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## MODERNIST NARRATIVES AND POPULAR MUSIC

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Popular music, as we understand the term today, was a product of the modern era, extending from the late eighteenth century through the first two-thirds of the twentieth, or from the industrial revolution through late capitalism.<sup>1</sup>

The modern era brought a concentration of power in the institutions of industrialized countries and a new set of economic and social relations within the developing systems of capitalism and socialism. It was a time of the emergence of large new nation-states, swallowing up previously autonomous city-states, regions, and smaller countries; of colonialism, with a handful of European countries taking military and economic control over much of the rest of the world, and then postcolonialism, with large international conglomerates playing the same role; and of oligarchical domination within industry, finance, and both state and private institutions. In contrast, today's postmodern world is marked by fragmentation, discontinuity, ephemerality, and chaos in economics, politics, social relations, and the arts.

The intellectual and ideological climate of the modern era encouraged various writers to construct meta-narratives: broad, all-encompassing schemes purporting to yield some "special mode of representation of eternal truth."<sup>2</sup> Lyotard, who sees the modern–postmodern dialectic as a "crisis of narratives," defines the modernist meta-narrative (in science):

To the extent that science does not restrict itself to stating useful regularities and seeks the truth, it is obliged to legitimate the rules

<sup>1</sup> The term "extended nineteenth century" is sometimes used as an alternative label.

<sup>2</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge, MA, and Oxford, 1990), p. 20.

PUTTING POPULAR MUSIC IN ITS PLACE

of its own game. It then produces a discourse of legitimation with respect to its own status, a discourse called philosophy. I will use the term modern to designate any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth . . . If a metanarrative implying a philosophy of history is used to legitimate knowledge, questions are raised concerning the validity of the institutions governing the social bond: these must be legitimated as well.<sup>3</sup>

Historical and critical writing about popular music is itself a product of the modern era. In the spirit of its time, much of it attempts not only to “legitimate the rules of its own game” and “the validity of the institutions governing the social bond” but also attempts to “seek the truth,” drawing on some “philosophy of history” to “legitimate knowledge.” Some of it approaches meta-narrative; but the less pretentious term “narrative” seems more appropriate.

These narratives have common features. As befits their origin in modernist thinking, each is hierarchical and exclusionary, tending to privilege some genre or repertory of music over all others. None originated as a single essay, manifesto, or polemic; each appears in the work of various writers of common ideological bent, permeating modernist writing on music from the most utilitarian to the most arcane, as assertions and assumptions in the nature of belief systems and therefore not requiring explication or intellectual development. They often approach myth, in the general meaning of this term as “a purely fictitious narrative . . . embodying some popular idea concerning natural or historical phenomena.”<sup>4</sup>

What follows is intended not as a comprehensive survey of writing on popular music,<sup>5</sup> but as an attempt to identify and describe several modernist narratives shaping this literature.

*The narrative of musical autonomy*

The essence and value of a piece of music resides in the text, in the music itself, not in its reception and use. Judged in this way, popular music is artistically and morally inferior to the classical repertory and is thus not deserving of serious scholarly attention. It does, however,

<sup>3</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1984), pp. xxiii–xxiv. Originally published as *La Condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* (Paris, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1971), p. 1889.

<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive survey and criticism of the history of popular music study, see Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia, 1990).

MODERNIST NARRATIVES AND POPULAR MUSIC

mirror the society in which it was created more directly than does classical music.

Early in the modern era, a distinction developed in the Western world between the music of the elite classes, comprising both classical ("high art") music and the less technically demanding genres of the bourgeois parlor, and that of the people, encompassing both folk and popular music (as these two terms came to be used in the twentieth century). Classical music, preserved in musical notation and performed by professionals for passive audiences, was understood to be universal and eternal, with a single repertory serving for the entire (Western) world. The music of the people, created and passed on chiefly in oral tradition, often in a participatory environment, was taken to be regional and ephemeral.

