

ADORNO AND POPULAR MUSIC: A CONSTELLATION OF PERSPECTIVES. By C. Campbell, S. Gandesha and S. Marino (Eds.). Milano-Udine: Mimesis International, 2019. 148 p.

It would be difficult to claim that the thought of Theodor W. Adorno is under-represented in current academic research. Monographs and articles on the multi-faceted oeuvre of the stern German thinker are countless, as the enthusiasm for, or at least the interest in, Frankfurt critical theory in its entirety does not appear to be experiencing any decline whatsoever. However, as it often happens, just when one is left wondering what else could be added to scholarship on such a discussed author, then a new book appears that makes you reconsider many aspects of his philosophy, either through philological-historical inquiries or through productive thematic displacements.

The present book, *Adorno and Popular Music*, edited by Colin J. Campbell, Samir Gandesha and Stefano Marino in the 50th anniversary of Adorno's death, belongs precisely to the latter sort of study, engaging Adorno's thought beyond the common-sense understanding of his intellectual profile. Here one has to pay attention to the nuances: this book does not linger on the weary topic of Adorno's critical judgment on popular music, but rather seeks to develop some Adornian insights in order to frame the variegated field of contemporary popular music. The bet of the editors lies on a clear assumption: far from being outdated, Adorno's reading of the culture industry can provide invaluable tools to understand "current phenomena of aestheticization in the contemporary society of spectacle, of 'atmospheres' and of aesthetic capitalism" (8). However, this is not to say that a mere implementation of Adornian notions is needed and sufficient; quite the contrary, the book seeks to challenge Adorno's perspective as the ultimate acknowledgement of his influence and fecundity, searching to rescue the spirit from the dogmatic grip of the letter.

This is a risky enterprise, given that, as one of the authors included in the present collection, Alessandro Alfieri, recalls in his essay, "Adorno died on the eve of a paradigm change between the 1960s and the 1970s" (65), and given that, as the book editors recall, "Adorno never witnessed [popular music]'s impact on contemporary culture and the role of pop-rock music in collective imaginary" (7). Indeed, reactualizations always flirt dangerously with arbitrariness, and only a great deal of thoughtfulness, philological mastery and historical awareness can ward off the specter of lazy misuses. Fortunately, the five interventions included in the book are as many examples of bravery, bravura and respectful reading.

Stefano Marino's contribution deals with the political engagement of Angela Davis, who studied under Herbert Marcuse in the late Sixties, with a brief stint in Frankfurt under Adorno, and with the transformation of her figure from a critical theorist to a commodity (i.e., a popular idol). The reference is to the number of pop and rock songs written in support of her political activism, from The Rolling Stones' "Sweet Black Angel" to "Angela" by John Lennon. According to an "orthodox Adornian approach", exemplified by his writings on jazz, popular music and the cultural industry, the commodification of antagonist figures, i.e., their incorporation within the all-encompassing logics of cultural consumption, should fatally hinder or even neutralize the full deployment of their subversive message. The status of popular icons would, from this orthodox perspective,

be unwillingly functional to the de-legitimization of their critical thinking. Was not Adorno himself critical about the blending of political protest with popular music, which was common during the Vietnam years? However, Marino suggests that we should engage “dialectically” with Adorno’s ideas, following instances already present in his work, like the “need to be ‘dialectical, all to dialectical’ in developing a theory of art that also includes new artistic forms connected to the transformations underwent by the artwork in the age of its industrial producibility and technological reproducibility” (33-4). An unorthodox Adornian reading of contemporary pop-rock music would thus try to highlight how even commodities like song-hits may embody, or at least help developing, non-standardized forms of culture and consciousness, somehow “transcending” their reified character imposed by the administered world (53). Marino’s essay, especially when it levels a revealing critique at Adorno’s “quasi-teleological” conception of the history of music leaving little room for musical innovation after Schönberg’s breakthrough, exemplifies in the best possible way the overall intent of the book, which ultimately seeks to *think with Adorno and beyond Adorno*.

