What is Pop Music?

Pop – a little palindrome of conundrum status. In attempting to reach a definition of pop, one is almost tempted to delimit what it is not rather than what it is. Firstly, consider the question of genre. Although pop is unquestioningly treated as such, it must be remembered that by its self-definition, popular music cannot by susceptible to genre. Rather, it is a momentary position of any form of organised sound. The blind and ubiquitous acceptance of pop-music as genre is due to the extramusical necessity of popularity, and therefore excludes one from establishing a piece of music as ‘popular’ by means of musical analysis. To identify pop-music in historical terms is futile for the simple reason that popularity is not temporally bound. This leaves the definitive process in terms of social and psychological functions. In terms of general attitudes towards it, contemporary pop-music is now manufactured with popularity as its goal, facilitating the construct of pop-as-genre (it is this which will be dealt with here, rather than music that becomes popular). Theodore W. Adorno defined popular music as having two fundamental, contradictory characteristics: standardisation (the generic structure of a hit) and pseudo-individualism (the individuality of the hit which simultaneously separates it from others, making it recognisable). The genre status of popular music proves the totality of standardisation in that the generic sound, style, themes and even the artists themselves are conformative. In this way, pop has effectively become a genre while simultaneously refuting its genre status by its very definition: music which is popular. Even the term ‘popular culture’ is an oxymoron since it is something which is invented, applied, and enforced via mass media and is imposed on rather than generated by a community or society.

The high integration of commerce is an element of pop-music which isolates it from other musical forms. This is not to maintain that commerce is unconnected with non-popular music, but rather that the association of pop-music with commerce is something which is broadcast in the industry. Like the method of corporate branding seen in the fashion industry, the four-minute pop song is at once product and advertisement. Whilst the Classical, or art-music tradition is similarly engrossed in finance, this is solely on the part of the promoters and producers of recorded music, the pop tradition, if we can call it that, is one which is unashamed of its monetary interest, not needing to hide it. Music which is indigenous, dance-orientated, composed exclusively for film, or in conjunction with the l’art pour l’art ideal all have a social or artistic function divorcable from capital profit. By extension of this and in tandem with the fact that no known society lacks music, we can conclude that all music expresses, in some form, the contexts in which it evolved or was composed. To find what pop-music expresses, however, takes examination of its social effects. This will be dealt with later…

2 A good example of this is the commercial backing of the forthcoming Thrills album. It is planned to have a corporate backing of each individual song. See Irish Times, 30-12-06, http://www.ireland.com/theticket/articles/2005/1230/739679862DISCO.html
Although structural standardisation occurs in all forms of organised sound; for example free Jazz in the realisation of its concept, or John Cage’s aleatory necessitating the organisation of chance, have to some extent a standardisation within genre. Pop-music, however, differs in that standardisation is adhered to, whereas in other traditions, it is consistently challenged and manipulated, thus depowering the standard itself. Standardisation occupies a dominant role in the production of pop-music while being more servile to the art-music composer. This filters down to the treatment of musical form (here taken as Ernst Toch’s definition as the ‘balance between tension and relaxation’\(^3\)). Pop has little in the way of drama in the context of other musics, and this is most likely due to its origin in African music. Adorno claimed that pop needed standardisation and pseudo-individualism to succeed the former to make the tune palatable, the latter to render it recognisable. Despite the fact that he wrote on pop-music in 1941, when the industry stood at a considerably lesser strength than today, and style differed greatly, the same dual characteristic is easily seen in its contemporary counterpart.

The pop-music industry must continually produce newness, but by saturating the radio with its most recent product it effectively pushes that newness back to the status of wallpaper, thus forcing the new condition of standardisation. (In reality this novelty is not musically innovative, rather it is the usually predictable dull love-songs or otherwise presented as new. This is why Adorno uses the term *pseudo-individuality* rather than individuality). This causes the process to start again, creating a cyclical regeneration of pop-music. A result of this is that, as the cycle gains momentum, regeneration becomes more frequent. Examples of this come in the form of occasional lack of imagination manifest in the lifting of famous melodies from the Classical tradition, such as J. S. Bach’s *Air on the G-string*, Pachelbel’s *Canon*, or Satie’s *Gymnopédie no.1*. We also see trends of retrogression from time to time in the industry, or to be more precise, they are resurrections of long dead trends, disguised as reactions against the contemporary pop fad, creating a polar reaction against them, and giving the industry an implicitly totalitarian dominance.

