its grip. The «ghost of 'lectricity», to quote Dylan's «Visions of Johanna», triumphed in all its fetishist obscenity, alchemically transmuted into that gigantic “Thing” that hypnotized our desires, the sadomasochistic watt-induced numbness that made you feel a nobody and a chosen one at the same time, for it was you who had the strength to endure it. It was the listener's sublime in action: the music was too much for us to bear, and at the same time, we knew that no one but us could bear its being unbearable. Then the whole thing became routine, and sometimes an uncanny one (later on, spontaneously ritualized concerts – Michael Jackson's or Vasco Rossi's, it did not matter – turned into viable examples of benign fascism), but the first times were the ones you carried with you.

I regret now that in my book I was not able to convey all my passion for music (music in opposition to power and music *as* power), which definitely superseded my interest in the “debate about music” I spoke endlessly about. My critical approach was strictly anti-ecstatic and ultimately anti-aphrodisiac. I clothed myself in penitential irony, and I was very hostile to the hippy aesthetic of good vibrations. I had to make myself heard among the noisy competition of my fellow music critics, and the severity of tone was the best way to differentiate myself from the most intoxicated Dionysian revelers, but I should have let myself loose a little more. Even the most austere Frankfurt School “critical listening” must give way sooner or later to a certain degree of *Einfühlung*, of less-guarded empathy, Maybe I came closer to that twenty years later when I wrote *La voce di Bob Dylan* (2001). I dare not say with a straight face that rock and roll “saved my life” (Wim Wenders said that). Not more than Gustav Mahler or Lennie Tristano, so to speak, but in a nutshell, yes, it is true.

Looking back at the century that gave birth to the blues, rhythm and blues, country, rockabilly, rock and roll, and pop music in all its declinations; looking back at the deeper history that generated Dixieland, swing, be-bop, West Coast jazz, free jazz, fusion, hip-hop (for the sake of brevity I cannot include here the myriads of styles and genres in Latin American and world music); and, last but not least, the history that saw the rise and fall of impressionism and expressionism, polytonality and neo-classicism,

dodecaphony, chance-based music and electronic music, the end of the 1970s was the time when the total had to be drawn, the bonds subscribed at the turn of the nineteenth century were about to expire, and it was time to find out which investments had been savvy and which ones were not. It was the end of a short but very intense century whose beginning might be traced back to Debussy reproducing on Western instruments the Gamelan music he heard at the Paris World Fair in 1889, or to W.C. Handy in 1903 transcribing a song he had heard in a Mississippi train station from a field laborer named Henry Sloan. The harmony was dissonant, unheard of, strangely sensual, and (according to the legend) only years later he understood that he had not heard a variant of rag music, he had heard the blues.

Critics must not lose their sting, lest their work be reduced to irrelevance. Yet Robert Schumann, who established the foundations of modern music criticism, was right: when we hear a perfect piece of music such as the «Allegretto» in B flat from Beethoven's *Symphony No. 8*, «one has no choice but to be quiet and happy» (Schumann 1946, p. 98, entry of December 10, 1840). Conversely, the critic would be advised to do a little soul-searching and try to understand why the passing of years has made him so self-indulgent. In my book, I wrote that Keith Jarrett's *Köln Concert* embodied «the obsession of petit-bourgeois pleasantness, eighty minutes of unbearable musical molasses». ⁴ The young come into the world with the precise mandate to be contemptuous, it is the sense of their appearance on this earth, and I did not want to be an exception. I was a product of post-War disenchantment. I could not stand any music written after 1945 that was not harsh, dissonant, and intolerable to the ears of the casual listener. At times, however, I really liked listening to Keith Jarrett the same way you pass by a pastry shop and there is no diet in the world that will stop you from stepping in and buy a Napoléon.