By the late nineteenth century, socially based distinctions between "highbrow" (classical) and "lowbrow" (folk and popular) music had become even more rigid.<sup>6</sup> The classical repertory, symbolizing order and permanence and thus power, continued to be associated with and supported by the aristocracy, as before, but now more importantly by industrialists, financiers, and the bourgeoisie. A supportive narrative took shape, holding that the European classical repertory was superior to all other music within and outside the Western world. At its crudest, this narrative took the form of a set of supposedly commonsensical assertions:

In general terms "Classical Music," like Classical Literature, is that which has been recognized by the ages as of the best and highest class. Thus, in common acceptance, "classical" is the antithesis of "popular." In its stricter sense, a classical production is one that has stood the test of time, and has come to be acknowledged by scholars and teachers of the art as a model of purity of style and form, and most worthy of emulation . . . because of [its] purity of form, universality of idea and permanent value to musical art.

In general terms that music is popular which makes an easy appeal to the masses. There can be no definition of popular music that will apply equally to the music of all nationalities, for the reason that standards of taste differ in the various countries.

Less civilized peoples, even the wildest tribes of Africa or fiercest islanders of the South Seas, have a "music," and rude musical instruments which are their own. They have their battle songs, and their funeral dirges.

Feasts, weddings, even cannibal orgies, are accompanied with some sort of a succession of sounds chanted with accompaniments

<sup>6</sup> See Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA, and London, 1988), for an account of this process in the United States.

PUTTING POPULAR MUSIC IN ITS PLACE

pounded from rude instruments. The more civilized the people, the nearer to some form or rhythm and the more intelligible their music.<sup>7</sup>

Underlying this narrative is the assumption that music is autonomous; that is, its value resides in the musical composition itself and not in its reception and use. From this follows the notion that distinctions between “the best and highest” music and all lesser genres, as well as between “masterpieces” of the classical repertory and lesser pieces within this genre, are to be found in details of melody, harmony, form, rhythm, and instrumentation. As Dahlhaus put it, the great works of classical music came to be seen as “ideal objects with an immutable and unshifting ‘real’ meaning,” and the function of the scholar dealing with these objects “consists in the gradual unfolding of [this] meaning,”<sup>8</sup> a view grounded in nineteenth-century German idealism and the concepts of genius and individual masterpieces.

The autonomy principle was closely allied to the aesthetic of genius and the notion of originality, both survivals from the late eighteenth century. Not only was autonomous music vindicated in a formal and aesthetic sense by musical logic, it also received a philosophical legitimation – a “necessity for existing,” to use Novalis’s phrase – by being the product of genius . . . [though] this aesthetic was never committed to paper during the age itself.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the intellectual poverty of this argument, based as it is on little but assertion,<sup>10</sup> it came to dominate Western attitudes towards music throughout the modern era, enabling musicologists and critics to ignore all music lying outside the Western classical repertory, even to the extent of appropriating the term “music” for this repertory and this repertory alone. Consequently, virtually all the literature on popular music for the first two-thirds of the twentieth century was the work of non-academics, chiefly journalists and dilettantes, whose writings at first glance may appear to have little to do with the narrative of musical autonomy. But in fact this literature

<sup>7</sup> Nathaniel I. Rubinkam, *Masterpieces of Melody and the Musical Art* (Chicago, 1906), pp. 36–9. Rubinkam held a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago.

<sup>8</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 150, 155. First published as *Grundlagen der Musikgeschichte* (Cologne, 1967). <sup>9</sup> Dahlhaus, *Foundations*, p. 147.

<sup>10</sup> Theodor W. Adorno developed a much more sophisticated set of arguments around the concept of autonomy. For a summary, see Middleton, *Studying Popular Music*, pp. 39–42. For further criticism of the modernist view of musical autonomy, see Janet Wolff, “The ideology of autonomous art,” in *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, ed. Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 1–12; Rose Rosengard Subotnik, “The role of ideology in the study of Western music,” *Journal of Musicology* 2/1 (Winter 1983), pp. 1–12; and Edward W. Said, *Musical Elaborations* (New York, 1991).

MODERNIST NARRATIVES AND POPULAR MUSIC

is so grounded in the assumption that music outside the classical repertory is not worthy of attention that it makes no attempt to deal with musical aspects of the popular repertory, in even the most general way.

