

DIEDRICH DIEDERICHSEN, *AESTHETICS OF POP MUSIC* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023). ISBN: 1509552030, 176 pp, €9.99 (paperback).

For the German cultural critic and music journalist Diedrich Diederichsen, ‘the pop star operates in a grey area between “expression” and “performativity”’ (117). This liminal space is one of the framing topics of Diederichsen’s 2023 *Aesthetics of Pop Music*—a manifesto-style book which intends ‘to separate the concept of pop music from the concept of music’ (83).

From the outset, Diederichsen uses the term “pop music” (not pop, not rock, not R&B) because it has the widest possible scope’ and ‘pop music’ implies many other aspects beyond music (vi). These include dress codes, hair styles, production techniques, events or places, and spaces where music is experienced. Across six chapters, social, cultural, philosophical, and historical topics in Western popular music are explored: pop music as a form of indexical art (Chapter 1), as belonging to the second of three culture industries (Chapter 2), as an impulse to connect (Chapter 3), as an assembly of effects and small noises (Chapter 4), as popularity and criticism (Chapter 5), and in relation to production aesthetics (Chapter 6).

Considering pop music as an indexical art, the book blurb explains that it ‘is not so much a form of music as a constellation of different media channels, social spaces, and behavioural systems, of which music is only a part’. But music remains at the epicentre, which is emphasized by the sections on the aesthetics of vocal and sound effects. This is because voice and sound effects ‘speak of their causation—revealing through sound that they have specific human and/or mechanical-instrumental sources’ (12). Examples include the personae of Bo Diddley and Billie Eilish, which are briefly situated in relation to performance art. This approach highlights the performer for ‘that is why the first question asked by any pop musician worth their salt is: Who is this person? What kind of person are they?’ (14).

Questions of performance are connected to the recording, which Diederichsen only likens to Theodor W. Adorno’s conceptions of the photo album. Akin to a photo’s representation of a moment in time, the recording is paralleled as traces of causation of a person’s voice, an instrument, or a machine creating a sound in time. For ‘musical recordings meanwhile no longer record the work (as the score does); instead, they record a performance incorporating all manner of specific contingencies not marked in the score: tempo decisions, indispositions, ambience, and so on’ (18). Such sounds, retained on recording, not only represent a performance but are fundamental to understanding nuances of recorded popular music—a topic of discussion across

popular music research.¹ Mark Katz, for example, labels these as fugitive sounds, which highlights their ephemerality.²

Chapter 2 focuses on what Diederichsen describes as cybernetic capitalism in the culture industry and is anchored in work by Adorno and Max Horkheimer on the capitalist law of value. It is argued that Adorno and Horkheimer's approach 'overlooks the history of the means by which culture became a mass industrial phenomenon: through technological media, with its history of entanglement in capitalism, warfare and increasing productivity' (29). The author's argument is presented alongside brief discussion of Wolfgang Hagen's rebuttal to Adorno's writing on radio and Friedrich Kittler's opposition to the Frankfurt School.

The second half of Chapter 2 proposes that pop music belongs to the second of three culture industries: the indexical side. Diederichsen divides the second culture industry into categories of television and pop music, with television presenting an 'image' and pop music presenting 'sound' (35). This contestable division is recognised by Diederichsen, for 'in every culture industry, (1) elements of the social "outside" breach the "inside" of private/family life and (2) an (autonomous or private or intimate) "inside" breaches the social "outside"' (35). While the philosophical arguments in Chapter 2 assume prior knowledge, the table outlining the three culture industries is a useful preliminary division.

