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Audiences and everyday aesthetics

Talking about good and bad music

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ABSTRACT The first part of this article outlines a dilemma in cultural studies and sociology of culture regarding the politics of aesthetics. This concerns whether discourse about the evaluation of symbolic forms serves to reinforce power relations and maintain divisions between people and communities, or whether evaluation can serve as a basis for greater commonality. One way of at least beginning to address this issue is to attend to the ‘everyday aesthetics’ of media audiences, exemplified here in the ordinary evaluative discourse of music users. The second part of the article reports on interview research about musical tastes and values. It analyses these interviews for evidence of the ways in which evaluative statements might involve making connections with others, or alternatively how they may act as barriers to social connectivity or community. How and to what extent might ordinary musical evaluation be thought of as part of potential aesthetic public spheres?

KEYWORDS *audiences, commonality, emotion, everyday aesthetics, music, public sphere, sociological aesthetics, taste*

Rhys, a 40-year-old unemployed Welsh man, is explaining to an interviewer why he likes the music of Simon & Garfunkel.

Interviewer: Do you have a favourite Simon & Garfunkel song?

Rhys: ‘The Sound of Silence’, imagine the lyrics to that. ‘I go into the bathroom, and again my friend, the sound of silence’. And he, Simon, goes on about his personal life. About him.

Interviewer: What appeals to you about that then?

Rhys: Well, he’s so talented isn’t he? His ability to say stuff.

Interviewer: Yes, I understand that you admire that about him, but what *appeals* to you about him?

Rhys: His openness within, talking about his own life. It’s voyeurism isn’t it? ... He’s like *Big Brother* in a musical way, because when he wrote that song, ‘Boxer’, ‘The Boxer’, ‘went into 7th Avenue and played with a couple of whores’ etcetera. Things like that. Perhaps that’s not the way he said it but



he's, but the way he says it. What he's doing is what a lot of working-class boys have done. Including me, I'm afraid. But he says it in a beautiful and a *dignified* way. He's got the ability with the lyrics. And his musical sense is terrific. But now he's on his own, without Garfunkel, he's well, he's a philosopher of music, Paul Simon, in my eyes. He experiments with stuff now.

Explaining our media pleasures and displeasures can be hard. Perhaps music is even more difficult to talk about than other symbolic forms because of its abstractness, its lack of denotative meaning. Faced with questions about why they like certain songs or certain performers, many interviewees tend to talk, as Rhys does here, not about music itself but about lyrics (and as is the case for many of us, his memory is hazy), or about the life and career of a performer. Others talk about a live performance or a television programme that they have seen about music or musicians; it seems easier to capture visual or physical impressiveness than sonic pleasure. To try to get at the sense of emotional intimacy in Simon & Garfunkel, Rhys even refers to *Big Brother*, a hotly-debated TV phenomenon at the time that the interviews were carried out. But none of this is to say that music is a bad subject for researching the everyday evaluation of media texts. Asking about the *meanings* of particular pieces of music is unlikely to prove fruitful, but listening to the way in which people struggle over the articulation of their *pleasures* (and there is plenty of evidence that working-class people such as Rhys find such articulation more difficult than the educated) can be highly productive. There is no bathroom in 'The Sound of Silence' and Rhys may be remembering a scene in the film *The Graduate* (Mike Nichols, 1967), which features the song. However, bathrooms are places where we look into mirrors and it may be that Rhys appreciates Paul Simon because he allows him some space for self-reflection. Rhys might be confusing Paul Simon with the narrator of his song, and he might not be able to say why Simon's musical sense is 'terrific', but he can identify openness and dignity as qualities he finds appealing in 'The Boxer' – features that might be particularly highly prized in Rhys's circumstances, unemployed for three years and personally insecure ('I haven't got much of an ego. I don't feel very confident in myself and never have. The end result is that I haven't got very great self-esteem'). And Rhys's life and his musical tastes are more varied than the 'unemployed' tag might suggest. Other music allowed Rhys to connect with his partner (via Bob Dylan), to affirm his strong sense of Welsh identity (through listening to Welsh choral music) and, even after years of unemployment, to mark the onset of the weekend (by hearing 1950s rock and roll). For all its slipperiness, music makes clear that people's pleasures, tastes and values are connected to their emotional lives (which is not to say that other media do not also involve intense emotions). And, significantly for what I would like to write about in this article, although music can be deeply personal, it is also tied in important ways to our relationships with others, and to the various forms of collective identity which help to make us who we are.