There is a place in my mind where I am still certain that Jarrett's Cologne Concert, with its Celtic, modal cascades, its long pentatonic meanderings, and the implicit promise to reconcile all genres and styles, is indeed a perfect example of musical molasses. The fact is that eventually you reach an age when you realize that all dreams of personal, collective, utopian, and musical happiness are a little syrupy. Or a lot. And there is not much you can do about it except enjoy it. An honest critic will have to be frank about it, while he or she is about to listen to the next neo-tonal composer, neo-new age piano player, neo-folk singer-songwriter, neo-country group, neo-psychedelic band, neo-blues guitarist, and neo-classic rock band. Music has lost lots of hard edge, lately. Edges are rounder now, and softer. It has already happened. After Bach, the pleasantries of *Tafelmusik* dominated the field for an entire generation.

In May 2014, I was in Milan and passing by La Scala I saw the bill of a ballet based on music by Pink Floyd. Kudos to my student once again, and to Mr. Floyd. We may complain that everything has been reduced to pop or rejoice because everything has

⁴ «[...] l'ossessione della gradevolezza, ottanta minuti di melassa sonora insopportabilmente piccolo-borghese» (Carrera 2014, p. 101).

been raised to the level of serious music. The choice is ours. Music does not care. If it sounds good, it is good.

A STATE OF INDEPENDENCE

The 1980s were the years when pop took over rock, Franco Battiato taught huge postmodernism classes in packed stadiums, Lucio Dalla touched the hearts of all the Annas and Marcos of the *bel paese*, and the Italians never agreed on anything more than they agreed on him and Vasco Rossi. The stubborn generations of the 1960s and the 1970s did not recover easily. Now that the wounds are healed now (are they?), it is time to acknowledge that there were deep lessons to learn in rock's capitulation to pop, and the first lesson was that one pop song is all pop songs. I do not mean that in a reductive way. I just want to stress that at the beginning of the 1980s hierarchical aesthetics ceased to apply to popular music, if they ever applied in the first place. Richard Meltzer had already made the point in *The Aesthetics of Rock* (1970), a work that is as unreadable now as it was when it first appeared, unless we decide to look at it as a striking example of proto-postmodernist prose. In short – such was Meltzer's thesis – there is no ontological difference between «A Day in the Life» by The Beatles and «I Think We Are Alone Now» by Tommy James and the Shondells. Back in 1970, Meltzer did not know how right he was. Now, anyone can see the validity of his argument just by following on YouTube the next incarnations of «I Think We Are Alone Now» from Lene Lovich's cover in 1979 to Tiffany's in 1987. Regardless of artistic value, if there is indeed «a unit of rock significance» (Meltzer, *passim*) in every song, then the most sublime rock song resides in its entirety in the stupidest pop song, while the stupidest pop song finds perfect shelter within the greatest rock song.

What matters is neither the original version nor the copyrighted one, but the signifying unit hidden in every song, the musical meme or, if you want, the kernel of the Real, «that which remains the same in all possible symbolic universes» (Žižek 2008, pp. 62-63), which in our case means in all covers. Every song, in other words, contains a kernel of enjoyment that floats from one cover to the next (the first recording is also a cover, which is evident in the case of *Lieder* and standards, and less so – but often no less true – in the case of pop songs). Not only that: pop makes distinctions of style and genre very slippery. We need to hold on to those distinctions because without awareness of genre, form, and style, there is no criticism; but we also need to recognize the instance when the power of the song transmogrifies from one universe into another. In those instances, the result is not the perfect relocation of the transmuted object, as if we were using a 3D printer or Star Trek's transporter, but a new entity whose kernel nonetheless has remained the same.

