

**A SOMAESTHETIC APPROACH TO ROCK MUSIC:
SOME OBSERVATIONS AND REMARKS***

1.

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To Valeria:

for all the live concerts that we have enjoyed together,
for all the love that we have shared.

I think that your body
is something I understand.

ANI DI FRANCO. *Swan Dive*

ABSTRACT: In this article I sketch some ideas and observations for a philosophical theory of popular music, with a particular focus on the subgenre of rock music. While acknowledging the fundamental importance still today of the contributions of Frankfurt critical theory to this topic, I also try to broaden the conceptual horizon by referring to pragmatist aesthetics and in particular to its recent development into somaesthetics. I consider the latter of great philosophical importance especially to evaluate in an adequate way the fact that understanding and appreciating rock music naturally and necessarily implies a relevant somatic component, i.e. is always bodily-rooted, while not denying for this reason also the presence of an intellectual component in this kind of aesthetic experience. In my article I exemplify some of my theses by referring to recordings and live performances of Lou Reed, Pearl Jam, Radiohead, and other rock musicians.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Popular music, Critical theory, Pragmatism, Somaesthetics, Theodor W. Adorno, Richard Shusterman

As has been noted elsewhere, “until recently, the interdisciplinary field of aesthetics [...] was either silent about, or hostile to, popular culture” in general, and popular music in particular, on the basis of the predominant idea that the latter “is aesthetically impoverished”¹. For this reason, although the study of popular music represents by now an established academic field, most investigations have been developed within frameworks, like sociology or cultural studies, that “value music as a social practice” (or better: understand it as “*only* social practice”), that demand “evaluative neutrality” in approaching this subject, and that “explicitly dismiss the importance of the music’s aesthetic dimension”² (where “aesthetic” may be well understood in a broad sense that includes both the artistic value of a certain work and the perceptual or, say, experiential dimension of our encounter with it). Contrary to these basic assumptions that have been quite predominant, I would recommend a general “broadening [of] the field of aesthetic experience” that may lead us to see how popular music not only “has no essential conflict with philosophical aesthetics”³ but should rather be an object of special interest for aesthetics – like other kinds of “industrial fine arts” that are typical of the present age⁴.

As a matter of fact, popular art (and, in this context, especially popular music) “deserves serious aesthetic attention”⁵: it should be understood as a central phenomenon for contemporary aesthetics to deal with, due to its leading role and great influence in shaping our *sensus communis aestheticus*⁶, and also due to its role in compelling us to broaden and rethink a part of the vocabulary and conceptuality of aesthetics as such (for instance, with regard to such notions as beauty, inspiration, imagination, disinterested contemplation vs.

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¹ Gracyk 2007, p. 6.

² Gracyk 2007, p. 1.

³ Gracyk 2007, p. 1.

⁴ See Vitta 2012, in particular chapters 1-2.

⁵ Shusterman 2000, p. 177.

⁶ See Matteucci 2016a and 2016b.

interested participation and active consumption, individual vs. collective creativity, etc.). As has been noted, “contemporary aesthetics [is] characterized by a number of leading themes” that have “broken out of the confinement of fine art” that had been predominant from the eighteenth century onwards, among which “the aesthetics of everyday life and the aesthetics of popular art”⁷. In this context, it can be argued that “popular art not only can satisfy the most important standards of our aesthetic tradition, but also has the power to enrich and refashion our traditional concept of the aesthetic”⁸.

In a certain sense, what has been observed by Lars Svendsen apropos of fashion also applies to popular music, namely that it has been “virtually ignored by philosophers” for quite a long time, “possibly because it was thought that this, the most superficial of all phenomena, could hardly be a worthy object of study for so ‘profound’ a discipline as philosophy”. However, “if philosophy is to be a discipline that contributes to our self-understanding”, then popular music (like fashion, in Svendsen’s example) “ought to be taken seriously as an object of philosophical investigation”, since it affects “the attitude of most people towards both themselves and others, [...] and as such it is a phenomenon that ought to be central to our attempts to understand ourselves in our historical situation”⁹. Beside this – still insisting on this comparison between the philosophy of fashion and the aesthetics of popular music – it must be said that “sooner or later everything comes to interest philosophy”. If, on the one hand, “there is a view of the field according to which philosophy once encompassed every inquiry and went on to lose parts of itself one by one as each field saw how to be scientific”, on the other hand there is also a view of the field according to which “philosophy’s curiosity continues to seize on more of what is said and done and not yet brought into philosophy’s consciousness”: if it was “relativity a century ago”,

perhaps “it’s brain science and film today” (and also fashion and popular music, I would add)¹⁰.

This may lead us to ask the question as to whether or not there is a philosophical approach that would be more promising and adequate than others for the purpose of developing an aesthetics of popular music. It is important today to find an adequate approach to this subject of inquiry. In fact, as has been noted, if it is “no exaggeration to say that crafting a theory to fit avant-garde artworks [...] has been the major preoccupation of art theorists in the twentieth century”, it is also no exaggeration to say that “attempting to accommodate mass-art forms” (which surely include popular music as well) “may be the next major preoccupation of theories of art”¹¹. In particular, “the attention to popular music that is now emerging offers new perspectives on the philosophy of music and more generally on the philosophy of art”¹², and it is thus important for philosophers who work in the field of aesthetics not to ignore it.

I will argue in this paper that pragmatist aesthetics, and in particular one of its developments specifically centered on the living body¹³, namely somaesthetics, may be a promising philosophical approach when it comes to grasping some essential features of our aesthetic experiences with popular music. To be sure, it is obviously not my aim to completely cover this wide and complex subject in the limited space of a single article, eventually developing a full-blown interpretation of it. Rather, as the

¹⁰ Pappas 2016, p. 73.

¹¹ Fisher 2005, p. 539.

¹² Fisher 2011, p. 405.

¹³ The role of embodiment is central in the pragmatist tradition, although obviously in various ways and degrees according to different authors, etc. “The Deweyan pragmatism I favor”, as Shusterman explains, “understands human intelligence and reason as grounded in our natural equipment for survival and improvement [...]. Reason is a product of evolution, and it can evolve and change further. Classical pragmatism has an essentially embodied view of human nature. It rejects the radical dualism of body/mind. [...] That classical pragmatism emphasized the embodied nature of human experience and cognition has been very helpful to me in developing my project of somaesthetics” (Shusterman 2010a, p. 61). On this topic, see also Shusterman 2008, chap. 6.

⁷ Shusterman 2012, pp. 105, 110.

⁸ Shusterman 2000, p. 173.

⁹ Svendsen 2006, pp. 6-7.

subtitle of my article already suggests, I assume it as a sufficient task for now to present some preliminary observations and provisional results of an inquiry into the aesthetics of popular music that I intend to develop in a more systematic way in the future, and to profitably intersect different approaches (among which, precisely, pragmatism and somaesthetics)¹⁴.

2.

Somaesthetics – defined as “the critical, meliorative study of the experience and use of one’s body as a locus of sensory-aesthetic appreciation (*aisthesis*) and creative self-fashioning”¹⁵ – can be conceived of as “a systematic framework”¹⁶ that has three fundamental branches: analytic, pragmatic and practical somaesthetics¹⁷. From this point of view, somaesthetics may be understood as a somewhat general philosophical approach that can be applied, so to speak, to a great variety of problems and phenomena, and is both comparable to and compatible with other relevant and general approaches (such as, for example, dialectical aesthetics, phenomenological aesthetics, hermeneutical aesthetics, analytic aesthetics,

etc.)¹⁸. For example, somaesthetics has been successfully applied to the understanding of such activities and practices as the so-called “practical arts of living, such as cooking, fashion, cosmetics, home decoration, environmental design”, and in addition, “besides these more specific aesthetic practices, [...] the general art of living and stylization of self”¹⁹.

