PART III

Debates

9 Pop, rock and interpretation

RICHARD MIDDLETON

Everyone with an interest in pop has opinions about it – about its meanings, value, effects and significance. But some opinions – those of critics and academics, for example – claim more attention than others, largely because they have access to the public ear; and, actually, surprisingly little is known about ordinary fans' interpretations. Does this matter? Articulate description of musical responses is always rare; but more is at stake here than the familiar 'mystery' of music.

The announcement of the 1994 Mercury Music Award, by a panel chaired by noted pop music scholar Simon Frith, led trade magazine *Music Week* (6 August 1994) to bemoan the involvement of 'egghead academics and journalists who think too much for their own good'. Thirteen years earlier, the first international conference of the recently formed International Association for the Study of Popular Music was greeted with mocking incredulity in a London *Times* feature (16 June 1981), as was the first issue of the Cambridge University Press journal *Popular Music*. There seemed, evidently, to be an obvious incongruity here – high-value educational capital invested in the study of worthless music, rationality applied to the obstinately irrational, articulate discourse to the wantonly dumb; and this incongruity runs deep through the academy's involvement with pop. There are often suspicions that pop is being used. Thus male leftists, with the radical political commitments of the '1968 generation', largely drive the shape of the early waves of scholarship, 'rockist', 'masculinist' and anti-establishment as it is. More recently, 'postmodernist' intellectuals find in 'knowing' post-punk pop a seemingly ready accomplice in their search for a politics of 'identity'. The 'populist' alternative – 'let the fans speak for themselves' – loses its simple appeal once its inversionary logic becomes apparent. For conflicts and intersections of involvement and reflection, pleasure and theory, 'people' and 'intelligentsia', create the very conditions of existence for all interpretations of vernacular music culture.

Mass culture critique and the search for authenticity

A persistent question, both in the academy and on the street, has been whether pop – product of a highly capitalist industry – can nevertheless

find ways of expressing real feelings; even if it is made by them, can it stand for us?

The music originates at a time when capitalist society was being significantly re-structured, and much of the earliest writing on pop bears the marks of its roots in 1960s re-configurations of cultural fields and educational institutions which resulted from this re-structuring. Despite the appeals to cultural and political change, however, there is at the same time a debt to older positions, notably those associated with the early twentieth-century critiques of mass culture. In Britain, the influence of the literary critic F. R. Leavis; in the United States, the work of the sociologists of mass society; in Europe, the critical Marxism of the Frankfurt School: all these distinct but complementary bodies of theory lie behind the search for a popular music, and an interpretation of it, that could be seen as escaping the baleful embrace of commercial exploitation.

In post-war Britain, Leavis's defence of 'minority culture' validated by 'truth to experience' and grounded in 'organic community' offered a powerful paradigm. Richard Hoggart drew upon it in order to argue the superiority of the 'traditional' music culture of the working men's club over the 'shiny barbarity' of rock'n'roll. But by the mid-sixties the marker of discrimination had begun to shift, so that 'serious' work, with a capacity for 'inner growth', was now seen by some commentators as possible within pop. Though approved sources – jazz, blues, folk – were still favoured over their adaptations in commercial pop, the way was opened to a politics of authenticity in rock studies, together with a search for musical expressions of community, centred on the new social category of 'youth' (see Hall and Whannel 1964; Hughes 1964).

American writers, while drawing on partly different traditions, arrived at similar positions. Greil Marcus (1977) searches for a music of 'risk' and 'freedom' where 'each individual attempt implies an ideal community'; his account of Elvis's notorious passage from heroic youth to flabby music industry plaything is organised around, not anything so crude as 'selling out' (the vulgar version of this position), but loss of faith. It is this perspective which energised the countercultural rock magazines – *Rolling Stone*, *Creem* – just as the assumptions of 'Left-Leavisism' seeped pervasively into the British pop music press (not to mention some of the early academic musicology of pop).

Against the background of an emergent New Left, the late 1960s myth of rock authenticity shifted its colouring from liberal towards marxisant; Marcuse crossed with the American Beats formed the matrix within which a 'college aesthetic' (in Britain, specifically an art-school aesthetic) developed, moulding musical practice, vernacular theory and academic discourse alike. In a parallel (and inter-linked) move, British cultural studies,

centred on Stuart Hall's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham, was crossing semiotics and poststructuralism with the theory of hegemony associated with the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci to create what became known as subcultural theory.