The non-hierarchical and non-normative categories I am looking for are not general classes under which material or conceptual beings can be classified. In other words, I

am not invoking the pop-music equivalent of Aristotelian primary categories (Substance, Relation, Quantity, Quality) and secondary categories (Place, Time, Situation, Condition, Action, Passion). I would rather refer to Wittgenstein when he says that there are no clear definitions that we can attribute to categories; rather a “halo” or “corona” of related meanings radiating around each term (Wittgenstein 1978, pp. 14, 181). I may also think of Gilbert Ryle when he speaks of categories as «a galaxy of ideas» rather than a single idea (Ryle 1971, pp. 201-202). Such categories are not normative. They are ready-made; they come after the fact and their purpose lies in connecting the dots. Conversely, they may “singularize” the dots by breaking up patterns that are too familiar and no longer useful. I am looking less for recurring tropes or indicators of style, to use Philip Tagg’s lexicon, than I am for indicator of problems, “event categories,” so to speak, in analogy with the “event horizons” of physics.⁵ Undefined areas, that is, which contain their own kernel of enjoyment-significance whose meaning may be lost or become ambiguous beyond their border.

Meltzer’s “unit of rock significance” is one of those slippery syntagms that at first sight do not make sense outside the context in which Meltzer places them. True, Meltzer quotes W.V.O. Quine, «The unit of empirical significance is the whole of science» (Quine 1963, p. 97), but that is no more than a sophomoric stunt on his part (which is the same thing that can be said for 95% of his book). Let’s make therefore a leap from the ridiculous to the sublime: the real issue is what Ernst Bloch, in his *Spirit of Utopia*, defined as “carpet as pure, corrective form” (*Teppich*), meaning all music from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance still lacking the realization of subjectivity, and being therefore a prelude to subjectivity (Bloch 2000, p. 37). (Incidentally, I think that “tapestry” would be a better translation of “*Teppich*” than “carpet,” given that Bloch was probably thinking of medieval tapestries.)

I do not subscribe to Bloch’s idealistic terminology in its teleological and normative features. I merely point out that contemporary, rock-derived popular music oscillates between two poles. One is a failed attempt at subjectivity (Bob Dylan in a 1966 interview defined rock and roll as «a fake attempt at sex», which is accurate to the extent that the same definition could not be extended to jazz and the blues). The other is a diffuse, collective, interwoven, tapestry-like subjectivity, which is nonetheless the only possible ground for the pollination of the “unit of rock significance.”

In Bloch’s ideal history of music, the definition of non-subjective music as tapestry makes sense to the extent that at some point a solid subjectivity (say, Beethoven—who was Bloch’s hero) comes about and occupies the forefront. That is not the case in popular music, where tapestry is indeed the forefront. The diffuse subjectivity of pop songs means that we never encounter “the” pop song but only one of its *avatars*, the broken line of a pattern in the tapestry. The pop song is not represented; it represents itself. As much

⁵ «Style indicators are in other words those aspects of musical structure that state the *compositional norms and identity* of a given style and that tend to be constant for the duration of an entire piece» (Tagg 2013, p. 523).

as the transcendental ego (“I think”) is the presupposition of experience, so “I sing” is the transcendental presupposition of the song. The “I”, however, is the “I” of the song and not the ego of the singer. In fact, it is not “I sing” as much as it is “It sings” (a rough equivalent of what, in Lacanian fashion, is known as *ça parle*). The song appropriates the singer.

It is all very well for Frank Sinatra to say that Billie Holiday would pick up any song and make it her own (Hamill 1998, p. 115). In fact, the song (think of «Strange Fruit») made Billie Holiday its own—which goes to Billie Holiday’s credit, for songs do not just appropriate every singer. The singer listens to the song. The song cannot listen to the singer, but the singer feels that the song “hears” the singer, and in this impersonal, transcendental “hearing,” the song owns the singer. In time, «I’m a Fool to Want You» took possession of Frank Sinatra, Billie Holiday, child prodigy Angelina Jordan (see her rendition on YouTube), and lately Bob Dylan (listen to his cover version in *Shadows in the Night*, 2015). The transcendental “I sing” is actually a transcendental “I connect”—connecting one singer to another in an endless chain.