Alessandro Alfieri’s erudite essay follows the same trail, proposing a re-assessment of American minimalism, which, due to its insistence on rhythm and pattern repetition in spite of melodic development, is the exact opposite of Schönberg’s “dialectical music”. Focusing on American minimalism and its distant relative, that is, rave music, is a way of recasting under a new light Adorno’s opposition between Stravinsky’s static and repetitive music, which would amount to a “denial of subjectivity” and “an expression of social reification”, and Schönberg’s, Berg’s and Webern’s atonal expressionism and dodecaphony. Whereas the latter exploited repetition to suggest the eternal return of possibility, for Adorno Stravinsky’s music would entail a passive acceptance of the eternal recurrence of the same. Rave music, as well as American minimalism, could then be deemed incapable of expressing the critical-dialectical content of the world and the society, if not a thoroughly standardized experience. But in American minimalism, e.g. in composers like Robert Fink, repetition had a critical function, inasmuch as it was meant as a critique of late capitalism, where “the excess of repetition that characterizes the consumer society is a repetition that sacrifices meaning” (72). Minimalist repetition, on the contrary, aims precisely at converting the role of seriality, from a blind economical drive to a positive creation of desire and feeling through rhythm, by focusing on a “non-teleological jouissance”. There is a line, thus, connecting Stravinsky and minimalism, on the one side, and rave music, on the other side, where repetition, pace Adorno, is emancipated from the transcendence of the truth content and sticks to the pure enjoyment within a “tribalistic” and anonymous frame of a collective “We”. However, for Alfieri, Adorno’s philosophical-sociological approach to modern music allows us to see how the chains of this line are not on the same level. In rave music, in fact, seriality and repetition become a pure instrument of impersonal enjoyment, deprived of any critical content whatsoever, which is a tendency unwittingly started by the second minimalist generation, which made minimalism a mainstream scenario fully compatible with other genres, like pop or commercial music, fully embedded within the cultural market.

Giacomo Fronzi’s essay ideally builds on the previous articles to present us an Adorno defender of pop music *malgré lui*. The idea is that Adorno, “criticizing this sector of music production, anticipated forms of popular music with a connotation that he himself would have considered positive” (81-2). Taking as a point of departure Adorno’s distinction between a “sociology of the musical object” (where specific musical contents

or oeuvres are analyzed immanently) and a “sociology of the musical function” (which addresses the significance of musical production within the broader context of economy and culture), Fronzi claims that this difference is not due to opposite methodological presuppositions and perspectives, but rather by a differentiation in the object itself. In fact, the sociology of the object is the appropriate method of analysis for those properly artistic objects which are separated from existence, i.e. aesthetically autonomous, whereas the sociology of the function demystifies those works whose truth content is stifled by their being entirely embedded within the capitalistic machinery. Fronzi makes clear that the point is not to distinguish between high and low culture, or between classical serious and popular/standardized music, but rather between commodified music and self-reflexive music “which critically opposes its fate as commodity” (91). Therefore, even from an Adornian perspective, there is room for a “non-serious” music endowed with a critical content or scope. Of course, Adorno’s disregard for popular music qua realm of the absolute standardization is well-known; still, Fronzi believes in the possibility of applying to pop music many insights and virtues Adorno saw in serious music. Again, the point is not to condemn overall certain categories, but to acknowledge a critical potential where it appears, no matter if it shines through pop or rock songs. Many songwriters and composers/performers of the 1960s (e.g. Frank Zappa), as Fronzi argues, were perfectly aware of the nature of their “musical material”, as Adorno would have put it, a succeed at producing self-reflexive music fostering critical awareness within society.