Despite subcultural theory's new conceptual trappings, the debt to older mass culture critique is clear enough: Leavis's 'folk', classic marxism's proletariat, Marcuse's bohemians and outcasts, are replaced by youth sub-cultures: teds, mods, rockers, hippies, punks, as subjects of revolution – or at least resistance. The theoretical advance is the use of Gramsci to develop an account of pop styles as neither simply 'imposed' nor simply self-generated but as a form of 'negotiation' over constantly shifting cultural terrain. This was coupled with an interpretation of musical consumption as an aspect of meaning-production: style-elements, mass-produced as they are in their origins, are 're-articulated' to the expressive needs and social contexts of the subculture. The approach stands or falls with the concept of homology (structural 'fit'). But few subcultural studies demon-strate the music's fit, rather than assuming it; those which attempt to often fall into analytical generalisation, vagueness or inaccuracy, a deficiency which is a symptom of the deeper-level problem that, in cultures marked by fluidity and multiple mediations, it is difficult to protect social owner-ship of cultural forms (see Willis 1978; Hebdige 1979). Punk was the watershed. As the internal contradictions of both music and cultural style burst it apart, so images of socio-musical homology lost credibility (Laing 1985).

In recent years, 'authenticity' as such has also struggled for intellectual credibility, contaminated as it is by romantic wish-fulfilment and political exploitation. Yet models built on a distinction between 'art' and 'trash' or 'mainstream' and 'underground' (and indeed 'pop' and 'rock') still figure strongly in popular discourse. But the authenticity here has lost focus; it marks distinctions but without clear reference to social subjectivity. Arguably, to rehabilitate the concept would require that more attention be paid to 'articulation', less to 'homology', so that the fluidity of subjectivity and social positioning can be acknowledged, and the music's role theorised within rather than beyond the circuits of commercial media processes.

Sarah Thornton's study of dance music 'club cultures' suggests that it is possible to do this. Against the Birmingham approach, she insists that sub-cultures are constructed through the media, not in spite of them, and are not separable from commercial logics. Retreating from analytical depth, she claims that 'authenticity is ultimately an effect of the discourses which surround popular music . . . [and hence] subcultures are best defined as social groups that have been labelled as such'. As vehicles of 'subcultural capital', they simply mark distinctions, assert hierarchy, claim exclusivity,

transferring differentiating mechanisms typical of bourgeois society into youth culture itself. This persuasive picture reveals, though, how thin the concept of authenticity has become. Moreover, something of an older circularity remains – 'As a deep-seated taste dependent on [social] background, music preference is therefore a reasonably reliable indicator of social affinity' – and both the broader determinants of 'social background' and the part played by musical sounds themselves remain relatively obscure (Thornton 1995: 66, 162, 112–13). Thornton's language – 'consumers', 'brands', 'labels', 'niche markets', and so on – suggests something of an alignment between dance music subcultures, and her own ethnographic methodology, on the one hand, and the wider ideology of new-right consumerism, on the other. She is well aware that 'difference' is potentially repressive as well as liberating; yet she seems to shrink from any attempt to connect the new cultural segmentation to broader social forces.

That subcultural theorists have often ignored, or under-estimated the power of such forces is now easy to see, and it also helps to explain the neglect of the most imposing of the mass culture theorists, T. W. Adorno (1990), usually dismissed as simply an elitist snob. True, Adorno's message, at its most sweeping, would reduce popular music studies to nothing more than affirmations of the music's status as commodity-fetish. He re-writes formula (a potentially productive ground for creativity) as standardisation of musical form. He over-reads monopoly, to a point which empirical studies of both industry and consumption show to be unjustified. And he aligns music history to a uni-linear Marxist–Hegelian project of human emancipation which reduces the species anthropology 'upwards' into the perspective of a declining (Middle-European, bourgeois) class. Yet who could deny that the tendential strategies of the entertainment conglomerates and their 'gatekeepers' often approximate to the Adornian nightmare? Any cultural theory of pop's meanings must work with fully open eyes within this horizon, but few have done so.