This article explores the way that people talk about why they like and dislike music, and what such talk might tell us about the politics of aesthetics. It is remarkable how little we know about why and how people value the texts that they like and dislike, whether musical or otherwise. Seminal work on ‘ordinary’ aesthetic evaluation was carried out by feminists concerned to rescue texts highly valued by women from élitist denigration (most notably perhaps Ang, 1985; Radway, 1987). Later work on fans built upon this tradition, focusing on those supposedly ‘pathologized’ sections of media audiences with strong attachments to popular cultural texts (e.g. Jenkins, 1992; Stacey, 1994; the major study of music fans is Cavicchi, 1998). But discussions of ‘ordinary’ or everyday evaluation in these studies are surprisingly fragmented, and derive from different theoretical interests to the ones elaborated here. The present article attempts to build on this earlier work, but places itself within the context of sociological and cultural studies debates about aesthetics and social power. These debates are outlined in the first part of the article. Put briefly, some writers, such as Tony Bennett and John Frow, are deeply suspicious of aesthetics while others, such as Janet Wolff, Nicholas Garnham and Simon Frith, have argued for its importance. To a certain extent, these debates concern whether sociologists and cultural studies researchers should make their own interventions into aesthetic evaluation. However, they are also about a much broader sense of the politics of aesthetics. Do discussions about the evaluation of symbolic forms serve to enforce power relations and maintain divisions between interpretative communities? Or can evaluation and the search for pleasure in beauty (and other facets of art and entertainment) serve as a kind of social learning experience, and one oriented to commonality, or at least to connections across social difference?¹

In invoking this notion of commonality, we are in territory which has been powerfully mapped by Nick Couldry in a recent essay. Without some notion of commonality, says Couldry, ‘any refounding of democratic politics seems impossible, even unimaginable’ (2006: 64). Couldry wisely offers only cautious steps towards building a notion of commonality sensitive to difference. As he puts it, ‘what is urgent now is not defending the full range of cultural production and consumption from elitist judgement (an old story), but defending the possibility of *any* shared site ... for an emergent democratic politics’ (2006: 70, emphasis in original). Nicholas Garnham and Simon Frith see aesthetic experience as one such potential shared site, and as I explain below, I think there are important insights in what they have to say. But I also want to probe the limits of this potential, or to put it better perhaps, the gap between potential and actuality. In particular, I want to consider the ways in which people’s reports of their aesthetic experiences and evaluations may also reflect and construct barriers and divisions between self and other, between different social groups.



Critiquing and defending aesthetics: interpretative communities and common cultures

One important cultural studies critic of aesthetics is Tony Bennett. Writing from a poststructuralist perspective in his 1990 book *Outside Literature*, Bennett criticizes not only accounts of literature based on the post-Kantian aesthetic tradition, but also attempts to reconstruct that tradition on Marxian foundations. The Marxian reconstruction, Bennett claimed, was achieved only by invoking 'an ideal futurity in which the subject and object of aesthetic judgement were universalised' (1990: 31). The cost of this, according to Bennett, was to undermine the very grounds of the Marxian and sociological critique: that traditional aesthetics were neither historical nor sociological enough. Bennett set himself resolutely against any lingering remnants of essentialism and universalism in radical thinking about aesthetics. His chief adversary was not so much the reinforcement of class relations, which would be the primary target for certain forms of radical sociology; rather it was universality of taste, whether in its conservative Kantian guise as a natural property of the human subject,² or in its radical version, where universalization of certain tastes would be deferred to a point where social and historical conditions would have changed so as to allow a progressive universality. Whether in its radical or conservative versions, these approaches were focused primarily on an attempt to reform subjects, and therefore distracted from the more realizable and urgent political goal of intervening in cultural policy based around the creation and distribution of objects. Aesthetics, Bennett argued, should be subsumed into a cultural politics, and such a cultural politics should urgently abandon any pretensions or aspirations to universality.

In a similar poststructuralist vein, John Frow (1995) sought to show that no general economy of value could be made to underpin claims about aesthetic judgement – or indeed claims about truth. Societies consist of a vastly complex network of differentiations irreducible to a single scale: the views of different national regions, of men and women, of different age groups, of different sexual subcultures and so on. This does not mean, however, that judgements are relative, and are simply derived from social position and identity, as a sociological approach to evaluation often implies (Frow accused Bourdieu of such a reduction). For Frow, such a perspective could be as politically disabling as universalism. In a conscious echo of Foucault's concept of regimes of truth, Frow borrowed the term 'regimes of value' from Arjun Appadurai in order to seek a 'non-determinist' but institutionally-informed understanding of what some sociologists would call taste cultures. Frow's idea was that people make judgements from within regimes of value but importantly these are relatively autonomous of social identities and positions. On the face of it, this is an attractive idea, even if Frow provided very few examples of what these regimes might



look like in contemporary societies, what degree of permanence they might have, and how they might be constructed. But this was tied to another argument which is particularly significant in the context of this article. For Frow the possibilities for dialogue between these different regimes of value were extremely limited. Discussion between different groups could take place in a seemingly very circumscribed 'space of overlap between regimes'. These problems of cross-social communication did not stem, in Frow's view, from the way that inequalities of access to the means of judgement led to evaluation as a game of social superiority. In fact, Frow attacked this Bourdieuvian position, claiming that a hierarchy of high and low culture was no longer an adequate way to understand culture. Instead, the fundamental problems were the incommensurability of values and the related separateness of the language games of different social groups. For Frow, surveying the discourse of cultural studies academics, cultural intellectuals were caught in a double-bind when it came to matters of aesthetic evaluation. All they could do was either espouse the norms of high culture or take the equally dangerous route of speaking for others via the advocacy of popular cultural norms – and for Frow much of cultural studies had taken this second path. This is an argument from the heyday of postmodernist cultural theory, resolutely opposed to universalism and essentialism. The ultimate sin was to 'speak for others' and the main political goal for intellectuals was frankness about the position from which they spoke. Also noteworthy in the present context is Frow's bleak poststructuralist scepticism about the possibilities of social interaction across difference.