As it were, I can make a case that rivals «I’m a Fool to Want You». At the end of the 1970s, no name among my crowd was more vilified than Donna Summer’s. She seemed to stand against everything we held dear. No one conveyed the stupid shape of things to come better than her senseless disco act, wasn’t that so? Well, a reassessment is long overdue. To me, it occurred when I listened to a conversation with Brian Eno recorded on August 29, 1998 at the Kunsthalle in Bonn, Germany, a great venue where I often went at the end of the 1970s (I often travelled to Germany) to hear the Bonn Symphony Orchestra, classical pianists, and Markus Stockhausen playing post-Baroque trumpet concertos. Eno put on Diana Ross and the Supremes’ «Someday We’ll Be Together» and then he said,

Pop music has been an incredibly brilliant, great experiment. That’s one of them, and another one is that Donna Summer song, «State of Independence». Again, one of the most dignified pieces of music [...] You know, I remember some classical idiot saying to me once, in a kind of snooty way, well, of course, everything in pop music had been done by 1832, meaning that pop music was simple, you know, structurally simple. It uses the same old chords, it doesn’t do anything melodically challenging, theoretically. And I said, listen to «State of Independence» sometime, you know, as a piece of very, very sophisticated folklore-art. Those pieces stand alone.⁶

Diana Ross and the Supremes have always been legit, but Donna Summer? For a moment, I honestly thought he was pulling a Richard Meltzer on the audience. It was not so. The 1983 live performance of Donna Summer’s «State of Independence», available on YouTube, is as dignified as any great civil right hymn of the 1960s. Donna

⁶ Michael Engelbrecht interviews Brian Eno in 1998, my transcription, at 38 min., <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9qAxrSKfCQ>>. Last accessed: 4 March 2017.

Summer truly opens up some sort of Heavenly Jerusalem where Martin Luther King's dream of freedom is being realized in a space and a time that does not fully belong to this unhappy globe. While listening to the song, however, I knew I had already heard it. My recollection of it remained below the surface and did not want to come out. Thanks to the comments posted below the video, I found out that «State of Independence» was actually a track by Jon Anderson and Vangelis from their second collaboration, *The Friends of Mr. Cairo* (1981).

Now, can one imagine a shade of pale that is *whiter* than Jon and Vangelis? How could Donna Summer turn a mildly intriguing pile of prog-synth-pop-New-Age platitudes into a «meditation on integration», to quote Charlie Mingus? (Incidentally, I wouldn't mind if «State of Independence» would become the national hymn of the United States; I would love to hear the Congress sing «Shablam idi, Shablam ida» in unison). Did Brian Eno know who wrote the song? Did he bother to know? But the whole point is precisely that *it does not matter*. It does matter to the pop music historians and to the copyright holders, but “it does not matter” insofar as the song lays out an excess of unattached meaning which is the mark of its indestructible kernel, of its inner enjoyment. What matters is the unit of significance—the “purloined letter” or the purloined interval, the metonymic signifier that cannot be pinned down in one definitive cover. The meme, indeed (see Jan 2000).

I am advancing no idealist aesthetics; nor am I defending pop songs on the spurious basis of a Platonic idea of rock, existing independently from the concrete practices of productions and the accidents of life. Just the opposite. My aesthetics is materialistically contingent. I am saying that what survives in the metamorphic process that goes from the “original cover” to the next one is the power of the signifier that answers to no authorship and does not subscribe to any fixed idea of what the song ought to be.

When I first heard Eno's speech, I also heard a word he had not uttered. When Eno said, «Pop music has been an incredibly brilliant, great experiment», I heard, «Pop music has been an incredibly brilliant, *planetary* experiment». I do not know where that word, “planetary,” came from. There is nothing in the phonetics of “incredibly,” “brilliant,” and “great” that I could consciously rework into “planetary.” I do not know what subconscious stream took hold of me, but the beauty of the word I believed I heard struck me nonetheless. A couple of weeks later, in a case of sheer synchronicity, I opened *Death of a Discipline* by literary theorist Gayatri C. Spivak to warm myself up for a seminar in the Department of English of my institution. In a chapter called, yes, «Planetarity», I found this quotation, which totally validated my aural misprision of Eno's words:

I propose the planet to overwrite the globe. Globalization is the imposition of the same system of exchange everywhere. In the gridwork of electronic capital, we achieve that abstract ball covered in latitudes and longitudes, cut by virtual lines, once the equator and the tropics and so on, now drawn by the requirements of Geographical Information Systems [...] The globe is on our computers. No one lives

there. It allows us to think that we can aim to control it. The planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan. It is not really amenable to a neat contrast with the globe. I cannot say “the planet, on the other hand.” When I invoke the planet, I think of the effort required to figure the (im)possibility of this underived intuition (Spivak 2003, p. 72).

Spivak’s seminar focused largely on her notion of planetarity. She took care to distinguish between the “dogmatic” and “critical” usages of the concept. The point was to avoid the double bind that is implicit in the uses of concepts as both critical *and* dogmatic (a mistake that virtually every school of critical theory is guilty of). To make decisions, one has to choose either dogmatic *or* critical use. The dogmatic notion of the planet as entirely knowable must be supplanted by the notion of the planet as ultimately *inaccessible*. One could also recall Heidegger’s notion of the inner safeness of the Earth with respect to the World, if it were not that Heidegger meant it in a regressive, reactionary, ultimately dogmatic sense (see Heidegger 1975). Unsurpassable limitations in our power to gather a total knowledge of the planet—but also of a text, a film, a song—is what cultivates an unconditional ethics in reading, watching, and listening. I also assume that, in Spivak’s terms, “unconditional” must be understood as in “unconditional love”.⁷

Planetarity vindicates us of the abstract, value-deprived, barren “globe” of globalization. It makes us feel the earth beneath our feet again. It is not, I must stress, an idealistic concept, precisely because it will always remain *an incomplete tapestry*. Capitalism may possess the globe, but it will never possess the planet. Human folly can destroy the world, but it will not destroy the planet (the planet will go on without us). Music born in a specific time and place (from Euroclassical music to synth-pop or African-American soul) re-territorializes all the time. People all over the world may feel moved by listening to any kind of music in their own terms, which includes appropriating the music and letting themselves be appropriated by it. In this process, they will make music essentially *incomplete*, open to an endless string of permutations, and therefore *planetary*.

Legend has it that there are currently forty million people studying piano in China. As Alex Ross has pointed out, «Now classical music is the world; it has ceased to be a European art» (Ross 2007, p. 516). It is being written by men and women all over the planet, from Azerbaijan to South Korea, in a growing cross-pollination of Western and non-Western patterns. The same applies to jazz and rock. An unheard-of rhythmic pattern coming from Africa or East Asia may have us change our perception of the world a year from now. Popular music as a planetary experiment (which includes, possibly, contemporary «world» classical music) confirms that the flapping of a butterfly’s wings in Brazil can cause a tornado in Texas, for every music piece is a larva constantly

⁷ I am grateful to my colleague Auritro Majumder of the University of Houston for the transcription and posting of the seminar’s notes.

changing into a butterfly changing into a tornado. Yet the experiment is unfinished, and it has to stay that way. The true event of the planetarization of popular music, as opposed to its globalization, may be that mere popularity is actually the sign of a non-event (a distinction should be made between popular music and celebrity music), while the true event is the move from emancipatory politics to emancipatory tapestry weaving.

By the end of the 1970s, progressive, experimental, and politically committed music narrowed itself down to a point where very few people could follow it. My mistake in those years was to look for more extreme avant-garde, not realizing that pop music in its full potential is always at the forefront of «something» (the virtual Gotha of African-American musicians singing the choruses of «State of Independence» is the best example). The 1980s saw many illusions fall, yet they did bring us a state of independence. We were free at last, and if we look back to that time now, it ought to be because we can do it freely, and not because of regret. Had we been able to listen to our hard-earned independence back then, instead of crying over the lost hopes of those years...

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