Grasping the musical text

What do listeners hear when they listen to pop? How do they construe the inter-relationships and meanings of the sounds? The discipline of musicology is the one that should be able to answer these questions. Yet its established methods have not always proved suitable for the task. One of the problems with Adorno is his musicology, which in its method is simply transferred from its classical home and applied (or misapplied) to a repertory with arguably different requirements. This is not uncommon in the early attempts at a musicology of pop – though not always in such

an unqualified form (see Mellers 1973). Indeed, a dominant theme in the work of the younger generations of pop musicologists who appeared from the 1970s on, and who were influenced by emergent cultural studies, is precisely the issue of analytical method: how is the pop text to be grasped? – a question sometimes reduced to an attack on the received musicological paradigm tout court (Tagg 1982; McClary and Walser 1990; Shepherd 1991).

Pop is different in many respects from classical music. So there is a need to hear harmony in new ways, to develop new models for rhythmic analysis, to pay attention to nuances of timbre and pitch inflection, to grasp textures and forms in ways that relate to generic and social function, to escape from what Tagg calls 'notational centricity' (that is, the tendency to focus on a score rather than the sounds). Just as important, though, is that at a second level, the methodological problems arise from deeper, conceptual contradictions within the musicological paradigm. To locate music's meaning in its objectively constituted sound-patterns, regardless of its cultural contexts, social and emotional effects, and the bodily movements which accompany and perhaps generate it, is part of a broader tendency within post-Enlightenment bourgeois aesthetics. The trans-historical 'autonomy' of the work; the demand for 'disinterested' listening; the separation of a 'spiritual' from a lower physical sphere of expression; the reification of the 'composition': all fit together to form an ontology which would seem quite to exclude the secular life-processes of the pop song. To listen that way (as traditional analytic method implies we should) expropriates practice for 'art'.

Simon Frith (1996) has argued that 'musicology produces popular music for people who want to compose or play it'; its text is constructed around the interests of production – rather than listening. For anyone who believes (as I do) that this need not be so – that the 'musicologist' should also masquerade as the 'critic', who in turn tries to impersonate the 'fan' – the challenge is to show that analysis can produce an account of responses grounded both in intuition and scientific knowledge.

But if analysts are also fans, they are fans of an atypical sort. The question, 'who, in an act of textual analysis, is the listener?', might prompt as one response an excursion into ethnomusicology, where the problem of how to relate 'etic' (outsider) and 'emic' (insider) perspectives is a familiar one. The issue is that of pertinence (of interpretive code, of analytic paradigm). Often, large-scale contrasts are drawn between Western classical music on the one hand, African–American and pop musics on the other. The former is said to focus on *syntax* ('embodied meaning', 'extensional development'), the latter on *process* ('engendered feeling', 'intensional development') (Keil 1966; Chester 1990). There is a good deal in this – but

care is required. Such either/or distinctions are usually suspect, and probably all musical styles mix both approaches in varied proportion. Moreover, the same piece can be heard in different ways: even if a song seems to the analyst (an 'outsider' trying to get 'inside') to fall into a particular category, this does not of itself tell us whether all listeners would agree; and thus we are still left wondering where exactly 'inside' is (or indeed whether it has a single location at all).

Most textual analysis of pop has looked not to ethnomusicology but to semiology – the 'science of signs' – for inspiration, fired by a belief that 'social meaning' is crucial here. Listeners, it would seem, find songs meaningful. The question is, how the music produces this effect. The work that has been done varies in focus and in degree of methodological eclecticism. Certain issues constantly reappear, however: which musical features are the most important; how the features and parts of a song divide up and inter-relate; what exactly is the musical 'text' (a song, a style, a performer's repertory) and how it relates to 'contexts' of various sorts; whether meanings are 'coded' into particular sound-features, or attributed to them more flexibly by listeners; how far the interpretive process is a product of our experience, how far it constructs experience. Philip Tagg's well-known method relies more than most on empirical testing. Tagg reads meaning by, first, substituting discrete elements (a pitch, a rhythm, etc.) in the music to find how this changes the effect, and second, by 'inter-objective comparison' with other pieces in the same or similar repertories; in both cases, a body of respondents is consulted. This works well for dramatically characterised styles, especially those connected with visual images (film music, television themes) – though it can be criticised for apparently pinning down meanings too precisely, with little allowance for effects of context and disputed interpretation. It works perhaps less well for the more predictable and repetitive processes of typical chart pop or dance records, when there are fewer clear 'sound-images' to pick out.

