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Toward a Philosophy of Popular Music

From Carpet to Subjectivity, and Back

On March 13-14, 2015, I was the keynote speaker at the annual conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM), Italian Chapter, in Parma, Italy. The topic of the conference was *What Will Be Left of the 1980s?*, and I had been invited to talk about the new, expanded edition of my 1980 book, *Musica e pubblico giovanile* (Carrera 2014). In the last part of my paper, I looked back at the transition between the 1970s and the 1980s from a point of view that aimed to transcend once and for all my (and not just mine) puritanic aesthetic of old. It was on that occasion that I made acquaintance with Luca Marconi. We never had the chance to meet again, unfortunately, but we corresponded occasionally. I am glad to have the opportunity to participate in a project that honors his work and his memory.

At the Parma conference, I intended to ask the following questions: 1) How wide is the distance that now separates my generation from the debates of forty years ago? 2) What significant steps have been taken in the understanding of popular music as a global cultural phenomenon? 3) Is it now time to introduce a set of working categories that will eventually lead to a "philosophy of popular music"? I will add here a few theoretical points to the final section of the paper that I delivered in Parma and was subsequently published in the proceedings of the conference (Carrera 2018).

The 1980s were the years when pop took over rock, and the stubborn generations of the 1960s and the 1970s did not recover easily from the loss. Now that the wounds are healed (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 many hierarchical categories ceased to apply to popular music—if they ever applied in the first place. In fact, Richard Meltzer had already made the point in *The Aesthetics of Rock* (1970/1986), a work that is as unreadable now as it was when it first appeared, unless we

decide to take 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* (The Beatles) and *I Think We Are Alone Now* (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 1970/1986, p. 97) in every rock/pop 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 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 classical *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 music 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 floating categories are neither metaphysical nor normative. They are phenomenological, or rather ready-made; they come after the fact and their purpose lies in connecting the dots. Or, conversely, they may "singularize" the dots by breaking up patterns that are too familiar and no longer useful.

By saying this, 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.[1] Undefined areas, that is, which contain their own kernel of enjoyment-significance whose meaning may be lost or become ambiguous if they are expanded beyond the extent of their reach.

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 Willard Van Orman Quine, «The unit of empirical significance is the whole of science» (Quine 1963[2], p. 42), but that is just one of his many sophomoric stunts (the same thing 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 European music from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance still lacking the fulfillment of (Western) subjectivity, and being therefore no more than a prelude to subjectivity (Bloch 1923[2]/2000, pp. 37, 46, etc). Initially, I thought that "tapestry" could be a better translation than "carpet", but it is not so. Bloch borrowed the term from Leo Popper and György Lukács, and they really meant "carpet". Its meaning is ambiguous, but it can be understood as the interwoven "ground" on which subjectivity will eventually walk on.

I do not subscribe to Bloch's idealistic terminology in its teleological and normative, Euroclassical-only 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 kind of attempt at sex», which is accurate to the extent that the same definition could not be applied to jazz and the blues).[2] The other is a diffuse, collective, carpet-like subjectivity, which is nonetheless the only possible ground for the pollination of the «unit of rock significance», whatever that is.

In Bloch's history of music as a journey to the Self, the definition of non-subjective music as carpet 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 the carpet is indeed at the forefront. The diffuse subjectivity of pop songs means that we never encounter "the" pop song but only one of its *avatars*, the

[1] «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).

[2] «And rock 'n' roll is a white, seventeen-year-old-kid music. That's all it is. Rock 'n' roll is a fake kind of attempt at sex» (*Radio Interview with Klaus Burling, May 1, 1966, Radio 3, Sweden*, in Burger 2018, p. 154).

line of a pattern in the carpet, either broken or tight. The pop song is not performed *by* someone; it performs itself. It is not represented; it represents itself. As much as the transcendental ego ("I think") is the presupposition of shared experience, so "I sing" is the transcendental presupposition of the shareable song. The "I", however, is the "I" of the song and not the ego of the singer. What we have here is not a case of "I sing" as much as it is a case of "It sings" (a rough equivalent of what, in Lacanian fashion, is known as *ça parle*). The song appropriates the singer.