Sometimes the assumed inferiority of popular music is made explicit, as in an early biography of Irving Berlin:

[Berlin] came into the world with an unrivalled capacity for inventing themes. But to that birthright he has added little of the art, the patience, the interest in form, and the musicianly knowledge which could elaborate them. It is an injustice at once to his true achievements, to his deepest aspirations and to his honest unpretentiousness to link his name with a Wagner or Rimsky-Korsakoff. . . . In time his music will be heard from the Metropolitan's stage. There is small doubt of that. But it will be heard after other men, with less inventive genius perhaps but with far greater musicianship, have picked his tunes up from the streets and transmuted them into operas as Moussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakoff rifled the treasure chests of Russian folk music to make their finest scores.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, the author of the first book-length study of popular music, after promising to demonstrate that this genre is "a most revealing index to American life" that "sums up the ethics, the habits, the slang, the intimate character of every generation," makes it clear that he attaches no great value to the product itself:

[Popular music] is all part of our fast-working, well-routined machine age, dealing in formulas, in slogans, in short cuts, but often side-stepping honest realities. The universe of the popular song is unique in the history of mankind. It has its own private system of absurdities and needs little more than direct quotation to receive its due of laughter in Olympus. . . . Many a fine poet or excellent composer might find it exceedingly difficult to produce anything with a wide popular appeal, simply because of his inability to make his expression convincing to the masses of listeners. To make such an appeal it is actually necessary to be one of those whose personal responses are of the naive and childlike type.

In its reaction to entertainment of all kinds the human race will probably never grow up. After all, why should it?<sup>12</sup>

And in the first historical survey of popular music in the United States, offered as a "record of our history," this same author takes pains to explain that even though he considers popular music to be

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Woollcott, *The Story of Irving Berlin* (New York and London, 1925), pp. 218–20.

<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Spaeth, *The Facts of Life in Popular Song* (New York and London, 1934), pp. iii–iv, 148.

PUTTING POPULAR MUSIC IN ITS PLACE

“historically and racially important,” he is nevertheless convinced that “artistic merit has nothing to do with it”:

It would be foolish to deny the obvious fact that America’s popular songwriters have written some incredibly banal, absurd, bathetic stuff, badly rhymed, often ungrammatical, with cheap, obvious, commonplace tunes. They have had this material promoted in various ways, of which the general public is quite ignorant, often involving some chicanery, even downright bribery. The personal characters of the songwriters themselves have not always been above reproach, and many of them could with difficulty command respect either as artists or as human beings.

It is impossible for a history of popular music in America to be continually complimentary either to its materials or to those who produced them. But it can at least attempt to analyze the reasons for certain established successes, . . . [and] in the process of such analysis, including the mere listing of much that may be considered important only for the sake of the record, such a book may throw considerable light on what Americans were thinking and doing at certain periods, how they reacted to the common impulses of life and what emotions they inherited from their ancestors and passed on to their descendants.<sup>13</sup>

Most subsequent books of this sort on popular music have similarly assumed that the study of musical texts is best left to musicologists and theorists, who have the analytical tools to examine the classical repertory for evidence of order and eternal truth, while writing on popular music should concentrate on the lives of composers and performers, and on song lyrics, searching for insights into social history. One such book, for instance, is subtitled “The history of the American popular song told through the lives, careers, achievements, and personalities of its foremost composers and lyricists,”<sup>14</sup> while another explains that the songs of the Tin Pan Alley era were “a mirror to and a voice of America during a period of formidable growth and change. The fads and fashions, the fluctuating mores, tastes, and moral attitudes, the current events and economic crises, the passing moods and social forces – all that made up American social history – were caught, fixed, and interpreted in words and music.”<sup>15</sup>

Even though rock ‘n’ roll and other popular genres of the 1950s and 60s brought a new generation of journalistic writers on popular

<sup>13</sup> Sigmund Spaeth, *A History of Popular Music in America* (New York, 1948), pp. 3, 584–5.

<sup>14</sup> David Ewen, *Great Men of American Popular Song* (Englewood Cliffs, 1970).

<sup>15</sup> David Ewen, *The Life and Death of Tin Pan Alley* (New York, 1964), p. xiv.

#### MODERNIST NARRATIVES AND POPULAR MUSIC

music with more enthusiasm for their subject,<sup>16</sup> most of them were still concerned with showing that popular music “reflected American life as it really is” by “[catching] the moods and manners of their times and express[ing] them in a way that satisfied, entertained, perhaps even thrilled the people for whom [it was] intended,”<sup>17</sup> and not with considering the music itself.