In later work Tagg (1992) has placed more emphasis on larger-scale pointers to meaning: 'style indicators' (norms of the style in question) and 'genre synechdoches' (part-for-whole references to other styles), both of which bring clusters of associations with them. In a not dissimilar move, I myself, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogic meaning, have tried to construe musical textures and processes as dialogues of style-elements and their associations, through which a multiplicity of 'voices' speak (Middleton 1995). This is to situate meaning not 'in' the text but at the conjuncture of intersecting (and often contesting) discourses. Interestingly, two of the most accomplished recent interpretive studies, by Robert Walser (1993) and David Brackett (1995), work with methods that stress the importance of discursive contexts. But, as Walser argues, music

itself also functions as discourse – just as texts create contexts in addition to being defined by them. Similarly, as analysis starts to accept its proper place, telling one story among many that attach to the music, so music – musical practice – emerges more clearly as itself one branch of theory, implicitly commenting on its surroundings, musical and non-musical.

It is in this sense that dance music might be said to theorise the much-touted 'end of rock'. And in doing so, it may dramatise the possibility that, even though music is certainly everywhere wreathed in meanings, the idea of *musical representation* – the musical text designed to express some pre-existent reality – ties the semiotic perspective no less than the rock aesthetic to a specific form of meaning–production which may now be in decline. If dance textures do tend to evacuate the representational *mise-en-scène* formerly guaranteed above all in pop by expressive sung words, what seems to expand into this space is the gesturing body.

The pop body

Perhaps, though, this body was never really absent. The *physicality* of pop – 'the galvanising, primal joy of rock'n'roll itself' (Carson 1990: 448) – has been obsessively thematised since the very beginnings of the music. The sense that pop brings together, in specific ways, *feeling* and *movement* is often regarded as finding a focus in the performer, especially the star, whose person seems to embody the feelings the music expresses, and whose gestures both incite and stand for the corporeal responses of fans, through dance and in other ways. Paradoxically, however, there has been little serious study of star behaviour from this point of view, or of performance in general; and while the rush of work following the prominence of pop video brought the benefits of film theory to visual analysis, it often tends to miss links to the music (for example, to the 'gestures' structured into the movements of the sounds) and to older forms of (live) performance choreography.

Singing has an importance beyond 'expression' here, since in singing, after all, the body's pulsations are protruded on to a stream of breath. Arguably, though, the body's input extends throughout the music – and in a fashion, according to some, which bypasses the mediations of 'expression' altogether. To Peter Wicke – who rejects the apparatus of semiology and elevates 'sound' above form – it is a question of 'the *collective* presentation of emotions, postures and gestures'; 'the most important thing here are "structures full of movement" . . . [the music] is not a sign of something beyond itself but stands for something by itself, it is the mimic presentation of movements, patterns of movement, scenes of movement' (Wicke

1990: 19; my emphasis). Similarly, Walser (1993: 45) describes moments when 'the music is felt within as much as without, and the body is seemingly hailed directly'. But if, as John Shepherd (1993) argues, the movements of sound as such constitute a site of exchange between interior and exterior, where the material sociality of subjects and their bodies is negotiated, the problem becomes that of specifying what is distinctive about pop – and this in turn asks questions about how 'direct' the body's 'presentations' can be, if the mediatory codes inscribed in particular cultural instances are taken into account. This demands, surely, a theory of musical gesture grounded both in the spectrum of 'natural' rhythms which are all around and within us (including body-rhythms), and in the culturally mediated practices of specific musical traditions.