The success of pop-music is dependent on four conceptual constructs, two psychological, and two social. Firstly, there is the strong, fast, and ubiquitous belief in the sacredness or the ‘fetish-character’ of music; secondly is the concept of talent; thirdly the idea of a polarity between ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’, i.e., a denial of the relativistic nature of aesthetics; and finally a further polarity between ‘good’ music and ‘bad’. The first two of these constructs stem from the Romantic aesthetics of the nineteenth century, and have been somewhat anachronistically continued. Despite the supposedly sacred and transcendent nature of music, a construct that the pop industry promotes, it nevertheless treats its musical material as a raw commodity. The pretense of artistry promoted alongside pop-songs is necessary to ensure the success of the same. The fact that this pretense is transparent is not important, for as Adorno and Horkheimer express it: ‘The triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them.’\(^4\)

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Anglo-American celebrity culture in recent years has caused a massive promotion of what Adorno labeled ‘the illusion of individual achievement’. This affects the non-celebrity in an oppressive manner, implicitly forcing him/her to the status of a single cell in a mass of others – all indifferenciable. The association of concepts such as ‘talent’ and ‘genius’, with contextually meaningless buzzwords like ‘artist’ and the identification of the non-celebrity with the celebrity through media littered with tabloid glamour furthers this action immeasurably. The two social constructs exist as a result of a falsified stability, and cannot possibly have any concrete subsistence. The polarisation of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ music is due to the totality of the standard form of successful pop-music, which in turn seems to deny the existence of non-popular music. This reflects back onto the general issue: music other than popular music is referred to as ‘classical’, a useless umbrella term, or ‘world music’, a term which does not make sense per se. Regarding the final construct, the false aesthetical judgment of endorsing one pop group over another, for example, when the two are similar to a point of confusion rests on both the promotional end of the industry in its advertising campaign and the music’s familiarity to the judge.

A further characteristic of the pop phenomenon is its function within mass culture. The stimulus of mass culture, a good example of which is canned laughter, has a close relationship with the effects of pop-music. The reduction of emotional responses and emotions themselves is a characteristic result. The stimulus to laugh, caused by a recording of an audience, or the drama caused by actors on The Opera Winfrey Show or Jerry Springer is reflected by the depreciation of love, perhaps the most sacred emotion of all, in pop-songs. This vulgarisation and commodification of love for the sake of monetary profit is perhaps the epitome of the mass pop-culture condition. The vast majority of contemporary manufactured pop-songs are based on this theme. The debut album by Beyoncé, *Dangerously in Love*, contains this theme in all but one song. This exception narrates the love between father and daughter, and it is worth noting that it appears as a hidden track.

The use of the love theme in pop-music, as an abstract entity which relates to common humanity results not in celebrating love nor humanity, but in the compromisation of the individual. Pop-music, which is designed to fit the aesthetic choice created by its chart-topping predecessor, is comprehensible to all. In terms of art, any piece of music which is immediately comprehensible to all must be meaningless, as to be ubiquitously understood is merely an act of dictation, leaving no room for subjective interpretation and therefore tarnish individuality. In defining pop-music, this now leaves us no choice but to exclude it from the category of art.

Stimuli are, however, counterbalanced by sedatives, leaving the subject in complete and controlled equilibrium. Pop has a totalitarian power which prevents its listeners from needing to explore other musics. The need to hear pop is at once created and satisfied by pop. How does this work? By creating the idea that pop-music is the only music there is – by denying the existence of other musical discourses. This explains how standardisation dominates the pop style; a ‘three-chord-trick’ promoting the idea that in all musical science and musical nature there are only three chords (I, IV, and V). The sinister ubiquity of pop tacitly enforces this, and the miniscule and ambiguous differences between the sub-genres of pop prove it. These create a false sense of individualism within

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the microcosm of pop-culture. The audience within this microcosm in turn will categorise
the likes of Haydn and Stravinsky as ‘Classical’, not realising the vast temporal and
stylistic differences between the two. When the subject hears an orchestra s/he reacts by
determining it as ‘classical’. The lack of definition of pop is perhaps partly created by this
paradigm; not knowing what is outside the bubble creates an unawareness of the bubble
itself, and the employment of concepts such as ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ discussed above
proves this false consciousness.

But the sedative nature of pop goes further. It does not demand the attention,
thought, or reaction of the listener. It can operate as background or foreground (usually
accompanied by visuals), and its perennial ubiquity creates an anaesthetic of familiarity –
a wallpaper of cliché. Adorno and Horkheimer relate this to balance between labour and
leisure:

What happens at work, in the factory, or in the office can only be escaped from by
approximation to it in one’s leisure time. All amusement suffers from this incurable
malady. Pleasure hardens into boredom because, if it is to remain pleasure, it must not
demand any effort and therefore moves rigorously in the worn grooves of association. No
independent thinking must be expected from the audience: the product prescribes every
reaction: not by its natural structure (which collapses under reflection), but by signals.6

Like the low quality sedatives doled out in Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World
(‘soma’), and George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-four (‘victory gin’, ‘victory cigarettes’),
pop completes the analogy of our contemporary mass culture in terms of musical
consumption. Huxley’s ‘soma’ is handed out free of charge from the bureaucracy the
same way we hear a pop-song for free on the radio, although we can still buy it if we
choose. The continual repetition of the small number of songs in vogue is analogous to
the repeated political slogans in Orwell’s dystopia. The consumers become severely
agitated when they lack their sedative, as they are then far from the comfort of sleep,
exposed and fearful. It must be noted that the protagonist in each novel is capable of
seeing through the membrane of false consciousness: in Brave New World, Huxley’s
Savage attempts to awake others in hijacking the doling out of soma, and Orwell’s
Winston Smith is well aware of the low quality of ‘victory’ gin and cigarettes.