Even recent books of this sort, including those most dedicated to establishing the legitimacy and historical importance of popular genres, still have nothing to say about the music, and thus, even though unwittingly, continue to perpetuate the myth of its inferiority.<sup>18</sup>

#### *The narrative of mass culture*

Communications systems of the modern era made it possible for cultural products to be widely disseminated. Since these systems were economically driven, and since the less “cultured” classes comprise the bulk of the population, the communications industry has found it economically imperative to give priority to products geared to the inferior artistic and moral levels of the lower classes. In the process, the general cultural level sinks to the lowest common denominator, and “cultivated” artistic and moral standards are endangered.

MacDonald Smith Moore has argued that a group of American musicians and intellectuals, mostly from New England, developed the ideology of a “redemptive” culture in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup> Though serving most obviously to privilege the music of their choice, the classical repertory, this narrative was even more importantly a response to fears that the predominantly Anglo-American–Protestant culture of the elite classes was under siege by people of other classes and ethnicities, as first- and second-generation working-class Americans became more militant in their demands for a greater role in the country’s economy and culture, at the same time that millions of immigrants from Central Europe and the Mediterranean lands were pouring into the country. Philip H. Goepp, educated at Harvard and in Germany, wrote in 1897:

<sup>16</sup> For a comprehensive survey of the literature on popular music, see David Horn (with Richard Jackson), *The Literature of American Music in Books and Folk Music Collections: A Fully Annotated Bibliography* (Metuchen, 1977). A supplement, with the same title, was published in 1988. <sup>17</sup> Spaeth, *A History of Popular Music*, p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> See, for instance, Ed Ward, Geoffrey Stokes, and Ken Tucker, *Rock of Ages: The Rolling Stone History of Rock & Roll* (New York, 1986).

<sup>19</sup> MacDonald Smith Moore, *Yankee Blues: Musical Culture and American Identity* (Bloomington, 1985).

PUTTING POPULAR MUSIC IN ITS PLACE

It is the hour for the declaration of independence, and strangely, not of the many from the leaders, but of the leaders from the many. . . . In the classical past it was our good fortune to have none but true leaders. We learned to trust them unconsciously as well as implicitly. But with later democratic stirrings there came inevitable demagoguism. Men appealed over the heads of those who had the true, the saner intuition to the ruder mob to whom clear thought was naught, sensational amusement all. Democratic as we must be in government, there is no doubt that the bursts of popular will throughout the nineteenth century have had a sinister effect upon art. The lower instincts with the lower classes have broken away from the higher. Within the right meaning, the true democrat in government not only can, he must be the true aristocrat in art.<sup>20</sup>

“In a symphony of Beethoven the ultimate purpose is the utterance of the high thought or feeling of a great man,” Goepp insists; “where there is a beautiful expression there must be nobility of the prompting thought,” elevated above the “lower instincts of the lower classes.” At issue is not merely “beauty,” though: the “moral quality,” “high aspirations,” and “honesty” of the music of a master composer “shines clear throughout his art.”<sup>21</sup>

The elite had not been concerned with the “inferior” cultural products of the lower classes as long as they were contained within their own cultural spaces; but with the development of the new mass media – radio, phonograph, film – they moved out of this space and became available to the entire population. As a professor of music at Columbia University saw it:

The very vastness of the radio audience which [is] so exciting to the commercial mind, is seen to be, for the artistic or humane mind, a matter for apprehension rather than jubilation. To be candid, the commercial and the higher human interests seem to be here flatly opposed. For it is a fundamental axiom that majority taste is always comparatively crude and undeveloped, and that where it is allowed to dominate, art languishes and dies; on the other hand, art survives and grows only where majority taste undergoes that winnowing and progressive refining whereby minority standards emerge from it.

As an instance of this crudity of majority taste one may cite the case of jazz. The features of jazz to which it owes its popularity are precisely the ones that make it most intolerable to a sound taste: its banal melody, its commonplace and sometimes sugary and sentimental harmony, its obvious, over-accented, monotonous

<sup>20</sup> Philip H. Goepp, *Great Works of Music: Symphonies and their Meaning* (New York, 1897), pp. 15–17. <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 19–22.