There has been disquiet in the sociology of culture and cultural studies about the separation of cultural analysis from questions of aesthetic evaluation advocated by the likes of Bennett and Frow, and implied in the neglect of aesthetics in these fields more generally (see Born, 1993; Brunson, 1990). Perhaps the most important contribution to thinking about the relationship between aesthetics and sociologically-informed cultural analysis came from Janet Wolff (1983), in a book that predated Bennett and Frow's contributions, and did not anticipate the particular poststructuralist critiques that they developed, but which is nevertheless germane to many of the issues that they raised. Wolff argued that the sociology of art had 'exceeded its own brief' (1983: 11) and had failed to account for the aesthetic. She aimed to show that aesthetic value should not be – and could not be – reduced to social, political or ideological coordinates, that aesthetic experience was relatively autonomous and that art had its own specificity. What was needed therefore, claimed Wolff, was a sociological aesthetics. The sociology of art involves critical judgements, but for Wolff, the solution to this problem was not to try even harder for a value-free sociology, rather to negotiate directly with questions of aesthetic value (Wolff, 1983). Wolff's programme for a sociological aesthetics had three main elements: first, taking values bestowed by



critics and audiences as a topic for analysis; second, bringing into the open contemporary aesthetic categories and judgements which locate and inform the researcher's project; and third, recognizing the autonomy of aesthetic pleasure. This last element would ultimately need to be grounded in a sociological account of the nature of the aesthetic and of the specificity of art. However, by her own admission, Wolff failed to offer such an account; rather, she was only able to indicate, towards the end of her impressive but curtailed discussion, problems with potential routes towards such a theory, in discourse approaches and the philosophical anthropology of art.

Nearly 20 years later, Nicholas Garnham (2000) followed Wolff in arguing against the reduction of the aesthetic to the social and of aesthetic judgements to ideology. To do so, he returned to the Kantian argument for the autonomy of the aesthetic. According to this view, art has the capacity to bridge the sensual and the rational, and to allow an escape from necessity, facilitating the creation of alternative worlds where the potential for the combination of happiness and virtue can be projected. From this position, explained Garnham (drawing on Bowie, 1990), two different theories of the value of the autonomy of art are derived. The first is that of the German romantics, concerning art's resistance to rationality and its potential expression of uncontrolled creative plurality. This led ultimately to Nietzschean notions of an aesthetic orientation to life as a whole, with its important influence on poststructuralism, especially in the later work of Foucault and a generation of neo-Foucauldians. The second tradition emerging from Kant, much preferred by Garnham, is the Hegelian theory of praxis, where symbolic forms are seen as an objectification and projection of interaction between subjects, on the one hand, and other humans and nature, on the other. Here, art could be seen as a realm 'within which the possibilities of social emancipation could be experienced and thus held open, if only as a utopian possibility' (Garnham, 2000: 156).

Garnham, then, is much bolder than Wolff in committing himself to a positive conception of art rather than merely outlining, as she does, potential pitfalls in a number of possible routes towards such a conception. Garnham's view is grounded in a critical Enlightenment goal of emancipation dependent upon ideas of a common humanity and the hope of a common culture which are radically at odds with the poststructuralist anti-essentialism of Frow and Bennett. For Garnham, the double-bind outlined by Frow, whereby intellectuals cannot become involved in evaluation because of the dangers of either speaking for others or affirming power-laden traditional aesthetics, is a 'totally false and politically damaging dilemma' (2000: 161). It is politically damaging because it dispenses with any hope of emancipation (a hope perhaps rendered unfeasible in Bennett's pragmatic disdain for aspirations towards an 'ideal futurity'), unifying humans in the struggle against nature. Instead, for Garnham, in such poststructuralist positions we



are left with either the relativism of individual taste (close to the notions of consumer preference in neo-classical thought) or – and at this point Garnham turns the tables on poststructuralism’s claims to provide a more realistic assessment of political possibility – ‘a dogmatic social constructivism which ... makes human nature and human life excessively malleable and rules out a priori any explanation of cultural practices in terms of ... the relatively unchanging characteristics of the human condition’ (2000: 158). Garnham follows Wolff down a theoretical pathway laid out by Sebastian Timpanaro and Raymond Williams, where the pleasures of art are understood as rooted in certain psychobiological constants; not permanent, metahistorical categories but relatively stable ones, certainly more stable than sociocultural configurations. Here, a sociological aesthetics is linked both to a psychology of aesthetic experience and to very widely shared bodily experiences.