As titled, Chapter 3 proposes that 'At the Heart of Pop Music Is No Object, but an Impulse to Connect' [sic] (37–58). This is explained through a discussion of links between sounds, films, listeners, and fan cultures, which explores categorisations of listening. Through a listener's evaluation of performers, the author argues that links are made between voice and identity. Discussion of identity includes the persona in relation to fan culture and their emulation of haircuts, dress styles, performances, and fans connecting with other fans. The author proposes that fans are in constant recognition mode, and they use this perspective to situate a listener in a communal context (concerts, nightclubs, music festivals), in isolation (bedroom, audio playback devices), and to explore links between the listener in isolation and communal experiences. This encompasses those with a teenage bedroom, which is taken as a vestibule of society. For

¹ See: Victoria Malawey, *A Blaze of Light in Every Word: Analysing the Popular Singing Voice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Simon Zagorski-Thomas, *The Musicology of Record Production* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Lori Burns, 'Feeling the Style: Vocal Gesture and Musical Expression in Billie Holliday, Bessie Smith, and Louis Armstrong', *Music Theory Online*, 11/3 (2005), [<https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.05.11.3/mto.05.11.3.burns.html>].

² Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology has Changed Music* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004).

Diederichsen, the bedroom facilitated an aloneness that was later emphasized by the invention of the Walkman and has since been accelerated by its many digital successors.

Chapter 4 expands ideas of linking through voice, behaviours, effects, and cultural styles. The topic of linking includes social visibility, whereby 'listeners of pop music in the 1950s thus aurally connected voice characteristics and individualities with other (visually perceived) physical traits, but also with general statements' (59). While primarily evaluated in relation to 1950s American popular culture, the visibility of pop music performers is presented in three categories: recipients desired by the listener ('That's who I want'), role models ('That's who I want to be'), and spaces that the listener desires to occupy ('That's where I want to be') (61–62).

The penultimate chapter argues that pop music harnesses individualism, but depicts an alternative collectivism, and Diederichsen explores their selection of music alongside cultural and historical developments. The author considers pop music in relation to four negations of music ('ethnography', 'magic and symbolism', 'star cult as body cult', and 'chance, accident, slapstick and small sounds') (85–88). In this way, the author reinforces their aim to 'separate the concept of pop music from the concept of music' (83), which they argue is necessary for understanding future expansion and developments in pop music.

Ideas of linking, cultural concepts, and the many topics for future expansion make *Aesthetics of Pop Music* an engaging read.³ Although it is written from a cultural studies perspective, discussion on using the term pop music in relation to Allan F. Moore's 2012 arguments for popular song would nevertheless be useful.⁴ Similarly, sections on the persona and popular music could be developed through reference to Moore's writing on the persona and the personic environment, Stan Hawkins's gender analyses of the persona in popular song, and writing on the musical persona by Edward T. Cone.⁵ In addition, arguments for pop music as an indexical art might be complemented by David Nicholls' 2007 study of popular music as a plurimedial form which combines several means of expression.⁶ While the author outlines in the preface that they do not provide

³ For further research on this topic, see Ralf von Appen, 'On the Aesthetics of Popular Music', *Music Therapy Today*, 8/1 (2007), 5–25.

⁴ Allan F. Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series, Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 3.

⁵ See Moore, *Song Means*; Stan Hawkins, *Queerness in Pop Music: Aesthetics, Gender Norms, and Temporality* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016); Edward T. Cone, *The Composer's Voice* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1974).

⁶ David Nicholls, 'Narrative Theory as an Analytical Tool in the Study of Popular Music', *Music and Letters*, 88/2 (2007), 299.

analyses, they guide the reader toward their previous German-language publications, *Körpertreffer* [*Body Hits*] (2017) and *Über Pop Musik* [*On Pop Music*] (2014), but further examples would have helped to illuminate sections of this book.

With arguments from the Frankfurt school, examples of performers ranging from the 1950s to the twenty-first century, discussion of modern technical recording methods, and commentary on social media, *Aesthetics of Pop Music* will appeal to a variety of readers, particularly those in multimedia and cultural studies. To quote Diederichsen's closing words: 'pop music's impossible and simultaneously ubiquitous physicality is and will remain its unique energy' (148). By exploring the many spaces that popular music occupies, its ephemerality is emphasized, and the many tendrils of thought in this book further exemplify the ever-growing research in popular music studies.

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