MODERNIST NARRATIVES AND POPULAR MUSIC

rhythm. . . . The crying trouble with our whole radio condition in America is the unenlightened commercialism of its administrators. These producers, stupid men who happen to have achieved a little financial power but have no musical feeling or experience, are complacently unaware that their own taste is far lower than that of at least the more influential minority of their public.<sup>22</sup>

And this from America's most celebrated composer of the early twentieth century:

Perhaps the most obvious [problem] is commercialism, with its influence tending towards mechanization and standardized processes of mind and life. Emasculating America for money! Is the Anglo-Saxon going "Pussy"? – the nice Lizzies – the cautious old girls running the broadcasting companies – those great national brain-softeners, the movies – the mind-dulling tabloids – the ladybirds – the female–male crooners – they are all getting theirs, and America is not! Is she gradually losing her manhood? . . . Music has been, to too large an extent, an emasculated art. And 98 ¼% of all radio music is worse than molly-coddle – it's the one-syllable gossip for the soft-ears-and-stomachs, easy for the bodies, and is fundamentally art prostituted for commercialism. . . . Lowest of all [are] the publishing, the broadcasting, and recording for profit. . . . helping music decline – dying – dying – dead.<sup>23</sup>

While the overt themes of this narrative are that "high" culture is artistically and morally superior to "low," and that new systems of mass communication are being used to disseminate intellectually and morally inferior and even dangerous cultural products, there's a critical sub-text: the assumption, usually lying just beneath the surface but occasionally made explicit, that the people creating, disseminating, and consuming these mass products are of inferior ethnic, class, or moral stock.

This narrative is not primarily critical of the economic system of capitalism that makes the production of "mass culture" possible and profitable, but is directed against producers and consumers themselves for their dissemination and consumption of artistically and morally inferior products.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Gregory Mason, *Tune In, America* (New York, 1931), pp. 72–3, 76. Mason is using "jazz" in the context of the period, as a catch-all term for the products of the music industry, particularly Tin Pan Alley.

<sup>23</sup> John Kirkpatrick, ed., *Charles E. Ives: Memos* (New York, 1972), pp. 133–6. This passage was written in the early 1930s.

PUTTING POPULAR MUSIC IN ITS PLACE

There are theoretical reasons why Mass Culture is not and can never be any good. I take it as axiomatic that culture can only be produced by and for human beings. But in so far as people are organized (more strictly, disorganized) as masses, they lose their human identity and quality. For the masses are in historical time what a crowd is in space: a large quantity of people unable to express themselves as human beings because they are related to one another neither as individuals nor as members of communities. . . . A mass society, like a crowd, is so undifferentiated and loosely structured that its atoms, in so far as human values go, tend to cohere only along the line of the least common denominator; its morality sinks to that of its most brutal and primitive members, its taste to that of the least sensitive and most ignorant.<sup>24</sup>

No one has articulated the mass culture critics' sense of superiority and loathing towards consumers of mass culture better than Allan Bloom, who reduces the object of scorn from the collective to the individual:

Picture a thirteen-year-old boy sitting in the living room of his family home doing his math assignment while wearing his Walkman headphones or watching MTV. He enjoys the liberties hard won over centuries by the alliance of philosophic genius and political heroism, consecrated by the blood of martyrs; he is provided with comfort and leisure by the most productive economy ever known to mankind; science has penetrated the secrets of nature in order to provide him with the marvelous, lifelike electronic sounds and image reproduction he is enjoying. And in what does progress culminate? A pubescent child whose body throbs with orgasmic rhythms; whose feelings are made articulate in hymns to the joys of onanism or the killing of parents; whose ambition is to win fame and wealth in imitating the drag-queen who makes the music. In short, life is made into a nonstop, commercially pre-packaged masturbational fantasy.<sup>25</sup>

As this passage makes achingly clear, the most important agenda of the modernist narrative of mass culture is the privileging of some repertory or genre of music over allegedly inferior cultural products, and thus the privileging of those people who understand and respond to this "superior" culture over those who produce and consume mass culture.

<sup>24</sup> Dwight Macdonald, "A theory of mass culture," in *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, ed. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (New York, 1957), pp. 69–70.

<sup>25</sup> Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York, 1987), pp. 74–5.