Crucially, for Garnham, the problem of aesthetics, of the evaluation of symbolic forms, is ‘part of the wider problem of creating viable communities for autonomous agents under the conditions of modernity’ (Garnham, 2000: 162). Modernity weakens the doxa of tradition, but also entrenches class division and widens the gap between cultural producers and consumers. This combination of factors creates a crisis of value. None of the writers discussed so far would dispute that interpretative communities are created in these conditions. However, Bennett, Frow, Wolff and Garnham would provide different answers to the question: ‘Can there be meaningful communication between these interpretative communities?’ Frow’s answer, as we saw, was that this was only possible in extremely circumscribed spaces of overlap between regimes of value; so circumscribed that Frow hardly addresses them. Garnham’s answer is yes, or perhaps more accurately, that we should (and indeed must) aspire towards such communication. For Garnham, evaluation needs to take place within a public sphere governed by Habermasian discourse ethics, where conflict is contained (although never eliminated).³ Standards of taste can be arrived at communally via such mechanisms, and evaluation can act as a social learning experience. The search for the beautiful and the experience of ‘serious play’ can be the basis of a common culture (an ideal that goes back to Schiller). To recap an important point, this commonality is also rooted in a shared corporeality.

Another perspective on aesthetic discourse, ultimately not far removed from Garnham’s, is provided by Simon Frith’s *Performing Rites* (1996). Here we move more specifically into the realm of music, but also closer to what Janet Wolff sought when she called for a sociological aesthetics. Against philosophical aesthetics, Frith aims to show that aesthetics can be understood only by examining the language and sociohistorical contexts of evaluation. Complicating the usual high/low distinctions, Frith outlines three mutually defining discourses (art, folk and commerce) which are all,



in different ways, a response to the industrialization and commodification of music, and which people draw upon when making evaluations of music. Frith shows that genre is particularly important in determining the particular mix of aesthetic and ethical categories that people mobilize. But against an excessive sociological critique, Frith defends aesthetic discourse, and ultimately the aesthetic experience of music. The book is a sociologically-informed exploration of why the aesthetics of music – whether ‘popular’ or ‘serious’ – matter. This is grounded in a social phenomenology of music, achieved via chapter-length consideration of themes such as meaning, pleasure, the body, time and identity. The focus of Frith’s book is explicitly not on the questions of meaning and interpretation which have concerned many researchers in media and cultural studies, but on aesthetic experience. Music is intensely personal and subjective. For Frith, the aesthetic experience of music ‘gives us a way of being in the world, a way of making sense of it’ (1996: 272) and ‘music is especially important for our sense of ourselves because of its unique emotional intensity – we absorb songs into our own lives and rhythm into our own bodies’. But at the very same time, music is intensely social: ‘music response is, by its nature, a process of musical identification; aesthetic response is, by its nature, an ethical agreement’ (1996: 272). Other cultural forms allow for such emotional alliances, but music provides us with a particularly intense ‘subjective sense of being social’. It ‘both articulates and offers the immediate *experience* of collective identity’ (1996: 273; emphasis in original). This, says Frith, is the key to understanding the politics of music. Its effects on our understanding of our identities may have conservative as well as liberating effects, but music ‘can also suggest that our social circumstances are not immutable (and that other people – performers, fans – share our dissatisfaction)’ (1996: 276).

Frith, then, provides a much more elaborated and sociological account than Garnham, but one ultimately consistent with Garnham’s more philosophically-grounded argument of the ways in which aesthetic experience can act as the basis of affiliation and communication between different groups – and, to some extent at least, as a prototype for greater future social connectedness. For writers such as Bourdieu, Bennett and Frow, the aesthetic realm is fraught with dangers of power games: strategies of social distinction, universalism and speaking for others. While aware of such pitfalls, Garnham and Frith suggest a much more positive vision of aesthetic experience. Importantly, this includes *aesthetic discourse itself*; not just aesthetic experience and imaginary identifications, but talking (and, for a few, writing) about why we like what we like. Garnham goes further, seeing evaluation as ‘a social learning experience’ where common values might potentially be developed (Garnham, 2000: 164). Both Garnham and Frith are, in effect, defenders of the political and ethical potential of aesthetics.



Everyday aesthetics: interviews

How to adjudicate in this clash of views over aesthetics? One way to begin to do so is at least to listen to people as they engage in aesthetic discourse. Or to put it another way: if such conversation is as culturally, ethically and politically important as Frith and Garnham suggest, what does it sound like? When people discuss the music that they like and dislike, is there evidence of a potential for the commonality identified by Couldry as a key issue in modern politics? Or are we more likely to hear signs of the social power struggles which understandably concern Bennett, Frow and Bourdieu? In what ways might people's talk about good and bad music represent other, less positive dimensions of everyday experience than the emancipatory dimensions outlined by Frith and Garnham? Or another possibility: is music just a means of making personal connections – between friends, lovers, family – rather than anything political, or even *proto-political*?