In this article, I would like to emphasize some of the potentialities of this philosophical approach in the field of popular music²⁰. In my view, with its focus on the need to “put experience at the heart of philosophy and celebrate the living, sentient body as the organizing core of experience”²¹, somaesthetics makes it possible: (1) to arrive at an understanding of the particular kind of experience derived from popular music, primarily understood here, for both methodological reasons and personal knowledge, skills and taste, as rock music (although rock surely does not cover the entire field of what is usually defined as popular music)²²; and (2) to understand certain important connections between the purely aesthetic dimension, on one hand, and the ethical-political dimension, on the other, that are often involved with, or implied in, our experiences of popular music²³ (a question, the latter, that I will not pursue here).

¹⁴ To be precise, I have already started to develop this kind of inquiry in the past few years, but previously only adopting the methodology of a critical confrontation with the dialectical philosophy of Horkheimer, Adorno and to some extent also Marcuse (see Marino 2014; Marino 2017a; Marino 2017b). From this point of view, opening to the approach of pragmatism, in general, and somaesthetics, in particular, might represent the beginning of a new orientation of this research.

¹⁵ Shusterman 2000, p. 267. For this definition of somaesthetics as a new philosophical discipline, see also Shusterman 2008 (p. 19), Shusterman 2012 (p. 116), and, of course, the presentation of the international “Journal of Somaesthetics” (official website: <https://journals.aau.dk/index.php/JOS/index>).

¹⁶ Shusterman 2008, p. 19.

¹⁷ See Shusterman 2000, pp. 271-276. Recently Shusterman has also explained that, “along with the three branches of somaesthetics there are also three dimensions”, depending on “whether their major orientation is toward external appearance or inner experience”: representational, experiential and performative somaesthetics” (Shusterman 2016, pp. 102-105).

¹⁸ “[M]y aesthetic research”, as Shusterman explains, “began to look beyond the analytic aesthetics paradigm (valuable as it is) to incorporate ideas from pragmatism, phenomenology, hermeneutics, post-structuralism, and East-Asian thought. I was striving for some kind of new philosophical synthesis, a new remix (in rap terminology)”: “aesthetics can be more usefully pluralistic” than it has usually been, both with regard to a plurality of complementary approaches and to a plurality of objects of inquiry, for example neither excluding “the most elevated fine arts” nor devaluing “the most commonday everyday aesthetic practices and popular artistic forms” (Shusterman 2012, pp. 105, 112).

¹⁹ Shusterman 2012, p. 115.

²⁰ On this topic, see for instance Shusterman 2010b.

²¹ Shusterman 2008, p. XII.

²² See Middleton (1990, chap. 1) on the complex question of defining the concept itself of popular music.

²³ The question concerning “the practical import of aesthetics”, also (although not only) in terms of “contemporary aesthetics’ potent mix of aesthetics and politics” (Shusterman 2012, p. 115), has always been important in the general project of pragmatist aesthetics and then somaesthetics.

As can be easily observed, in these last sentences I have laid emphasis on the aspect of experiencing music and thus on the concept of experience – which, of course, is a concept of decisive importance in Dewey's pragmatist aesthetics (not by chance developed in a book called *Art as Experience*) and then in Shusterman's subsequent development of it²⁴. Among the many aspects of popular music (or, in this specific case, rock music) that surely deserve consideration from a philosophical point of view, i.e. from the point of view of philosophical aesthetics, I will mostly focus here on the aspect that concerns our way of experiencing it, of having an experience with this kind of music, or better of being in an experience with it. More precisely, I will focus on our experience as listeners of rock songs and participants in rock events, rather than our experience as music players and performers²⁵. As we will see, far from denying that appreciating and/or evaluating popular music²⁶ also involve to some extent our intellectual or, let's say, cognitive capacities, and without reducing at the same time this activity to a mere pattern of recognition and acceptance²⁷, it is my thesis that we actually miss a lot of what listening to this kind of music can mean for us (that is, how it basically functions and how it can improve and enrich our experience in general, or sometimes even change our lives)²⁸ if we do not take

adequately into account the decisive role played by the somatic dimension in it.

One should definitely avoid confusing "all legitimate activity with serious thinking" or with art that favors, so to speak, the development of "effortful 'independent thinking'": there are indeed more intellectual and, as it were, "more somatic forms of effort, resistance, and satisfaction"²⁹ in our experience with the different varieties and manifestations of the aesthetic and/or of art. Somaesthetics may provide a decisive contribution to gaining a deeper insight into this fact. Indeed, according to Shusterman "popular arts like rock [...]"

& Gemünden 1997, p. 219n). "The next thing that arrived was rock 'n' roll when I was around 10 or 12 years old. I had not been interested in music so much before because the German songs my mother listened to on the radio didn't interest me at all. But when rock 'n' roll arrived I realized that this was the best music in the world. [...] I bought all these records, but because my parents hated this rock 'n' roll I had to keep my records at a friend's place. But if you have to defend something that you like, it makes you to like it even more. And what I like most is that all these interests were really mine. My parents hated the comic strips, they hated rock 'n' roll, and when they found out what movies I was going to they also were against that. So everything I loved I had to defend" (Wenders 2014: <http://the-talks.com/interview/wim-wenders>). Compare this quotation to the famous songs by Lou Reed & The Velvet Underground precisely entitled *Rock 'n' Roll* (from their album *Loaded*, 1970): "Jenny said when she was just five years old, / You know there's nothin' happenin' at all. / Every time she put on the radio, / There was nothin' goin' down at all, not at all. / One fine morning, she puts on a New York station, / And she couldn't believe what she heard at all. / She started dancing to that fine fine fine fine music, whew! / Her life was saved by rock & roll. / Hey baby, rock 'n' roll. / Despite all the amputations, / We could dance to a rock 'n' roll station". This is probably an experience that most rock music aficionados, especially during their teens, have made. If I may be allowed to insert here a short autobiographical excerpt, for me it was first U2 and Bruce Springsteen, and then especially the new wave of rock bands of the early and mid 1990s (Nirvana, Soundgarden, Alice in Chains, Smashing Pumpkins, Kyuss, and above all Pearl Jam), that more or less "saved my life".

²⁹ Shusterman 2000, pp. 183-184. It is important to always bear in mind this difference, when dealing with pragmatist aesthetics, in general, and somaesthetics, in particular. As Shusterman claims, "aesthetic experience (with its sensory appreciative perception of aesthetic qualities) constitutes a far wider realm than the experience of art" (Shusterman 2012, p. 109).

²⁴ As he explains, "experience [rather than collecting or criticism] is ultimately what art is about"; "art [is] the purposeful production of aesthetic experience" (Shusterman 2000, p. 57).

²⁵ I would like to thank my colleague Anne Tarvainen for drawing my attention on the need to make fully explicit this distinction in my approach to the subject, and also for suggesting me the interesting work of McKerrell 2012 on somaesthetic hearing in traditional music.

²⁶ On this distinction, see Gracyk 2007, pp. 103-133.

²⁷ See Adorno 2002b, p. 452 ff. More precisely, Adorno's theory of the experience of recognition in listening to popular music divides this experience into different components, thus sketching the following scheme: "a. Vague remembrance; b. Actual identification; c. Subsumption by label; d. Self-reflection on the act of recognition; e. Psychological transfer of recognition-authority to the object" (Adorno 2002b, pp. 453-454).