Mouths and Throats

But how? Allow me to go back to my biography. Toward the end of the 1970s, I was leading a double life. In addition to the time 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 thesis 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 then there was Dylan. In my 1980 book I gave Dylan only few pages. I needed to learn more about his American roots, the folk ballads and the Delta blues that had nourished him. For a similar reason, I concluded my dissertation on Schönberg when I came in sight of his *Moses und Aron* (1933). I needed to learn more, much more about Schönberg's Jewish roots if I wanted to address properly such a daunting work. As much as *Moses und Aron* deserved a second dissertation, Bob Dylan deserved a book that I was not ready to write in 1980. I was, though, twenty years later, while living in New York, and, again, the relationship between poetry and music was the wall I had to climb (Carrera 2001/2011[2], 2021).

I had never been satisfied with the provisional conclusion I had reached in my Schönberg dissertation. I felt that my argument was incomplete and that it relied too much on the Viennese debate on the "limits of the language", which affected philosophy, literature, and music at the beginning of the twentieth century (in short, music and lyrics are separate languages that can look at each other and learn from each other but cannot be translated into each other). The weakness of my argument was that it did not differentiate

properly between orality, writing, sound, and performance. It was time now to set up a space where Schönberg and Dylan would be able, ideally, to meet.

In the liner notes of *Bringin' It All Back Home* (1965), Dylan writes, «a song is anything that can walk by itself / i am called / a songwriter. a poem is a naked person... some / people say that i am a poet» (Dylan 1965). These lines were the basis of my self-revisionism. The difference between a poem and a song is not of a hierarchical nature; one is not on top of the other. Rather, it is a matter of different expectations. The difference lies in the addition or subtraction of meaning that is inherent to the performative practices of poetry and song. No actor reciting a poem can make it "his own" or "her own". Not even the poem's author can, for that matter. A poem recited may acquire a surplus of beauty, but it is rare that it acquires a surplus of meaning. In a way, a written poem may be "more than written" (it is a «mouth», as W. H. Auden said), but it will never revert to orality.[3] A song, on the contrary, always falls short of being "fully written". It can be written, and it can be scored (here I am thinking of popular songs rather than *Lieder* or arias, although classical pieces are not out of the equation), but it resists writing. It does not need just a mouth; it needs a throat, and it avoids identification with its author even when the author and the performer are the same person. Potentially, every performer can make a song "his own" or "her own". And every new performance has the chance to endow the song with a surplus of meaning.

In other words, a poem is a naked person; it belongs to its author (it strips the author bare) in a way that a song does not. A song is anything that can walk by itself. It is the paradox of writing versus performance. The universality of writing (the written alphabet has no individual "throat") generates the individual author, the mouth. The song, which needs the throat that sings it, subtracts individuality to the throat's owner, making him or her a link in a chain of throats and voices, each one of them unique, transient, and contingent. Dylan must get credit for having turned this paradox into a poetics and an ethics of performance. The not-so-hidden meaning of «Here is your throat back, thanks for the loan» (a line from Dylan's *Ballad of a Thin Man*) may very well be that throats are indeed borrowed and loaned.

It is appropriate for Frank Sinatra to say that Billie Holiday would pick up any song and make it her own (Hamill 1998, p. 115). In fact, it was often the song (think of *Strange*

[3] «For poetry makes nothing happen [...] / it survives, / A way of happening, a mouth» (W. H. Auden, *In Memory of W. B. Yeats*, in Auden 1976, pp. 245-246).

Fruit) that made Billie Holiday its own—which goes to Billie Holiday's credit, of course, for songs do not just appropriate every singer. As I feel that I am being watched by things that cannot see me (the eyes in a Renaissance painting based on the laws of perspective, for instance), I also feel that I am being heard by things that cannot listen to me. The song cannot "listen to" the singer, but the singer feels that the song "hears" the singer, and in this impersonal, objectified "hearing", the song *owns* the singer. In time, a song such as *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.