Colin J. Campbell’s text on the post-punk/hardcore band Fugazi, which “implicates” what critical theory stated explicitly, is a vertiginous attempt at distilling the redemptive kernel of rock music without succumbing to a mere hermeneutical-semantic analysis of its lyrical content. One may wonder: isn’t it too bold to endow Ian MacKaye’s and Guy Picciotto’s band with the “unapologetically messianic” power of Benjamin’s notion of “profane illumination” and the “profane redemption” promised by critical theory in general? Although certain aspects of his essay make it perhaps less convincing than other contributions included in the book, due to its speculative character and sometimes loose, non-systematic references to Adorno, Campbell’s aim is rather clear and surely interesting: Fugazi’s critical poetics was a reaction against the political failure of an institutionalized rock music, against music as a cultural “furniture.” However, the point for Campbell is not to petrify Fugazi in the explicit content conveyed by their songs. In fact, as he claims, their political statements “are nothing without their context” (114). On the contrary, Fugazi’s music is a “call to experience,” to experience a redemption that passes “through the splinter-in-the-eye of profane suffering” and the acknowledgement of “this universal guilt that deludes us” (115). In a way, as MacKaye makes clear in his speech that Campbell extensively makes reference to, music – even punk music, even Fugazi – is always confronted with the risk of being “bottled,” reduced to a set of postures, rhetoric and motifs. Thus, for Campbell, Fugazi’s true message lied in keeping alive the hope for a profane redemption in a world where everything seems to the prevent it; their problem, ultimately, was “how to construct a ‘new idea’ when, by definition, there is never an audience for a *new* idea” (119). Fugazi’s music and MacKaye’s address reveal a critical attitude that consists in bringing to light and experiencing the constitutive tension that regulates the relationship between musical creation/live performance and its outer crystallization into stylistic codes, narratives and messages.

Marco Maurizi’s final piece on Adorno’s critique of the music industry represents the most coherent closing this book could hope for, acting as a philological counterpoint to

the previous more experimental sections. The fundamental claim of the essay sums up perfectly the overall attitude of this collection: Adorno's was not a naïve elitism, establishing sharp and insurmountable differences between highbrow and middlebrow forms of art; quite the contrary, the only distinction that mattered to him was that between standardized and non-standardized music. Therefore, he valued that kind of musical forms of expression and experience that broke free from, or were irreducible to, the "malign circularity between supply and demand, between production and need" (124). Simply put, he did not see in popular music the capacity of triggering new modalities of socialization beyond the capitalist frame of mass consumption and alienated labor. And this is why, as Maurizi argues, he never articulated a "philosophy of mass music," but only sociological assessments of it (127). However, Maurizi contends what the previous essays have tried to show, namely that on the eve of Adorno's death something happened that questioned his own assumptions concerning the overwhelming grip of cultural industry: in their "barbarism", The Doors, The Beatles and Pink Floyd, just to name Maurizi's favourite examples, turned the song form upside-down, "looking for the new, the fresh, the unheard, driven by precisely the kind of need that Adorno thought was impossible in contemporary society" (134). This is not to say that the further development of rock music simply contradicted Adorno's statements. Far from it, for Maurizi it "contradicted *and* confirmed" his analysis, for contemporary popular music is precisely traversed by the historical dialectical dynamic that pertains to every form of culture: it allows for critical messages and experiences to be produced, but at the same time tends, as if by nature, to normalize them into the circle of mass consumption. Of course, one may claim, as Maurizi does apropos of the somehow unique case of Frank Zappa, that "The fact that the cultural industry can host its own radical self-denial is not due to its democratic transformation, but to the fact that it now completely dominates the horizon" (145). Sure. But Zappa also proves that one can celebrate "the definitive neutralization of avant-garde music, while, at the same time, allowing its most powerful and corrosive instincts to have a second life" (*ibid.*).

This resumes the entire perspective opened up by this short but remarkably insightful collection of essays: popular music of the last fifty or sixty years is probably something more nuanced and surprising than what the late Adorno could believe. Nonetheless, if we are able to understand its truth content and its underlying socio-philosophical undertones, we owe it to Adorno himself and his critical approach to all cultural phenomena.

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PHILOSOPHY AND POETRY: CONTINENTAL PERSPECTIVES. By Ranjan Ghosh (Ed.). New York: Columbia University Press, 2019. 336 p.

This remarkable anthology commences with a philosophical survey of the so-called conflict between poetry and philosophy; Ghosh identifies this rift from the times of Xenophanes, painstaking charting its proceedings primarily through Plato and Aristotle