²⁸ "My life was saved by rock 'n' roll", as famously claimed by Wim Wenders (quoted, for instance, in Cook

suggest a radically revised aesthetic with a joyous return of the somatic dimension which philosophy has long repressed³⁰. Fully recognizing this aspect, in turn, may lead us to meditate better and more accurately than we are probably used to on the decisive role played by the body in the constitution of the human world-experience as such, inasmuch as the latter is not to be considered as “one object among others” but rather as “a constitutive or transcendental principle, precisely because it is involved in the very possibility of experience”³¹. In fact, the body

is deeply implicated in our relation to the world, in our relation to others, and in our self-relation, and its analysis consequently proves crucial for our understanding of the mind-world relation, for our understanding of the relation between self and other, and for our understanding of the mind-body relation. [...] The lived body is neither spirit nor nature, neither soul nor body, neither inner nor outer, neither subject nor object. All of these contraposed categories are derivations of something more basic. [...] The body is not a screen between me and the world; rather, it shapes our primary way of being-in-the-world. [...] Moreover, all of [the] aspects of embodiment shape the way I perceive the world. [...] Since this is the lived body with which I perceive and act, it is in constant connection with the world. And this connection is not a mere surface-to-surface contact, as a corpse might lie on the surface of a table; rather, my body is integrated with the world. To be situated in the world means not simply to be located someplace in a physical environment, but to be in rapport with circumstances that are bodily meaningful³².

³⁰ Shusterman 2000, p. 184.

³¹ Gallagher & Zahavi 2008, p. 135.

³² Gallagher & Zahavi 2008, pp. 135, 137.

3.

I would like now to briefly (and critically) examine a different philosophical approach to popular music, namely that developed by the famous Frankfurt philosopher and social theorist Theodor W. Adorno³³. Despite its length and rigorous structure, Adorno’s 1941 seminal essay *On Popular Music* can be summarized in the idea that *all* popular music (which, for him, also included jazz music) consists of standardization, pseudo-individualization and plugging, and functions as a sort of “social cement”³⁴. For this reason, popular music for Adorno is always undeniably false, i.e. it never contains what Adorno in his late, unfinished *Aesthetic Theory* calls the “truth content” of a work of art. According to Adorno, “all ‘light’ and pleasant art [is] illusory and mendacious”³⁵.

³³ Adorno, by the way, also represents an important point of reference for *Pragmatist Aesthetics*, although criticized for his “austere, gloomy, and haughtily elitist Marxism” and opposed to “Dewey’s more earthy, upbeat, and democratic pragmatism” (Shusterman 2000, p. XVII).

³⁴ Adorno’s main writings on this subject are the essays *On Popular Music*, *On Jazz* and *Farewell to Jazz* (Adorno 2002b, respectively pp. 437-469, 470-495, 496-500), and *Perennial Fashion – Jazz* (Adorno 1997, pp. 119-131).

³⁵ Adorno 2002b, p. 291. It is important to bear in mind that it is *not* my aim with this paper to oppose an uncritical plea for *all* popular music to what I consider Adorno’s aprioristic critique of *all* popular music, despite its great variety, the different values, significance and contents that it conveys, etc. A correct approach, in my view, is that “located between the poles of condemnatory pessimism [...] and celebratory optimism [...]. If the former pole denounces popular art in near paranoid terror as maniacal manipulation devoid of redeeming aesthetic or social merit, the latter embraces it with ingenuous optimism”. An intermediary position rather admits that “the products of popular art are often aesthetically wretched and lamentably unappealing, just as [...] their social effects can be very noxious, particularly when they are consumed in a passive, all-accepting way” (which logically implies that popular art is *not always* consumed in such a passive way, contrary to what Adorno and other critics assume). What must be contested are “the philosophical arguments that popular art is always and necessarily an aesthetic failure, inferior and inadequate by its intrinsic constitution”, without for this reason denying that “much popular art may indeed conform to Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s analysis”

This – given the intrinsic relationship established by Adorno between the aesthetic level, strictly speaking, and the sociopolitical dimension of art, and given the particular way in which he understands the concept of commitment in art – also implies that popular music, like all other products of the culture industry (that, for him, amount to nothing more than mere commodities)³⁶, is somehow doomed from the start to always being a sort of “social cement”. That is, a form of pseudo-art that is unable to express critical contents and lead people to develop a critical consciousness and attitude towards society. On the specific level of our aesthetic experience with this kind of music, this means that, for Adorno, “good serious music” like that of Beethoven, Mahler or Schönberg requires what he calls the structural mode of listening, corresponding to his ideal of an adequate fruition of a work of art, which is to say the best kind of “concentrated listening”; and vice-versa, popular music requires and indeed promotes an inadequate and distracted mode of perception (named “commodity listening”, “deconcentration” or “regressive listening”³⁷) which fully corresponds to its being mere entertainment, mere amusement. “Recommending jazz and rock-and-roll instead of Beethoven”, for Adorno,

does not demolish the affirmative lie of culture but rather furnishes barbarism and the profit interest of the culture industry with a subterfuge. The allegedly vital and uncorrupted nature of such products is synthetically processed by precisely those powers that are supposedly the target of the Great Refusal. These products are the truly corrupt³⁸.

(Shusterman 2000, pp. 176-177, 183). The obvious reference here is to the famous chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* on the culture industry (see Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, pp. 94-136).

³⁶ For example, according to Adorno “jazz is a commodity in the strict sense” (Adorno 2002b, p. 473).

³⁷ Adorno 2002b, pp. 293, 305.

³⁸ Adorno 2002a, pp. 319-320. In *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno even dares to speak of a veritable “antithesis of Beethoven and jazz, a contrast to which many musicians’ ears are already beginning to be deaf. Beethoven is, in modified yet determinable fashion, the full experience of external life returning inwardly, just as time – the medium of music – is the inward sense; *popular music*, in

According to Richard Middleton, “Adorno’s general position opened up new ground, in ways which often remain of value”; at the same time, however, “his specific treatment of the social situation of popular music, by proceeding, in his usual way, ‘through the extremes’, does have the negative virtue of exaggerating real trends. Anyone wanting to argue the importance of studying popular music” has the responsibility “to absorb Adorno in order to go beyond him”³⁹. So, for example, with regard to the important question concerning the hopelessly standardized character of “the musical material” that, for Adorno, *all* popular music is made of, it might be objected that his conception ultimately rests upon the questionable idea of a “historical necessity” in the development of “the compositional material” that “contract[s] and expand[s] in the course of history”, and is characterized by precise “laws of movement”⁴⁰. But this conception sometimes gives the impression of being a sort of top-down schema, a pre-planned framework imposed from above on actual musical phenomena that ultimately leads to exclude many other forms of musical expression from those considered by Adorno as legitimate ones for the contemporary age, simply because they still make use of traditional musical means like major/minor chords, etc. As a consequence, Adorno is not even open to the opportunity of a non-standardized use of standardized artistic materials⁴¹, which is something that quite often occurs in the field of popular music and also of jazz.

What is not conceivable from an Adornian perspective, in my view is quite common in the field of what I would define as “good popular music”⁴²

all of its many varieties” (which confirms Adorno’s incorrigible, hopeless tendency to generalize about it) “does not undergo this sublimation and is, as such, a somatic stimulant and therefore regressive *vis-a-vis* aesthetic autonomy” (Adorno 2002a, p. 116).