I can indeed 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 some time ago when I listened to a conversation between Michael Engelbrecht and Brian Eno recorded on August 29, 1998 at the Kunsthalle in Bonn, Germany. 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.[4]

Diana Ross and the Supremes have always been legit, but Donna Summer? For a moment, I honestly thought that Eno was pulling a Richard Meltzer on the audience. It was not so. Brian Eno was right, the 1983 live performance of Donna Summer's *State of Independence*, available on YouTube, is as dignified as any civil rights anthem of the 1960s. In her performance, Donna 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*

[4] *Michael Engelbrecht Interviews Brian Eno in 1998*, published online by Universityofambience, www.youtube.com/watch?v=W9qAxrSKfCQ (last accessed August 18, 2025) (my transcription at 38 min).

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 would not mind if *State of Independence* would become the national anthem 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 my point is precisely that *it doesn't matter*. It does matter to pop music historians and to the copyright holders, but "it doesn't 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.[5]

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 proceeds 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. John Andrew Fisher writes,

> Songs are more abstract entities than their recordings and they are not produced technologically any more than are poems; they can be recorded, arranged and performed in multiple ways and yet be the same song. A given song – for example, Dylan's *Mr. Tambourine Man* – is not to be equated with recordings of it, such as by Melanie. Nor are songs or their recorded versions to be identified with their live performances... (Fisher 2011, pp. 407-408)

Songs, however, are not *that* abstract. They do not exist on a bidimensional support like poems do. Only fully written music could be considered abstract, and it's likely that no such music exists. When the score remains yet the tradition of its performative practice is lost, each new rendition is a reconstruction. Songs are shapeshifters. They exist in transient bodies, yet they need those bodies to exist.

[5] The meme, indeed. See Jan 2000.

Planetarization vs. Globalization

When I first heard Eno's speech, I 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 ignore 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 Spivak seminar in the Department of English at 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 distinguished between the "dogmatic" and "critical" adoption 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 must 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 weren't that Heidegger meant it in a reactionary, territorial, ultimately dogmatic sense (Heidegger 1975, pp. 15-88). What cultivates an «unconditional» ethics in reading, watching, and listening – Spivak *dixit* – is our unsurpassable limitation in our power to gather a total knowledge of the planet—but also of a text, a film, a song. I also assume that, in Spivak's terms, "unconditional" must be understood as in "unconditional love".[6]

[6] I am grateful to my colleague Auritro Majumder of the University of Houston for the transcription and posting of the seminar's notes.

Planetarity rescues us from 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 carpet* (or 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 (even a planet reduced to splinters by atomic bombs will not know that it has become a former planet and will reconfigure as a little galaxy of asteroids). 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 it 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 an endlessly growing cross-pollination of Western and non-Western patterns. The same applies to jazz, rock, reggae, and rap. 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 changing into a butterfly changing into a tornado. Yet the experiment is unfinished, *not-all*, and it must 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 (indeed, a distinction should be made, whenever possible, between popular music and celebrity music), while the true event is the move from emancipatory political contents to emancipatory carpet 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 search for new directions mostly within the precinct of the 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 a good 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...

I will end here for now, but the work on the "philosophy of popular music" will have to be done, either by me or someone else. The Mouth and the Throat, the Kernel of the Real, Carpet-weaving, and Planetarity are the first operative categories in a potentially long list that should keep us busy for a while. The point, I must be frank, is to curb the overall presence of the sociological gaze. Not because it is useless. It remains essential if we want to understand what makes popular music, well, popular, instead of local, experimental, academic, or just forgotten (or forgettable). But popular music is not just the "music of society" or the music that the society has adopted after discarding previous musical incarnations such as ritual, Euroclassical, or traditional folk music. Simon Frith is somewhat right when he says,

> the social functions of popular music are in the creation of identity, in the management of feelings, in the organization of time. Each of these functions depends, in turn, on our experience of music as something which can be possessed. From this sociological base it is now possible to get at aesthetic questions, to understand listeners' judgments, to say something about the value of pop music. (Frith 2016, p. 268)

But the aesthetics of popular music cannot be derived from its social function, just like a new scientific discovery cannot be deducted from the social impact it has. The circle of interpretation must run in the opposite direction. If popular music is a planetary experiment (the word "experiment" must be emphasized), and not just a global experiment (driven, that is, by the globalization of production and exchange), then it needs to be approached with novel questions and categories, which is also the only way to receive new and surprising answers.

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