Such a theory – which translates the musicians' vernacular of 'groove' into a broader notion of rhythm permeating all aspects of musical texture – suggests a 'hidden' semiology, its meanings untranslatable but, precisely, *grasped*. This notion might remind us of Roland Barthes' 'figures of the body', or 'somathemes' – the body's gestures as they work in the music. Barthes' study of musical 'grain', though it says nothing about pop, quickly became canonic within pop studies, no doubt because it seems to offer a way of theorising intuitions of the music's gestural stratum. 'Grain' marks 'the body in the voice as it sings . . . the limb as it performs' (Barthes 1990: 188). It is the *surplus* in the interplay of signifiers, moving on the level of what Barthes calls *signifiance*, and opening to the listener the possibility of *jouissance* (the 'bliss' of self-loss – as opposed to the confirmation of identity associated with *plaisir* and effected by *signification* of culturally inscribed meanings). Pop listeners who have been 'lost in music' will know what Barthes is pointing towards.

Unfortunately, Barthes' influence on pop writing has by and large been at the level of generality: vague appeals to 'grain' (often reduced, mistakenly, to timbre); romanticising of 'bliss'. All too often, his limitations have transferred too: the social construction of the body and its signifying practices tend to be neglected, the variable interplay of *plaisir* and *jouissance* is reduced to an opposition, while 'bliss' seems to inhabit not so much the psychoanalytic sphere of the Imaginary as a strangely neutral pleasure-zone free of cultural marks. To challenge Barthes' elitist freedom to locate *signifiance* where he will (usually in modernist, avant-garde texts, while *signification* ('meaning') is left for the 'adjectival realism' of mass-culture products) requires the acknowledgement of an *encultured* body.

This means, above all, a *gendered* body. The analysis of gender codings in pop is an increasingly powerful stream. However, it is one thing to note the social conventions governing male and female roles in pop, another (more difficult) thing to find ways of discussing how modes of 'masculinity' and

'femininity' are constructed in the music itself. Can we connect specific musical styles or techniques to gendered values? Susan McClary (1991), diagnosing patriarchy in Western music as asserting itself through linear narrative and tonal closure (the Law of the Father, rationality triumphant), has explored the ways in which Madonna subverts it: through irony, rejection of linearity, refusal of cadence and 'phallic backbeat'. Robert Walser (1993) connects driving beat and high volume in heavy metal, together with the power guitars and controlled virtuosity, with machismo, but again finds some scope for modulation of this masculine image, especially in androgynous glam-metal. In *The Sex Revolts*, Simon Reynolds and Joy Press (1995) extend a similar reading to the whole of macho 'rebel rock', but they also construct an alternative, in the oceanic, pre-oedipal, 'wombadelic' bliss of ambient, dream-pop and psychedelia. For Richard Dyer (1990), the contrast with the 'thrusting' 'phallic' beat of rock is to be found in the more poly-rhythmic, whole-body (and hence liberating) eroticism which he finds in disco.

All these writers would, justifiably, refuse the label of essentialism. Yet an implicit binary divide ('dominant masculinity' in its relationship to something 'other') maps their readings to pre-conceived gender positions. Thus, for Dyer, 'even when performed by women, rock remains indelibly phallocentric'. Is such an approach capable of situating the full range of pop textures and structures, and their gender readings – from, say, 'girl groups' to rap? This question is a symptom of a wider problem which eases once gender codings are defined not by a binary 'cut' but as mutually constitutive, giving rise to discursive interplay, multiple gender histories and varied possibilities for musico-erotic pleasure. The idea of Mick Jagger as the embodiment of phallocentric macho desire, of androgynous camp, or of a pseudo-adolescent narcissism, all find equally plausible support from the Rolling Stones' music itself.

Genre, discourse, identity

For any discovery of meaning in music to take place requires first that 'conditions of audibility' are met – that is, that the events in question are classed as 'music', then, as a familiar sort of music, and finally, as a sort whose procedures and values are understood. This is akin to Franco Fabbri's (1982) definition of musical genre: 'a set of musical events (real or possible) whose course is governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules'. For Fabbri, such rules are formal and technical, as one would expect, but also semiotic, behavioural, social, ideological, economic and juridical. It is within this matrix – dense, powerful yet mutable – that understandings of

rock ballad, Britpop, trip-hop, etc. are generated, not to mention the over-arching symbiotic tension of 'rock' and 'pop' itself. But these categories are never stable. Musicians, marketing labels and taste publics do not always map the boundaries in identical ways; and besides, 'a continuous definitional struggle is going on among the interpretive communities' (Fornas 1995). This means that rock is best pictured not as a single life-history, but as the multivalent subject of a permanent dialogue, now (and to some) appearing as a struggle between alternative genealogies, now (and to others) as a centre (male, white, rebellious, subcultural) defined through relationships to a range of Others. Always, though, we can say that 'through its generic organisation . . . music offers people . . . access to a social world, a part in some sort of social narrative' (Frith 1996) – or in other words, an identity.