³⁹ Middleton 1990, p. 35.

⁴⁰ Adorno 2007, p. 31.

⁴¹ Mecacci 2011, p. 98.

⁴² “[B]ecause we can distinguish better from worse instances of popular music, an aesthetic of popular listening does not imply that all such music is equally

(reversing his definition of “good serious music”): namely, rock songs that are actually commodities but, as also happens with good films, can transcend their own status of mere commodities by means of their formal and expressive qualities – self-transcending commodities, as it were⁴³. In fact, much popular music “claims to be creative” and, contrary to what Adorno would have ever admitted, “insists that originality can be manifested [also] in the revisionary appropriation of the old”⁴⁴. This, in turn, may apply to: (1) the melodic and harmonic dimension of music, for example by claiming that popular music does *not* make use of so-called tonal music’s syntax in the same way in which classical music does, so that in the ultimate analysis they appear as incommensurable or at least not exactly comparable⁴⁵; (2) the equally important aspect of lyrics, inasmuch as sometimes “rich semantic complexity and polysemy are deeply enfolded into [rock music’s] seemingly artless, simple language”⁴⁶; (3) its fundamental rhythmic dimension, for example by arguing that in rock music there are surely common rhythms (to be differentiated from meters, by the way) but that they are not constraining, not entirely standardized, and rather allow various degrees of freedom. As has been noted,

rock bears constant witness to the distinction between meter and rhythm [and] once we differentiate meter and rhythm, we see that there is no *one* rhythm or meter which is characteristic of rock. [...] What is typical, if anything is, is the way rock characteristically displaces accents. [...] The lesson, then, is that rock’s beat is not just a rhythm that is played

good” (Gracyk 2007, p. 133).

⁴³ From this point of view, I agree that “we should be very selective in adopting Adorno’s *Kulturkritik* as it applies to popular music. What is identified as a static essence is a caricature, so there is little reason to deny that popular music can challenge a broad range of social conventions. Its commodity character does not exhaust its appeal. [...] Rather than explain its appeal, the ‘culture industry’ may generate barriers to hearing rock and jazz, just as Adorno thinks it has for serious music” (Gracyk 1996, p. 173).

⁴⁴ Shusterman 2000, p. 231.

⁴⁵ See Tagg 2016.

⁴⁶ Shusterman 2000, p. 218.

along with the music. Rock’s beat, particularly as highlighted by the drummer, is a matter of strategically accenting and interacting with the beats present in the rest of the music. There is nothing mechanical about it. [...] [R]ock music is normally polyrhythmic [...]. “[T]he beat” of rock is not any one thing, nor is it the only thing that matters in rock’s rhythmic pleasures. It is neither primitive nor simple, nor primordial nor mechanical⁴⁷.

Alongside this, and focusing more specifically on the aspect of the experience of listening rather than on the dimension of musical composition (which is central for Adorno), it might be argued that, when compared to an approach like Adorno’s, pragmatist aesthetics in general (for example, with “Dewey’s somatic standpoint”, “advocating a fully embodied aesthetic”⁴⁸), and somaesthetics in particular, may provide a valuable contribution by amending some prejudices and thus arriving at a better understanding of the specific kind of aesthetic experience that popular music involves. In fact, still developing a comparison between the philosophy of fashion and the aesthetics of popular music, it might be argued that what lies at the heart of “the philosophic fear of fashion” is probably a kind of squeamishness about the body as an object worthy of intellectual attention⁴⁹. The same thing probably applies to the way in which philosophers have usually disregarded the experience of listening to popular music, because of “the traditional intellectualist bias which motivates” most aesthetic theories: “critics of popular culture are loath to recognize that there are humanly worthy and aesthetically rewarding activities other than intellectual exertion”⁵⁰.

A significant remark from Walter Benjamin’s 1932 short writing *Hashish in Marseilles* (and indeed a quite surprising remark, given that he was not an aprioristic critic of popular arts as such in the age of their mechanical reproduction) masterfully exemplifies this concept. In a self-critical report of a night in Marseilles

⁴⁷ Gracyk 1996, pp. 134-136, 143, 147.

⁴⁸ Shusterman 2000, p. 10.

⁴⁹ Hanson 1993. I owe this insight to Pappas 2016, p. 87n.

⁵⁰ Shusterman 2000, pp. 176, 183.

when he went listening to jazz music, he admits with perplexity and discomfort that he suddenly found himself rhythmically and unconsciously tapping his feet on the floor. “The music, which meanwhile kept rising and falling, I called the ‘rush switches of jazz’. I have forgotten on what grounds I *permitted* myself to mark the beat with my foot. This is *against my education*, and it did not happen without *inner disputation*”⁵¹. This, for Benjamin, was contrary to his habits and rules, but for every aficionado of jazz, soul, pop or rock music it is the *Ur-reaction* (so to speak) to the typical beat or pulse that is quintessential to this music: the primal, most original and, what matters the most, not socially alienated or psychologically regressive aesthetic response to it. In my view, interpreting the spontaneous, almost irresistible and unstoppable impulse to mark the beat with one’s foot when experiencing certain kinds of music as the mere symptom of, for example, a “rhythmically obedient” personality (as Adorno sarcastically suggests⁵²), should not be understood as the possession of a superior or more precise form of knowledge about music or, say, of a more profound and more adequate way of experiencing it. Rather, preventing oneself from this kind of satisfying and aesthetically enriching experience⁵³ may be interpreted as the symptom of a “distorted” relationship to music and, at the same time, to one’s own body⁵⁴.

⁵¹ Benjamin 2005, p. 678 [my emphasis]. The passage is so relevant that it deserves being quoted also in the original German version: “Die Musik, die inzwischen immer wieder aufklang und abnahm, nannte ich die strohernen Ruten des Jazz. Ich habe vergessen, mit welcher Begründung ich mir gestattete, ihren Takt mit dem Fuß zu marniere. Das geht gegen meine Erziehung, und es geschah nicht ohne eine inwendige Auseinandersetzung”.

⁵² Adorno 2002b, p. 460.

⁵³ As clearly explained by Gracyk (2007, pp. 1, 133), against “the elitism of traditional aesthetics” it must be claimed that “popular music aesthetically enriches lives”: “our choice of music involves knowledgeable participation in a particular form of life”, and popular music surely “provides a vibrant musical culture that speaks to the lived needs of its participants”.

⁵⁴ Needless to say, I am focusing here only on some aspects of Adorno’s aesthetic theory and philosophy of

If I have just defined (in a very emphatic or even dramatic way, I admit) a certain and indeed quite usual way of understanding our most common experiences with popular music as “distorted”, it is because: (1) this behaviour and, in general, this attitude or mentality are symptomatic of an alienated or estranged relationship with one’s own body and some of its spontaneous, even joyous forms of expression; and (2) it implies a harsh misunderstanding of the kind of reaction or enjoyment that a certain kind of music necessarily requires, so to speak. The problem is that, due to what Shusterman critically defines as “the anti-somatic animus” present in the arguments of many critics of popular art⁵⁵, it is impossible for a thinker like Adorno – notwithstanding his genuine interest in many questions concerning the body, also in aesthetics – to conceive of a way of “disappearing into the artwork”⁵⁶ that is not compatible with, i.e. is essentially different from, his ideal of the structural mode of listening. In other words, it is impossible for him to conceive of different kinds of

music, which, if studied in their entirety, are surely much more complex, articulated and often illuminating than it may seem from this short and basically critical presentation. From this point of view, the present exposition of Adorno’s aesthetics cannot do justice to its great value and, on many aspects, its persistent relevance and actuality. However, notwithstanding these limits and notwithstanding Adorno’s well-known (and conscious, deliberate) tendency to sometimes make use of exaggerations, hyperboles and provocative formulations that must be always taken into consideration, I consider the present exposition of some aspects of his aesthetics as basically accurate and correct.