But if, in order to address these questions, we want to concentrate on what people say about what television programmes, films and texts they value and why, then we are returned to the problem identified at the beginning of this article: there is very little material on the everyday evaluation of culture in sociology and cultural studies, and still less on music. For example, Frith's sociological approach to the aesthetics of music draws on an impressively wide range of academic and journalistic sources, but hardly any of them concern ordinary discourse about music by non-professionals.⁴

It was partly to fill this lack that I and a number of co-researchers carried out semi-structured, fairly intensive interviews with individuals in 2002 and 2003. Four objectives informed our recruitment of interviewees. First, we aimed to cover a full range of ages from late teens to people in their seventies, to counter an excessive focus on young people in studies of popular music (see also Hesmondhalgh, 2005). Second, we aimed at a balance between men and women. Third, we aimed to recruit at least five of the 40 participants from ethnic minorities (9% of the UK population are from ethnic minorities, according to the 2001 Census data) in order to over-represent the non-white population slightly. Fourth, we aimed to cover as wide a range of social classes as possible. But why individual interviews rather than focus groups? Partly because of a strong sense that people's musical tastes and values cannot be understood separately from their *emotional* investments in that music (see Hesmondhalgh, 2007, for an extended discussion of this issue) and one-to-one interviews seemed to be the most likely way of beginning to understand these emotional investments. It is widely recognized in the methods literature that, if handled properly, intensive one-to-one inter-views are the most likely way to gain in-depth information about the 'feelings, experiences and perceptions' of research subjects



(Schutt, 2001: 265). Focus groups and participant observation would have been valuable complements to this method, but this was not possible given the funding available for this exploratory research.

The interviewers were asked to follow a schedule of questions. Interviewees were asked in advance of the interview to set aside recordings of special significance to them and to play these recordings during the interviews. In addition, questions were asked about whether music had got better or worse over time, and about the kinds of music that the participants did not like.

These emotional dimensions, central to people's relationships to music (and surely to the media more generally) in modern societies, raise difficult methodological and theoretical questions when it comes to empirical work. Among them is the issue of how we can understand and represent the 'inner lives' of others when most of us, on reflection, recognize the difficulties of representing our own inner lives in language. While there is no space here to resolve these questions fully, some further thoughts will help to lay the basis for the discussion of interview material in the rest of the article. A key methodological debate in interview studies hinges on whether to treat interview talk as a resource, or as a topic (see Wetherell et al., 2001). Do interviews provide knowledge about people and their practices and values, or are the only valid claims which can be made about interviews those concerning how people talk, such as what 'interpretative repertoires' individuals draw upon? Psychoanalytical approaches would favour the former view, although of course with huge qualifications about what can be known, especially from brief interviews. Discourse analysis would favour the latter. Writers who have portrayed the fieldwork interview as potentially akin to that of the therapy interview (for example, Kvale, 1996) may well be underestimating the challenges involved. But equally the discourse analysis approach to interview talk – where interview talk, and not the world 'beyond' that interview, is the topic – seems to demonstrate some of the problems of the constructionism that overwhelmingly dominates the epistemology of cultural studies. It ultimately implies that we can say nothing much about anything beyond language itself. Of course, it is sensible to be circumspect when making claims about the subjective experiences of others based on their talk in an interview, but in much sociological analysis of media consumption, this caution may have been exercised to such a degree that we have interview subjects who are curiously lacking in the kind of complex emotional lives experienced by many human beings.⁵ No serious researcher can deny the importance of reflexivity, but in some forms of constructionist analysis of interview talk, researcher reflexivity threatens to take over the fieldwork process altogether.

So in the discussion of interview material which follows, the focus is on how people talk, and on what their conversational moves say about



the pleasures and difficulties of talking about music. But it also attempts to make reasonable inferences, based on other aspects of the interview, about what kinds of subjective experience might underlie people's conceptions of value. To restate the central issue, it does so in order to investigate the extent to which people's evaluations of culture (here, music) might be a means of making connections across social difference, and conversely, the extent to which evaluative discourse might instead (or also) act as a barrier to social connectivity or community.

Musical talk as a route to commonality?

One of the most frequently recurring ways in which the participants talked about the music that they liked was in terms of its expressiveness: its ability to externalize or reflect emotions. A piece of music that Jackie, a 54-year-old teaching assistant in a primary school in the north of England, set aside to play in her interview was 'Train' by an English singer, Sally Barker. The message of the song is clear from the lyrics:

You're saying you lost your chance, that fate brought you defeat, you look so sad, you've been listening to those who say you've lost your chance. There's another train, there always is, maybe the next one's yours, get up and climb aboard another train.