A fine example of pop-as-sedative is the slogan designed to advertise the
Spicegirls several years ago. The promotion of ‘girl power’ created the impression of the
animation of femininity in reaction to male domination. The actual content of the pop-
songs or the presentation of their proponents didn’t matter in the slightest, hence their
direct contradiction. There was only a slogan, aimed at females, accompanied by the
stereotype of male-dominated women. This product was successfully targeted at females
of the age when they make their first identification with sexuality. While seemingly
promoting women’s rights (i.e., blinkering young women with the absurd belief that that
is what they advocated), the Spicegirls were in actual fact reinforcing the oppressed status
of the woman as sexual object, thus doubling their marketability.

Of course none of this would be possible without the recording technology and
cheap production of radio and playback systems. With recorded commodities in the pop
culture microcosm, the CD (or any format in vogue) becomes the standard point of
departure for pop performance. Other traditions, however, depend on the ritual of musical

6 ADORNO & HORKHEIMER, 137.
performance, from the tuxedo-wearing musicians in the concert auditorium to the experience of individual performances and improvisations at a Jazz gig. It is due, as Walter Benjamin states, to technology that ‘for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual.’ The pop star is servile to his recording more so than the classical musician is to his score. There is no want for interpretation or manipulation of the material. Who wants to hear U2 perform ‘With or without you’ in 5/8 with a 25 minute guitar solo? It is the reliance on the recording industry rather than ritual which produces the authoritarian nature of the CD over the artist who then becomes a mere object in relation to it. This makes pop-music producible without the musicians involved ever having met each other, reifying not only its consumers, but also its artists.

In terms of defining pop-music, it must be accepted that the music itself cannot be divorced from its commercial counterpart. Pop-music is a hybrid, a combination of entertainment, advertising, and monetary business. It is this composite which regulates the canon of pop-music, rather than popularity – causing a fundamental flaw and irony in the face of a so-called ‘popular’ music. The only true canonical parameters of pop are financial investment and radio repetition. This canon, in conjunction with other powers of the industry, is partly responsible for the reification of the audience. Musical taste is removed from the subject, and automatically formed by forces external to both the music and the subject. There are, therefore, no genuine aesthetic judgments on the part of the audience. Any taste is of a passive nature. Repetition and the system of stimulus and reaction (recognition) take the place of quality, which is left as unimportant. A direct result of the demotion of quality is the absence of beauty as a goal in pop-music. The ideal of beauty is unnecessary in the quest for capital and so abandoned.

The totalitarian and authoritarian nature of pop-music causes a system of reciprocal snobbery between those who like it and those who don’t. One often detects a tone of contempt for pop among lovers of Jazz or Classical music, but there similarly exists the very same in the other camp, and the application of a common ‘normality’ that pop-music provides is responsible. A similar event happened with the negligence of the avant-garde and similar movements, due to the authoritarian nature of the classical canon. The most humiliating act of the pop-culture can be seen in the Wachowski brothers’ *Matrix* trilogy. Here was presented the very idea of humanity suffering *en masse* from false consciousness, and reified to produce energy for a dominating technocracy. Contradicting this scenario were the themes of human freedom, lucidity and awakening manifest in the protagonist. However, in reality the movie was packaged as mass pop-culture, the aforementioned themes downgraded by their presentation with low-quality acting, bad script, and millions of dollars-worth of glamorous visual effects. Effectively, the directors made the critique of Hollywood-style cheese into Hollywood-style cheese. The *Matrix* turned the only remaining escape from false consciousness – awakening – into an instrument of sedation. A similar illustration occurs in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* when Vladimir, while watching Estragon sleep, claims that ‘habit is a great deadener…At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on…’ Vladimir is dawning from the sedative state under

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which he has lived his life when Godot’s messenger arrives and quashes his initial lucidity, renewing the waiting process which holds both heroes eternally. The phenomenon of pop-culture, at least on the musical level dealt with above, behaves in a similar manner. To apply social terminology, pop is a form of music which is undemocratic, totalitarian, and authoritarian.

In striving for a definition of pop, we must consider it firstly as hybrid; secondly as an creating and stabilising instrument of false consciousness and reification; thirdly of compromisation of individuality; fourthly as a barrier to other musical forms; and finally as a manifestation of the dystopia anticipated by Huxley and Orwell. All these characteristics are external to the musical discourse considered, and derive primarily from business. It aims at the insulation, desensitivity, and apathy of its listeners. It follows that pop, taken in the context of a social discourse against an artistic one is, to coin a term, unmusic.