⁵⁵ Shusterman 2000, p. 185.

⁵⁶ It is Adorno’s fundamental opinion that aesthetic experience as such requires a genuine being-open to the otherness of the work of art and being-willing to respond in a proper way to what the object itself of the aesthetic experience demands from the subject that is experiencing it. In fact, as he writes in *Aesthetic Theory*: “The relation to art [is] not that of its physical devouring; on the contrary, the beholder” must disappear “into the material”. “For him who has a genuine relation to art, in which he himself vanishes, art is not an object. [...] The false relation to art is akin to anxiety over possession. [...] Whoever disappears into the artwork thereby gains dispensation from the impoverishment of a life that is always too little” (Adorno 2002a, pp. 13-14).

music, equally legitimate from an aesthetic point of view, that require, because of their very nature, different kinds of aesthetic response and enjoyment. In my view, this can only result from the prejudices that, also in the case of great thinkers like Adorno, often represent our criteria of orientation far more than our conscious or reflective judgments⁵⁷. As has been correctly noted,

applying the skills of analytical listening to a simple popular song can result in sheer boredom, for some music is just not designed for that mode of listening. [...] One of the complications of contemporary musical life is that different musics and different listening situations call for distinct levels of concentration on what is taking place in the music. The challenge is to adopt an adequate mode of listening, which involves adjusting one's listening to the demands of the context and type of music. [...] Choosing music, we select a style that fits the level and kind of attention that we'll give to the music. [...] The admission that different musics reward different modes of attention does not prove that one mode is superior to another – unless, perhaps, one independently believes that exclusive attention is a superior activity⁵⁸.

4.

Now, rock music “creates meaning primarily in the emotional sphere. [...] In discussions of its emotional sphere, rock is supremely cast as a music of the body”⁵⁹.

And still:

rock music is judged more by its effects on the listener's body than by a “disinterested” appreciation of its formal properties. [...] Rhythm is perhaps the most obvious and frequently remarked upon aspect of rock music. [...] [I]n dance the connection between the music and the listener's body is felt and enacted, rather than merely contemplated. A good rock song is one that makes the listener's body want to move [...]. Good rock musicians enter into a dialogue with the dancers, adjusting their performance

according to the dancers' responses, which is something that requires a great deal of practice and training, but not the sort of thing that could be captured in a score or some other set of formalized instructions. For the musician as well as the dancers, the body and its feelings reveal whether or not the performance is successful. [...] The listener's response and the musician's performance are both mediated by a history of practices, forms, and conventions. But when the music rings true, it is the body that tells us so. This is something that has to be experienced to be understood⁶⁰.

If this is true, it means that applying to popular music the same criteria that we usually adopt to describe and assess the kind of aesthetic experience that is typical with “good serious music”, like Adorno actually does, is simply wrong. It is comparable, in a sense, to attempting to understand our experience with contemporary body art by adopting the same criteria that we usually use to evaluate Dutch Golden Age painting⁶¹. In fact, “popular music involves physically engaged responses (it is common for listeners to physically move, dance, and even sing along to the music)”, and this implies that “the model of appreciation at the heart of traditional aesthetic theory [...] faces a serious challenge”⁶².

So, what we need for an aesthetics of rock music is first of all an approach capable of emphasizing the body's role in aesthetic experience, eventually arriving at an argument that we should “sharpen our appreciation of art through more attention to the somaesthetic feelings involved in perceiving art instead of narrowly identifying artistic feelings with the familiar kind of emotions [...] that often make art appreciation degenerate into a gushy, vague romanticism”⁶³. While for most “so-called mass culture critics [...] com[ing] from both left and right”⁶⁴ rock music “is ‘regressive’ and

⁵⁷ As Gadamer explains, “the prejudices of the individual, far more than his judgments, constitute the historical reality of his being” (Gadamer 2002, p. 278).

⁵⁸ Gracyk 2007, pp. 142-143.

⁵⁹ Moore 2011, pp. 421-422.

⁶⁰ Baugh 1998, pp. 170-171, 173.

⁶¹ Analogous remarks can be found in Gracyk 2007 (p. 143), with regard to the different approaches required by novels and short stories, films and stage plays, impressionist paintings and pop art canvases, and then, of course, classical music and popular music.

⁶² Fisher 2011, p. 406.

⁶³ Shusterman 2008, p. 125.

⁶⁴ Olick 1998, p. 46. In fact, “the denigration of popular

aesthetically invalid” also, if not above all, “because it ‘is a somatic stimulus’”⁶⁵, somaesthetics, on the contrary, puts the living body, the soma, at the center of aesthetic experience as such, and in particular at the center of our experience with such arts as popular music. We should not “ignore the body’s subject-role as the living focus of beautiful, felt experience”:

somaesthetics, in its experiential dimension, clearly refuses to exteriorize the body as an alienated thing distinct from the active spirit of human experience. [...] More than guitars or violins or pianos or even drums, our bodies are the primary instrument for the making of music⁶⁶ [and also for its appreciation and evaluation in listening].

Of course, the attention paid to this immediate somatic dimension must not be confused with a denial of the fact that the audience of a rock concert “can take a critical and complex attitude” to the forms and contents “there presented”⁶⁷ and can achieve high levels of understanding (besides genuine and intense aesthetic enjoyment, of course). In fact, rock music can have “complex levels of meaning” that are “somatic as well as discursive”⁶⁸. In other words, it should be clear that the undeniable importance of the former dimension (the somatic) is not necessarily at odds with the latter (the discursive or, say, cognitive, intellectual dimension). There are kinds of aesthetic experience (understood here in the more limited sense of the experience we have with certain forms of art) that are high-stimulating for our cognitive faculties and capacities but low-stimulating from a somatic point of view. There are other kinds of aesthetic experience that, vice-versa, are cognitively low-stimulating but very powerful in arousing our bodily perception and activity. Finally, there are

art or mass culture [...] is widely endorsed by intellectuals of violently different socio-political views and agendas” (Shusterman 2000, p. 169).

⁶⁵ Shusterman 2000, p. 184.

⁶⁶ Shusterman 2008, pp. 28, 126.

⁶⁷ I adapt here to my investigation of rock music an example that Shusterman originally introduces about the audience of television drama.

⁶⁸ Shusterman 2000, pp. 186, 188.

probably still other kinds of aesthetic experience that can combine the two dimensions in unique ways, thus allowing us to have a well-balanced and integrated experience (namely, an intensive experience of being-part-of-the-event with both one’s body and mind).

In this regard, let us think about the quite typical sensation experienced after an impressive rock concert (in particular, as happens when one is a great fan of the artist or the band and so, for example, has spent several hours standing outside the gates of the stadium waiting for them to open, and then several hours standing in the middle of the crowd in order to find a place right in front of the stage, at a few meters distance from it): one feels both physically exhausted, emotionally enriched, and to some extent also intellectually delighted. An experience, the latter, that, if described this way, can clearly remind one of the sensations, feelings and thoughts experienced in sexual intercourse. Of course, not all our experiences as listeners of popular music and, in particular, as part of the audience at a rock concert, can reach such impressive levels of somatic (and, at the same time, emotional and mental) intensity and strength. However, this is absolutely normal and understandable: as happens with sex (to strengthen this association that may come easily to our mind) and, *mutatis mutandis*, with all kinds of human activities and aesthetic experiences, there are sometimes merely enjoyable episodes and there are at other times extraordinary episodes due to their intensity, meaning, etc.⁶⁹.