The 'discursive turn' evident here – and in much recent work – has had several effects. Among them is a renewed privileging of the 'local' – specific musical scenes and the 'social narratives' embodied not only in their musical practices but also the ways in which they construct themselves and are described. This perspective may be seen both as a re-writing of long-standing interests in youth consumption practices, and as a reponse to postmodern narratives of fragmentation and globalisation. There is a danger that the moment of consumption is torn from the longer circuits of music circulation, bracketing both processes and effects of production, and larger patterns of dissemination. Will Straw's (1991) influential study of 'communities' and 'scenes', though it pays little attention to the musical dimensions of genre, does situate local musical spaces within cosmopoli-tan networks of taste. The old idea of self-authenticating musical subcul-tures gives way to 'scenes' marked by mobile 'alliances' of musical categories whose legitimacy is governed by the logics of specific discursive and institutional practices. The idea that 'particular social differences . . . are articulated within the building of audiences around particular coali-tions of musical form' fits many of the patterns of contemporary musical flow – even if it also seems to evacuate any broader political interpretation of cultural power.

This shrinking of perspective is hard to avoid for local studies. Barry Shank's (1994) rich ethnography of the music scene of Austin, Texas focuses on how a succession of musical styles all cohere round what he sees as the master discursive figure of the local club scene, 'sincerity'. Similarly, Tricia Rose (1994) locates New York rap where traditions of 'black cultural expressivity' meet 'cultural fractures produced by postindustrial oppres-sion'. In both cases, the wider musical world, including the 'mainstream' (within the location as well as beyond), is present in the story but as audi-ence rather than actor. 'Belonging' is secured through selectivity, and

rather at the expense of the historical dialogues inscribed in the development of the musical styles. When, in the 1980s, Austin 'sells out' to a growing music industry presence, Shank, committed to 'sincerity', falls back on the banal explanation of 'commercial corruption'. Rose, taking on critics of rap's 'repetitions' and 'noise' with appeals to black difference, reduces two of pop's great tropes to ethnic exclusivity, rather than locating them within the larger dialogues of modern culture as a whole.

Admittedly, finding the right connecting mechanism between local and global is not easy. Lawrence Grossberg (1992) offers 'affective alliances'. These are articulations of 'cultural formations', such as the 'rock formation', to particular social contexts. The concept is close to Straw's; but Grossberg's swerve away from *meaning*, his insistence on *effects*, their 'positivities' and 'lines of force', empties the field of agency, and the music of specificity: 'there are . . . no musical limits on what can or cannot be rock'. But, arguably, musical identity is always *connected* to the definitions of genre and choices of historical narrative that people make. Music history can be construed as a *dialogue*, in which popular memory, grounded in real distinctions, plays its part. If, for most commentators, rock'n'roll coheres around such figures as Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry and Little Richard, things may look different to Los Angeles Chicanos, whose rock'n'roll hero, as George Lipsitz (1990) points out, was Richie Valens; yet Valens learned from African–American and country as well as Latin musics, and his hybrid style produced international best-sellers.