Jackie told the interviewer why she liked the song, and this involved more than just the lyrics or the message:

This music had a really deep impact on me. When you first hear it I think you think it's a sad song but it isn't. It's a song about hope, that no matter what trials and tribulations we have, you can always climb above it and you always have another chance to get things right, so it's the lyrics that are important. I also like the *a cappella* feel about it and then the music comes in and builds it up ... [Jackie pauses here and listens to a section which says 'We all crawl in the dark sometimes'] I just think it's something that we've all experienced without maybe knowing it, but when you feel ... when you look back over your own experiences, you know that it's absolutely right.

On the tape of the interview, Jackie's tone of voice is noticeably firm in saying: 'This music had a really deep impact on me.' She then shifts away from the song's effects on her to describe a quality in the song itself, the disjuncture between the song's apparent sadness and the message of hope. She qualifies her statement that the lyrics are important by identifying other qualities of the song which appeal to her. Part of this involves the privileging of the voice in the arrangement ('the *a cappella* feel') but also the gradual crescendo effect (a generic feature of so many records that offer themselves as an intensely personal comment on a set of experiences). Then, perhaps struck, as so many of our interviewees were, by the difficulties of talking about how and why music works, Jackie returns to the song and hears the line about 'crawling in the dark sometimes'.



Something here seems to strike her and she shifts back from describing the song's objective qualities to describing its impact on herself. Here she emphasizes two things. One is the way that the song allows her to make sense of an aspect of her emotional life which is buried, or at most only intermittently apparent to her. The line seems to bring to mind something painful, perhaps a memory of a specific incident or phase in Jackie's life – paralleling, but in a very different form, the way that 'The Boxer' allows Rhys to reflect on the challenges of his life. Jackie's reflections on 'Train' suggest that, for at least some of the time, she uses music as a form of emotional self-management. In this respect she echoes many of Tia DeNora's female participants in her groundbreaking study *Music and Everyday Life* (2000). DeNora sees people's emotional lives as more amenable to such management than I do (see Hesmondhalgh, 2007). But there is no doubt that Jackie, like some of DeNora's participants, uses music – at least in this interview situation – to reflect on her capacity to endure and survive.

But how does this very personal, subjective dimension to music fit with the intersubjectivity emphasized by Frith and Garnham in their discussion of aesthetic experience? The answer is that, for some people at least, the very intimacy of what is captured creates a sense of marvel at human understanding and its expression in music. For the second aspect of the value of the song that Jackie emphasizes here is the way that it captures a particular emotion in a way which is 'absolutely right'. This involves the lyrics, but it also involves the *performance*. Earlier in the interview, in response to a question about what music gives her most pleasure, Jackie had said:

Something ... that's going to have an emotional impact. Something where I feel the singer has lived through it and is singing about what he or she knows ... I always get more pleasure out of something that I think that person knows and understands and is delivering.

The feeling that the song is 'absolutely right', that it expresses emotions in a fitting and revealing way, seems to be connected to this view of the value of sincerity in music. Here, of course, we see the presence of the effects of romanticism on everyday aesthetic discourse. Sincerity – sometimes equated with authenticity, but perhaps usefully thought of as just one category of that overused concept – is an aesthetic value which post-romantic cultural analysis of many different kinds has tended to look upon with suspicion. But as expressed here, what Jackie seems to be valuing highly is that someone else has really understood what that mixture of hope and sadness, perhaps even despair ('crawling in the dark') feels like – and it is probably significant that the performance here is by a woman. So Jackie is not just valuing her own resilience, she is also valuing the fact that such feelings are being enacted and codified with skill and sensitivity by another person (and again there are parallels here with the way that Rhys talked about Paul Simon).⁶



Valuing the ability to convey deep emotion through music is not always about very intimate and personal topics though – at least not directly. Here is Olle, a 41-year-old social worker from London, of Nigerian background:

I am not particularly religious but I think that the second piece of music which I bought, classical as it was, was Handel's *Messiah*, and I have played that *ad infinitum* until someone nicked it from the house, and now I have to wait until Easter. But when they sing about the trials and tribulations of Jesus at the time, you can really hear it in their voices, they are really mourning their loss and I just find it beautiful and I can't imagine how somebody could take the time to construct a piece of music like that, I think it all the way through the whole thing.

The emphasis again is on the skilful externalization of what is felt to be on the inside ('you can really hear it in their voices') – expressiveness again seems to be the word for what is valued here.⁷ But this is a very different notion of expressiveness from that valued by Jackie, and a very different genre. Whereas Jackie used the expressiveness and sincerity of the Sally Barker track as a way of reflecting on her life, reminding herself of her own inner resources, and realizing that other people can convey an understanding of such experience, Olle is involved in projecting herself into the situation of people very different from herself. Even though she is not 'particularly religious', she gets pleasure from the way that the singers' sadness at the death of Jesus is made apparent in their performance. There is even perhaps an imaginative projection into what it is to be Handel – 'I can't imagine how somebody could take the time to construct a piece of music like that' – although this could also refer to the singers. Here, then, musical expressiveness is connected to thinking about what other lives might be like, and this is closer to the way in which Frith and Garnham think about the social importance of aesthetic talk.