5.

It is a cliché and a commonplace in the field of criticism of popular culture, in general, and popular music, in particular, to associate our experiences with rock, pop, soul, funk, rap etc. to sex, an important somatic dimension of our life that has been constantly, extensively and intensively, denigrated in Western culture. This has often happened as a result of focusing

⁶⁹ I borrow this idea from Shusterman (2012, p. 112).

on such practices as masturbation (understood as “mere discharge of tension rather than real satisfaction”) and “undeferrred and deviant sexual pleasure”⁷⁰, and by comparing the enjoyment of popular music to them⁷¹; or even by reducing rock music as such to “one appeal only, a barbaric appeal, to sexual desire”: “rock has the beat of sexual intercourse”⁷².

While writing the final draft of this paper, to be presented as a lecture at the conference on somaesthetics in Szeged, I had the opportunity to listen to many songs from The Afghan Whigs, Radiohead, Eddie Vedder/Pearl Jam and Arcade Fire, whose live concerts I could luckily attend (or better: I could aesthetically experience in person) in Italy in June-July 2017⁷³. These live music experiences were not only delightful, passionate, emotionally and also cognitively enriching,

and often deeply moving for me, but even interesting for my philosophical purposes, because they strongly reinforced my conviction that a somaesthetic approach may be useful to grasp some quintessential features of the particular kind of aesthetic experience involved in rock music. Namely, a kind of experience that is surely rooted in the somatic but, as I said, does not exclude for this reason the dimensions of deep emotional enrichment and also mental effort and intellectual gratification. Referring again to the music that I was listening to while preparing my lecture for the Somaesthetics Conference in Szeged, quite unsurprisingly (but also revealingly for the purposes of my paper) I discovered among the users’ comments to a YouTube version of Radiohead’s classic song *Jigsaw Falling Into Place* the following remarks⁷⁴: “The last 40 seconds of this song is pure orgasm. Don’t even try to deny it”; “I was going to deny it... but then I orgasmed. Embarrassing”; “All the song is pure orgasm”; and so on – clearly using these words in a metaphorical way, as often happens with the terminology of philosophical aesthetics⁷⁵.

The connection “rock = sex” has usually been introduced by highbrow-oriented theorists in order to criticize popular music, thus assuming a priori that such similarities imply the latter’s aesthetic irrelevance and also socio-psychological dangerousness. But even some theorists who have meritoriously attempted to rescue rock music from several prejudices have apparently followed the same logic. Namely, they have tried to aesthetically legitimate it by denying any conceptual and/or experiential relationship between rock and sex, thus automatically accepting the premise according to which an aesthetic experience that is to some degree comparable to sex is not valuable and is insignificant from an aesthetic point of view. On the contrary, I would

⁷⁰ Shusterman 2000, p. 182. Shusterman critically refers here, respectively, to Ernest van den Haag’s and Allan Bloom’s critical opinions.

⁷¹ Worthy of notice, in this context, is also Adorno’s (quite unintelligible, in my view...) comparison of jazz music as such to a sexual intercourse and especially of the use of syncopation in jazz rhythms to “a ‘coming-too-early’”, to an “anxiety [that] leads to premature orgasm”, to the “impotence [that] expresses itself through premature and incomplete orgasm” (Adorno 2002b, pp. 486-490).

⁷² Gracyk 1996, pp. 128, 130. The words put in inverted commas, quoted and then critically commented on by Gracyk in his book, are actually taken from Bloom’s 1987 influential book *The Closing of the American Mind*. In short, Gracyk convincingly shows that while the rhythm of rock music can often be “extremely sensual”, there is no evidence that it has intrinsically a “special ‘sexual’ aspect” and, furthermore, that for this reason rock’s “so-called ‘big beat’ is harmful” or has “a corrupting influence” (Gracyk 1996, pp. 130-131, 133).

⁷³ It may seem strange to the reader that at this point of my article I suddenly introduce such explicit references to my recent personal experiences with rock concerts. However, I do not consider this as inappropriate in the present context because profitably intersecting one’s philosophical thoughts (also derived from, or influenced by, selected readings) with one’s own life experience is something that corresponds to a typical pragmatist attitude. In particular, I was encouraged to do so by a few remarks of Richard Shusterman on how “most of [his] ideas in philosophy derive more from personal experience than from the reading of theoretical texts” (2016, p. 91) and Theodore Gracyk on his being a great fan of popular music (2007, p. 163 ff.).

⁷⁴ The video of this performance is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GoLJJRIWCLU>

⁷⁵ This may remind us, for example, of the double use (literal or metaphorical) of the concept of taste in order to grasp and describe aesthetic experience, as masterfully explained by Carolyn Korsmeyer (1999, chap. 1).

not recommend to share the same premise and then draw different conclusions from it, but rather to criticize and refuse the premise itself and arrive at the conclusion that an aesthetic experience (here: rock music) that is to some extent comparable to sexual intercourse (for example, with regard to its effects during and after the performance) is not diminished or deprived of its aesthetic significance and value because of this. A philosophical approach like somaesthetics, specifically aimed at emphasizing and redeeming “the body’s great reason” (freely quoting here Nietzsche’s famous words) from all the prejudices that it has fallen prey to for centuries, may be of great help for this purpose.

How does this reflect on the general discourse that I have developed so far and, in particular, what are the consequences of this last aspect (rock music and sex) on the comparison between Adorno’s aesthetic theory and pragmatist aesthetics? To be precise, Adorno cannot be considered by any means a thinker who despised instincts and impulses, but rather as someone who criticized the repressive combination of capitalist alienation and reification and “mutilated sexuality”⁷⁶, and advocated a truly free comportment of the subject towards the body (also including instincts and natural drives, of course). A truly free comportment and attitude that, however, for him were not even conceivable, let alone feasible or achievable, in the false world in which “life does not live” anymore (as the opening quotation of *Minima Moralia* famously reads).

This – together with many other aspects that it is not possible to take extensively into account here – has important consequences on Adorno’s critical view of aesthetic pleasure and what we may call the modern ideology of aesthetic enjoyment, as wonderfully summarized in the very first paragraphs of his *Aesthetic Theory*. For example, he writes:

In the false world all *hedoné* is false. For the sake of happiness, happiness is renounced. It is thus that desire survives in art. [...] What popular

consciousness and a complaisant aesthetics regard as the taking pleasure in art, modeled on real enjoyment, probably does not exist. [...] Whoever concretely enjoys artworks is a philistine; he is convicted by expressions like “a feast for the ears”. [...] Ask a musician if the music is a pleasure, the reply is likely to be – as in the American joke of the grimacing cellist under Toscanini – “I just hate music”⁷⁷.