Thus, once within the pop field, all musics, however local in origin, come under the sway of a particular long-lived discursive formation. Simon Frith (1996) contrasts 'folk', 'art' and 'commercial' discourses, which are focused around ideas of 'authenticity', 'originality' and 'popularity', respectively. These operate across all musical categories in modern societies, forever trying to make musical distinctions. Frith's sociologism – musical effects are always placed by their discursive and social contexts – is qualified by his constructionism – music makes available possible identities, constructs audiences, rather than representing pre-existing social facts; yet the need, consequently, to account for music's specificity, leads him not only into some surprisingly conventional areas (bourgeois music aesthetics, for example) but also into textual exegesis of his own. This rather expert 'musicology' (illuminating interpretations of songs, singing styles, performance techniques, etc.) jars a little with the vernacularist thrust of the theory, resulting in a somewhat problematic connection between 'music' and 'discourse'. This connection is the nub. If music is always mediated by discourse and institutional placing, these in turn are mediated by distinct patterns of musico-productive practice. As Georgina Born (1993) makes clear, in her authoritative critique of 'consumptionism',

to grasp the 'cultural object' that is at issue here as 'a complex constellation of mediations' requires the full reinstatement into theory of aesthetic agency, institutional power and creative strategies.

Modernism/postmodernism

Pop values are caught within the over-arching discursive dialectic of High and Low, which runs the musical field as a whole. (For anyone who doubts that this is still the case, the 1996 'Handel House affair' is instructive. A proposal to establish a museum dedicated to Handel in the London house where he lived was followed by consternation in the classical music world when it was pointed out that Jimi Hendrix had lived in the same house; perhaps he should be commemorated with a plaque as well!) 'Art', 'folk' and 'commercial' discourses all refract and at the same time play into this dialectic, and all originate in that same late eighteenth-century moment when the formulations of cultural hierarchy characteristic of late-modern society began to emerge. But now, according to some, a blurring of the high/low boundary can be seen, symptom of a broader emergent post-modern formation, marked by acceptance of commodity form, valorisation of local, fragmented identities, celebration of ironic surface. Such blurring is certainly apparent on the aesthetic level: compare minimalism and rave, for example; or try to categorise Brian Eno, Orbital, Psychic TV or Glenn Branca – or Freddie Mercury and Montserrat Caballé duetting on the 'operatic pop' of 'Barcelona'; it is also evident to some extent within aspects of production, partly in uses of electronic technology, partly as a result of more thorough commodification of classical music.

There is debate over the exact moment of the 'break' – the end of punk? the beginning of 'dance'? More important, as just remarked, on the sociological and discursive levels, the old hierarchy does still have force. Thus, despite certain stylistic and ideological links across boundaries (between various avant-gardes, for example), classical and pop musics by and large still circulate in different economies, have different uses, target different audiences. Perhaps there is a way to start to bridge the social/aesthetic disjunction, though. Born (1993) has explored the appeal of musical investments in 'culturally imagined community', both global (the pleasures of mass popularity) and local (the pleasures of 'alterity'). Frith's (1996) argument ends up in a not dissimilar place, with an eloquent description of music's power to offer 'alternative modes of social interaction', at once ideal and acted out. Jacques Attali (1985) has described music as a practice capable of pre-figuring changes in political economy. Less excitedly, Antoine Hennion (1990) insists that for pop theorists a sociology of music

is less useful than a 'musicology of society'. To the extent that music's socially constructive power is now accepted in cultural theory, the remnants of modernism in Born's vision may be no less important than the reformulation of a debate – between the 'musical' and the 'social' – that has been central to pop music study since its beginnings. It remains, then, to tackle the reconnection of the 'imaginary' and the 'real', if the political promise located from the start in pop, by fans and academics alike, is ever to be redeemed.

Further readings

On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word, ed. by Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (London: Routledge, 1990) contains a representative selection of pieces in the mass culture critique and cultural studies traditions, including several subcultural theory classics. It also offers a range of more musicological studies, and anti-musicological essays by Hennion and Barthes. *Reading Pop: Approaches to Textual Analysis in Popular Music*, ed. by Richard Middleton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) brings together a collection of interpretative studies. *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture*, ed. by Bruce Horner and Thomas Swiss (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) contains several essays relevant to the subject of this chapter. Simon Frith's *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) is the most accomplished monograph on popular music aesthetics. Richard Middleton's *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990) develops many of the arguments outlined in this chapter at greater length. The best single-author interpretative books on pop are Robert Walser's *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), David Brackett's *Interpreting Popular Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and Dave Laing's *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985). Jason Toynbee's *Making Popular Music: Musicians, Creativity and Institutions* (London: Arnold, 2000) is an important attempt to re-validate the significance of creative agency through a notion of 'social authorship'.