Occasionally in the interviews the emphasis on expressiveness took an explicitly progressive political form. For example, Maria, a 58-year-old retired teacher from Birmingham, born and raised in Greece (and whose first language is Greek) talked about expressiveness in the following way:

Maria: I mean, people use music to express various things: beauty, oppression, love. So I love, for example, Shostakovich and when I hear his music is when I would feel enraged by, say, injustice in the world or whatever. Instead of talking politics, say, with *you* ... I would just put this on and listen and I could hear the harshness of the regime, the oppression people felt, it is all in his music.

Interviewer: Does it make you angry?

Maria: If he was to express anger, it is very least of that because a human being was able to take all those and give it to you, and so you relieve some of your anger, if you like, because it's becoming acknowledged and you have the



medium to get it through your system. You also identify with that person and you say, 'Yes I know about that,' or 'There is so much experience a human being can have.' So I could feel very enraged about, say, an injustice, but if I hadn't lived myself in that system I could only know [it] from books, and I could have my views, but not the direct experience. But when I play the CD, for example, and listen to that, you just feel: 'I have some kind of direct experience of what it meant to be under that regime.'

Maria seems initially to be saying that political anger can be assuaged through playing Shostakovich. But also apparent here is the view that music is able to express experience in a more direct and immediate way than other forms of expression. The CD gives her direct experience of the Soviet regime in a way that a book cannot. So there is relief of powerful feelings of anger, but there is also acknowledgement of that anger. While such direct statements of empathy with the victims of political oppression are not what advocates of evaluative discourse necessarily mean in arguing for the political potential of aesthetic talk, they represent a case where music is being very directly used to imagine the suffering of others.

Musical taste as a barrier to commonality?

So far I have concentrated on what I think most people would see as very positive aspects of the way that people value the expressiveness of music. In the eyes and ears of music scholars versed in critical and post-structuralist theory, there might be signs of naive romanticism in some of the views expressed by interviewees, but the segments of interview talk I have analysed might be seen as supporting a picture of music as an important resource not only for shoring up the self against anxiety and isolation, but also as a potential means of social solidarity. However, this raises a problem. If highly valuing the ability of musicians to express emotion through music is a sign of potential commonality, a route towards social connection across difference, then this could be taken to imply that disliking music represents a barrier to social connection. This is emphatically not the position here. It is not positive evaluation in itself that represents (or may represent) social connection. It is the particular way in which that positive evaluation is expressed. We should avoid a simple polarization whereby enthusiasm for music (or other forms of culture) is interpreted as an impulse towards embracing the other, and a lack of enthusiasm as representing the erection of social barriers. One reason for thinking that this is too polarized a way of thinking about evaluation is that individuals, even when making positive judgements, are prone to perceive qualities in a performer, audience or social group associated with a particular piece of music which may simplify or distort the experiences or reality of that audience. This is the problem of projection. Projection is a feature of all our imaginary identifications, and can have healthy and unhealthy dimensions, but here this discussion is interested in some of the rather less



healthy simplifications involved in certain sorts of projection, which can be starkly revealed when people talk about music. For example, Jackie (quoted earlier) explained why she preferred blues and jazz – especially blues – to other kinds of music:

There's an authenticity to them.⁸ It's people singing because they want to sing, not because they want to make money. I think a lot of the old jazz and blues people, they didn't make money from it. They sang because they had to sing, didn't they?

This view of black musicians as driven by a primitive impulse to sing for the sake of singing is a distortion of history. It is a reflection perhaps of the double burden that black musicians have to bear: not only as the victims of racism, but also as the repositories of utopian dreams of various kinds about uncommodified culture. Does this kind of projection undermine Frith and Garnham's view of the potential of aesthetic discourse to create commonalities across cultural divisions? Not necessarily. The issue in the debate discussed in the first half of this article is *potential*, after all. Jackie's deep love of the blues might make her more amenable to discussion about the problems of taking this view of black music than otherwise.

Enthusiasm, then, should not be equated with the overcoming of social barriers. But equally, a lack of enthusiasm for certain kinds of music cannot be automatically equated with social closure. In some cases, someone might seem to be dismissing music considered pleasing or beautiful by others. But sometimes there is more going on in judgements that might be dismissed as 'elitist' than might initially meet the eye or ear. Ashley, a 19-year-old student, felt that music was in general 'going in the right direction', with the exception of pop acts such as Britney Spears and the *Pop Idol* phenomenon:

I just, I don't really like the way it's designed, in the way that *Big Brother* was designed as well, so that the population will like it. I don't like the way that they can assume the population will buy it and that they do. I think it's sad that everybody is so fickle, really, and I mean ... I think that people who were in *Pop Idol* they were all obviously very talented and I'm not saying that they weren't; but, (1) it's not my type of music; and (2) I just don't like the way it's all so set up. You know, 'This is the road to glory. Here we are, here's your ticket.'