First of all, however, the basic idea that we live in a completely “false world”, dominated by a kind of Enlightenment that has always been and still is “totalitarian”⁷⁸, in which film, radio, popular music and magazines merely represent “the aesthetic equivalent of power”⁷⁹, is highly questionable. This also implies that the idea that a correct, adequate relation to music should be summarized by the sentence: “I just hate music!”, is no less questionable and problematic. Even Adorno’s famous motto: “The bourgeois want art voluptuous and life ascetic; the reverse would be better”⁸⁰, although surely fascinating like many of his striking aphorisms of this kind, is not entirely convincing. In fact, by simply adopting a logical principle of inclusion (i.e. a “both/and” in which the acceptance of one of the options does not entail a rejection of the others) instead of Adorno’s logic of disjunction and mutual exclusion (i.e. “either/or” or sometimes even “neither/nor”, as is quite typical of his negative dialectics), it is clearly

⁷⁷ Adorno 2002a, p. 13. “That artworks are not being but a process of becoming can be grasped technologically. Their continuity is demanded teleologically by the particular elements. They are in need of continuity and capable of it by virtue of their incompleteness and, often, by their insignificance. It is as a result of their own constitution that they go over into their other, find continuance in it, want to be extinguished in it, and in their demise determine what follows them. This immanent dynamic is, in a sense, a higher-order element of what artworks are. If anywhere, then it is here that aesthetic experience resembles sexual experience, indeed its culmination. The way the beloved image is transformed in this experience, the way rigidification is unified with what is most intensely alive, effectively makes the experience the incarnate prototype of aesthetic experience” (Adorno 2002a, p. 176).

⁷⁸ Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, p. 4.

⁷⁹ Horkheimer & Adorno 2002, p. 103.

⁸⁰ Adorno 2002a, p. 13.

⁷⁶ Adorno 2002a, p. 161.

possible to want both art and life “voluptuous”. That is, there seems to be no reason why the former’s “voluptuousness” should exclude in principle the latter’s (although there are surely moments in one’s life in which “ascetic” habits and practices, and even “ascetic art”, can be what one is really in need of). It is obviously true that, as Adorno claims, sometimes “the force of sexuality and the sensuality related to it becomes even more palpable through its concealment”⁸¹ in art and aesthetics. But there is no plausible reason to generalize and infer from this that *all* art dealing with sexuality in an explicit way (as much rock music from the 1960s onwards has done), rather than in an implicit or concealing way, is aesthetically impoverished and thus illegitimate. Nor it is acceptable to reduce on this basis *all* popular music to a mere experience of fun⁸² (which, by the way, is not something disagreeable or miserable in itself, although it surely does not represent the highest value or pleasure in life).

A passage from *Pragmatist Aesthetics* can provide elements useful to the gaining of a clearer and more adequate perspective. As Shusterman explains, “rock songs are typically enjoyed through moving, dancing, and singing along with the music, often with such vigorous efforts that we break a sweat and eventually exhaust ourselves”; rock music evokes an “energetic and

kinesthetic response”⁸³. This, as I said, may clearly remind us (and, in my view, in a positive, *not* in a negative way) of other activities similarly involving vigorous efforts and sweating, exhausting oneself, and finally providing great satisfaction and pleasure at the end of the experience. Namely, activities like those theoretically inquired into, and also practically explored by, some branches of somaesthetics (yoga, massage, aerobics, forms of dance and martial arts, modern psychosomatic therapies, etc.), and then, of course, like sex.

It is thus not by accident, I think, that Shusterman explains that “there are aesthetic experiences of [...] everyday activities” (for example, let us think of listening to one’s favorite music with an Mp3-Device or a Smartphone while walking, having a bicycle ride, etc.) that are “markedly different from the ordinary experience of them” because of “a special quality of the object or event being experienced that can be classified as ordinary in a general sense of belonging to the real world of normal life rather than the artworld but also be extraordinary in terms of its quality”⁸⁴. And, in order to strengthen this explanation, the following example of aesthetically enriching experiences (already mentioned a few paragraphs before) is significantly added: “Compare [...] an enjoyable episode of lovemaking versus one that stands out as extraordinary because of its creativity, intensity, or meaning”⁸⁵.

6.

“Rock ‘n’ Roll music gets right through to you without having to go through your brain” is a presumed sentence of John Lennon critically used by Mark Miller against rock music and, in turn, critically used by Shusterman against Miller himself⁸⁶. The usual and commonsensical idea, in short, is that “sensuous immediacy” is *the* typical feature of popular music and that this logically implies

⁸¹ Adorno 2002a, p. 276.

⁸² “The ridiculous in art, which philistines recognize better than do those who are naively at home in art, and the folly of a rationality made absolute indict one other reciprocally; incidentally, when viewed from the perspective of the praxis of self-preservation, happiness – sex – is equally ridiculous, as can be spitefully pointed out by anyone who is not driven by it. Ridiculousness is the residue of the mimetic in art, the price of its self-enclosure. In his condemnation of this element, the philistine always has an ignominious measure of justification. The ridiculous, as a barbaric residuum of something alien to form, misfires in art if art fails to reflect and shape it. If it remains on the level of the childish and is taken for such, it merges with the calculated fun of the culture industry. By its very concept, art implies kitsch, just as by the obligation it imposes of sublimating the ridiculous it presupposes educational privilege and class structure; *fun* is art’s punishment for this” (Adorno 2002a, p. 119).

⁸³ Shusterman 2000, p. 184.

⁸⁴ Shusterman 2012, p. 112.

⁸⁵ Shusterman 2012, p. 112.

⁸⁶ See Shusterman 2000, p. 184.

that “rock can be enjoyed without intellectual ‘interpretation’ [and] is therefore not sufficiently ‘cerebral’ to be aesthetically legitimate”⁸⁷. This, however, not only confirms the abovementioned “anti-somatic animus” animating most critics of popular music, but on a more general level is simply wrong. In fact, if it is still a matter of controversy on a general epistemological level whether human perception is independent or not from any intellectual component (i.e. whether there is or is not a degree of immediacy in experience that is not permeated by rationality and conceptuality, that is completely non-conceptual or non-intellectual), it is not a matter for discussion on a specifically aesthetic level that our experiences with arts of all kinds never consist of merely pre-intellectual “sensuous immediacy” devoid of any degree of “intellectual ‘interpretation’”. Without committing myself for this reason to radical forms of conceptualism in epistemology and/or cognitivism in aesthetics, my point is simply that aesthetic experience always implies what we may call a free play of the faculties of our mind (freely adapting here Kant’s terminology to the specific purposes of this article).

In a sense, all music (thus including popular music as well) is “itself an inherently intellectual pleasure”⁸⁸, although it is obviously true that the pleasure brought by a twelve-tone esoteric composition of Anton Webern or a minimalist/avant-garde jazz piece of Tim Berne’s group “Snakeoil” is definitely a more intellectual one than the pleasure that is brought by listening to (and simultaneously dancing, singing along, etc.) *Rocks* by Primal Scream, *Go With the Flow* by Queens of the Stone Age, *Give It Away* by Red Hot Chili Peppers, *Bullet in the Head* by Rage Against the Machine, etc. Anyway, in all cases aesthetic experience always depends on the interaction and mutual coordination between the different faculties of our mind. From this point of view, it

always consists of a complex and mediated experience (although on various levels and in different ways, related as it is to very different kinds of art), and not merely an immediate and sensuous one, as many critics of rock music have argued. However, today we should be ready to acknowledge that our intellectual faculties, in turn, must be understood as basically embodied (as pragmatism’s typical non-reductive naturalism urges us to do⁸⁹), which clearly compels us to rethink “the aesthetic” as not separated or distanced from “the somatic” as traditional aesthetics seemed to imply. Of course, this must not prevent us from using the concept of immediacy as such: a concept that, if properly used, can even prove to be useful to describe certain features and effects of rock music⁹⁰. The problem, so to speak, is rather with some incorrect and ideological consequences deriving from a misleading use of the concept of immediacy when applied to rock music or other similar artistic practices⁹¹.

