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The Value of Popular Music: An Approach from Post-Kantian Aesthetics.

Alison Stone.
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The study of popular music has had an uneasy relationship with notions of aesthetic value, tending, as Alison Stone notes in this excellent and quietly polemical book, to 'bracket' such questions. Scholars have been happy to describe how people use popular music (e.g. DeNora, 2000), and why it may provide important clues regarding how they position themselves socially (e.g. Thornton, 1996 et al), but, when it comes to working out what it is that inheres in the musical material of pop and rock such that it excites, engages, and causes people to treasure such music, scholars working in the field have, in many cases, opted for silence.

One explanation for this reluctance may be that the critical categories that inform judgements of value in 'conventional' musicology seem ill-suited to any such commentary on popular music. When the features that are considered criterial with regard to art music are found in pop, they seem to omit exactly those things that we value in such music. As many of these features have their roots in Kantian and post-Kantian ideas about aesthetic judgement, a book that aims to rehouse popular music within post –Kantian aesthetics, as the subtitle of Stone's book affirms, may seem, on the surface, to be a somewhat quixotic endeavour. As she notes, philosophical aesthetics, and more general sets of aesthetic values, derived from these, "have been slanted against the popular domain". Why, then, bother to try and find a way to re-calibrate the aesthetic such that it can accommodate the popular when popular music practitioners, audiences, and its attendant scholars have plenty of reasons to be suspicious of such incorporation?

One answer to this is to deal with an anxiety of origins within the field, one that might be summed up by the name 'Adorno'. As Stone notes, he "cannot be ignored" and his critique of the culture industry "feed(s)…into many evaluations of popular music" To be sure, the outright dismissal of popular music is rare – though still not entirely extinct – but, as Stone astringently notes, "most people still discriminate within this field, using the same criteria – authenticity versus triteness, originality versus formulae, integrity versus commerce – by which [Adorno] condemned the whole field"(xvi). Or, as she puts it later, "popular music is [taken to be] aesthetically better the more it escapes its condition as popular music" (9). Those who ignore aesthetics are doomed to repeat it.

Stone's claims are rooted in the work of three philosophers. As already noted, Adorno is central, not simply because of the unavoidability of his critique of popular music, but because of his defence of the irreducibility of the material to the concept. Alongside this, she borrows the notion of the 'semiotic' layer of meaning, and meaning generation, from Kristeva and, foundational to both of those thinkers, and for Stone herself, is Hegel, and the view that art 'presents' truth. What is the distinctive truth that popular music presents? For Stone, the quality of popular music that allows truth to appear is its materiality – more specifically, its affirmation of bodily materiality. Stone wishes to show that popular music can 'present' or 'enact' the truth that our ideas and emotions are rooted in the body and are not, as experience, separable from that embodiment. Music, and specifically popular music, reminds us of this. Further, its contingency of construction, which often foregrounds the materiality of its elements, and the way in which meaning is formed out of the elements, rather than the elements slotted into a pre-given structure, presents or enacts the way in which, qua Adorno, objects exceed their concept.

In order to begin to mount her defence of the notion of a distinctive and defensible notion of aesthetic value, native to popular music, Stone first needs to establish what she means by 'popular music' and to argue that it constitutes a unified field. She suggests that, while such music is undeniably promiscuous both in its origins and in its often indiscriminate borrowings, it can be defended as a categorical unity, with its instances meeting all, or most of the following criteria: it is recorded music: unlike 'serious' music, where the score is ontologically prior, in popular music, even in live performance, the recording remains the primary reference. Related to this, it is music in which electrical amplification plays a crucial role, allowing relatively small groups to make a 'big' sound. Next, following Allan Moore, she notes that "it exhibits a strong tendency to display four functional layers" (15), these being explicit rhythm, bass, melody, and harmonic filler. In terms of structure, popular music is distinguishable from 'serious' music by a repetitive and contingent mode of construction, it does not display 'necessary musical progression'. Exactly as Adorno charged, popular songs are assembled rather than composed, from parts that are interchangeable and substitutable. However, as Stone will argue, this does not necessarily produce incoherence: as the parts coalesce, an access to meaning is opened up that is produced by the manner in which those parts reinforce and comment on each other, and a 'whole' is realised that is greater than the often accidental and improvisatory confluence of its elements might suggest.

The examples that Stone uses, and the way in which she uses them, are subtly subversive of the various diremptions – pop versus rock, indie versus mainstream, commercial versus artistic – by means of which much writing about popular music smuggles in the critical categories by which the field itself is condemned by conservative critics such as Scruton. Many of her examples – though by no means all – are taken from what might be called 'the long '80s' in Britain and Ireland: Wire, U2, Joy Division/ New Order, the Human League, Felt, and Gary Numan and Tubeway Army. On one level, this may simply reflect the songs

that formed a personal aesthetic; but, in treating each of these examples with the same thoroughness, and in refusing to privilege lyrical expression over the other elements of the records she chooses, an aesthetic is constructed that brackets many of the characteristics that would be taken to valorise "With or Without You" over "Are "Friends" Electric" – or, indeed, "Transmission" over "Blue Monday". Stone considers the 'song' – for which others might read 'track' or 'recording' – to be the foundational unit of analysis for popular music. She is excellent on the mechanics of composition – or assemblage – in popular music of the kind she (mostly) investigates: showing, for example how a programming error was retained in "Blue Monday", and how the sound of Edge's guitar, drifting into the studio control room as he noodled in the live room 'accidentally' completed the structure of "With or Without You".

In summary: this book outlines a persuasive aesthetic of popular music rooted in the post-Kantian tradition, re-tools Adorno in order to allow his critique of popular music to be understood in relation to his wider authorship, and, most importantly, from the point of view of popular music scholarship, grounds that aesthetic in an understanding of popular music that refuses to allow one form to prevail in terms of criteria imported from discourses about art and value that deprecate the popular as a whole.

Works cited:

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