This is closely connected, in turn, to the common objection (discoverable in such authors as Adorno, Greenberg, Rosenberg, van den Haag, Bloom, MacDonald and others) “that ‘the gratifications offered by popular culture are spurious’”. According to Shusterman, “the most straightforward interpretation and justification of the charge of spuriousness is that popular art’s alleged gratifications are not real because they are never deeply felt, that they are spurious because they are merely ‘washed-out’, ‘faked sensations’”. However, as he observes, the experience of rock music

⁸⁹ Shusterman 2010a, pp. 61-62.

⁹⁰ A good example is represented by an interview with the Italian trumpet player and composer Giovanni Falzone on his CD *Led Zeppelin Suite*, consisting of a sophisticated suite in four parts based on jazz arrangements for big band of songs by the legendary rock band Led Zeppelin. In fact, in discussing and commenting on his CD with the interviewer Falzone explains the general meaning of his musical project and, in this context, correctly talks about the extraordinary significance that the *immediacy* of rock music, even of a simple “power chord”, can have.

⁹¹ See, for example, Adorno’s typical way of using the term “immediacy”, *Unmittelbarkeit*, in a very critical sense in his strong critique of jazz music.

⁸⁷ Shusterman 2000, pp. 184-185.

⁸⁸ Gracyk 1996, p. 128. For a more general perspective on music as such, and not only popular music, see Gracyk’s recent book *On Music* (2013).

can be so intensely absorbing and powerful that it is likened to spiritual possession, [and] surely gives the lie to such a charge. Even rock's severest critics recognize the passionately real potency and intoxicating satisfactions of its experience [...]. Obviously and threateningly real in their intensity and appeal, the gratifications of popular art are sometimes scorned as spurious in another sense, that of ephemerality. They are not real because they are fleeting. [...] Such an argument, however, will not withstand analysis [because] it is simply false to conclude the unreality of something from its ephemerality. This *non sequitur* may seem convincing [...] because it has a grand philosophical pedigree extending back to Parmenides [...]. But despite this support from such powerful and longstanding prejudices, the inference is clearly wrong. Something which exists only for a time nonetheless really exists, and a temporary gratification is a gratification all the same. [...] To reject the value of the ephemeral has been a rather permanent prejudice of our intellectual culture, [...] a prejudice which blights and blunts our pleasures. [...] Rock songs are typically enjoyed through moving, dancing, and singing along with the music, often with such vigorous efforts that we break a sweat and eventually exhaust ourselves. [...] Clearly, on the somatic level, there is much more effortful activity in the appreciation of rock than in that of high-brow music, whose concerts compel us to sit in a motionless silence which often induces not mere torpid passivity but snoring sleep. [...] The much more energetic and kinesthetic response evoked by rock exposes the fundamental passivity of the traditional aesthetic attitude of disinterested, distanced contemplation – a contemplative attitude that has its roots in the quest for philosophical and theological knowledge rather than pleasure⁹².

From this point of view, it might be argued (a little bit provocatively but also realistically) that, just as aesthetic experience in its most classical formulation was to be

⁹² Shusterman 2000, pp. 178-179, 181, 184. Shusterman's emphasis on the dimension of pleasure probably makes it possible to compare his aesthetic perspective, developed from within a basic pragmatist paradigm, to Hans-Robert Jauss' famous rehabilitation of aesthetic experience (in the context of the hermeneutic tradition) as based on the dimension of pleasure and on the three Aristotelian dimensions of *poiesis*, *aisthesis*, *katharsis*. Quite interestingly, in some of his works Jauss precisely starts from a critique of Adorno's aesthetic theory as radically unsympathetic to the aspect of pleasure in art (see, for instance, Jauss 1972).

understood as an "intensification of the *Lebensgefühl* (life feeling) through the harmonious correspondence of imagination and understanding"⁹³, so a kind of aesthetic experience like the one that we have at a rock concert can be understood as an intensified or, say, "heightened perceptual experience"⁹⁴. Benjamin and Adorno are probably right in claiming that industrialized, mechanically-reproducible mass art is suitable for a kind of "reception in distraction"⁹⁵ (although only partially in distraction, in my opinion)⁹⁶. However, it is also correct to connect this aspect of the aesthetic experience that we usually have with popular music to its effect of "transfiguring intensity of awareness, perception, and feeling (and the enriching, more meaningful living this brings)" from a specifically somatic point of view⁹⁷. This implies a kind of aesthetic experience that can

⁹³ Gadamer 1994, p. 100.

⁹⁴ Shusterman 2012, p. 110.

⁹⁵ Benjamin 2006, p. 269.

⁹⁶ In Benjamin's own words: "The masses are a matrix from which all customary behavior toward works of art is today emerging newborn. Quantity has been transformed into quality: *the greatly increased mass of participants has produced a different kind of participation*. [...] Distraction and concentration (*Zerstreuung und Sammlung*) form an antithesis, which may be formulated as follows. A person who concentrates before a work of art is absorbed by it; he enters into the work [...]. By contrast, the distracted masses absorb the work of art into themselves. [...] *Reception in distraction – the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in apperception – finds in film its true training ground*. Film, by virtue of its shock effects, is predisposed to this form of reception. It makes cult value recede into the background, not only because it encourages an evaluating attitude in the audience but also because, at the movies, the evaluating attitude requires no attention. The audience is an examiner, but a distracted one" (Benjamin 2006, pp. 267-269). Adorno, for his part, writes in *On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening*: "Deconcentration is the perceptual activity which prepares the way for the forgetting and sudden recognition of mass music"; the listeners "are in any case no longer capable of concentrated listening. [...] Benjamin's reference to the apperception of the cinema in a condition of distraction is just as valid for light music. [...] But if the film as a whole seems to be apprehended in a distracted manner, deconcentrated listening makes the perception of a whole impossible" (Adorno 2002b, p. 305).

⁹⁷ Shusterman 2012, p. 111.

spontaneously lead to a certain degree of distraction⁹⁸ on the intellectual level (at least if compared to the abovementioned model of the structural mode of listening) and, at the same time, to a great amount of awareness and intensification on the somatic level. Once again, there is no necessary “either/or” dichotomy between these aspects but rather an inclusive “both/and” relationship.

From this point of view, popular music can even be seen as providing “some alternative cultural base from which to argue and nourish [the] critique” of the traditional aesthetic ideology of high art that has grown into “an oppressive obstacle to socio-cultural emancipation”, preventing “art’s liberation and reintegration into the praxis of ordinary life”. Hence popular music can prove to be “a promising force for transforming our concept and institutions of art towards greater freedom and closer integration into the praxis of life”⁹⁹, rather than a mere aesthetic equivalent of power (as Adorno argued). Far from leading to a devaluation and condemnation of the particular kind of aesthetic experience required by a rock performance, the latter’s strong somatic component might be rather understood in terms of “power relations [...] encoded and sustained in our bodies” which, however, “can be challenged by alternative somatic practices” that can always be “developed to produce experiences of great power and exaltation”¹⁰⁰.

⁹⁸ It is important to specify “a certain degree of” because simply speaking of “reception in distraction” in general, without further observations, subtle differentiations between different kinds of experiences within the same field etc., can prove to be misleading: that is, it can suggest the idea that certain kinds of art, like film, popular music and so on, are usually experienced in a condition of complete distraction and deconcentration, which is clearly false.

⁹⁹ Shusterman 2000, p. 145.

¹⁰⁰ Shusterman 2008, pp. 22, 37.

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