This may seem very dismissive of the 'population', 'the masses'. For some readers versed in cultural studies, Ashley's comments may indicate the most traditional of elitist judgements and, beyond that, a failure of imagination. According to this view, Ashley does not realize that people might gain relatively innocent pleasures from such music. This may be true, but to read Ashley's comment in this way misses the anxiety involved in what he is saying – and importantly in the context of this article, this is an anxiety felt on behalf of others. There is also anger here, and it seems



that this anger is directed not at the 'population', with their fickleness, but at those who 'design' what presumably, in Ashley's view, should be a more spontaneous experience or perhaps a more democratic one. For what Ashley seems to be pointing to is the power held by those who control the production of aesthetic experiences, as they say '*this is the road to glory*', on *our* terms. In terms of the debates that are framing consideration of the material here, there is evidence in Ashley's words of a yearning for better social connection.

However, this is not to claim that any kind of negative comment can be redeemed in this way as a sign of a search for potential solidarity. It seems highly unlikely that any terrain of modern culture can be free of personal and political problems (this is one of the arguments made in Hesmondhalgh, 2007, in opposition to writers who are highly optimistic about the personal and social value of music). Here, Dorne, a 58-year-old aromatherapist and reflexologist from South Wales, answers a question about whether music today is better than five, 10, 20 or 30 years ago:

I am sure this is a terribly biased opinion but no, I don't think music is as good nowadays as it was then. I think it is marketed. I think it is all too commercial, and I think the creativity now is too manufactured. And I go back to The Beatles really, when it came from the heart, and it was ... I don't think it was simpler, but it is done through computers now and they can be very clever with technology ... I don't think the youngsters necessarily need the raw talent that they had, and I think the pop stars are manufactured and produced to order. So I tend to be a bit cynical about it.

Such criticisms of 'commercialism' will be familiar to anyone who has discussed modern music, or indeed modern culture. Questioning such oppositions of creativity and commerce, talent and technology is familiar territory in cultural studies and the sociology of culture (Williams, 1958 is just one example of analysis of this dualism).⁹ This excerpt followed a section of the interview in which Dorne had said that she was tolerant of the music of her children (who were in their late teens at the time of the interview). Yet shortly after that, she talked about her dislike of the kind of music her children enjoyed – in her words, heavy metal (a category some of the participants used to mean loud guitar music). It was noticeable in reading the interview transcript and listening to the tape that Dorne's discomfort with heavy metal (and in fact with any kind of music that expressed strong emotions) reflected a real uncertainty about her children's lives. In this, no doubt, Dorne is not unusual, and she is certainly not 'at fault'. Her difficulty in making a connection to her children through music could well be, at least in part, a product of the way in which children sometimes use music, perhaps more than other media, to differentiate themselves from their parents. However, the main point with respect to the general argument here is that if aesthetic discourse has any political significance or potential in terms of representing or enabling greater



commonality across social difference, then it has to be remembered that aesthetic experience and discourse may also reinforce social divisions – between young and old, in this case, or elsewhere between different ethnic groups, genders or social classes.

Talking about music, thinking about the politics of aesthetics

For some of the analysts discussed in this article, to invest any political hope in the aesthetic is a serious mistake. It would be foolish to ignore the long history of snobbishness, idealism and downright stupidity surrounding the evaluation of symbolic forms. Yet the prevailing cultural studies tendency to be suspicious of aesthetics has excluded too much. At the very least, it is worth investigating what kinds of sentiments of social solidarity might lay within and beneath people's everyday discussions of what they value in music. The second half of the article has done so by scrutinizing material from interviews with a range of people.

The choice of music as a case study was not accidental. One of the reasons that music is such a fascinating form of communication is that it can involve both intensely personal and deeply collective experience – and sometimes these aspects are closely linked. Simon Frith's suggestion in *Performing Rites* is that music provides us with a particularly intense form of subjective sociality, an intensity deriving from the way in which rhythms and songs are absorbed into bodies and lives. (It could be argued – although it is beyond the scope of this article – that this makes music a kind of heightened test case for a much wider range of aesthetic experiences, for all aesthetic experiences involve some version of a relationship between the subjective and the non-subjective.) The interview material that has been briefly examined showed individuals engaging with music because of the very particular ways that it resonated with them as individuals, and yet for reasons that suggested the importance of intersubjectivity and (in some cases) of a notion of commonality. At times, for example, we saw that intense aesthetic experience can involve imagining what it is like for other people (performers or listeners) to feel emotions, even if that emotion is brought about by musically-invoked events that have no particular significance for the person reporting their feelings about music – as when Olle, a non-Christian, listens to a piece of music expressing sadness at the death of Jesus. At times such emotions were linked more directly and consciously to political feelings, such as solidarity with the victims of oppression.

However, the discussion also showed that aesthetic discourse can be riddled with problems and difficulties related to structured inequalities and differences in modern societies, as well as to personal and psychic dynamics. One distinctive aspect of the approach here has been to take seriously the idea that (many, not all) musical experiences are quite personal and subjective, and therefore to address the emotional and affective elements



of people's engagements with culture. This, I hope, is in keeping with the emphasis in the best versions of cultural studies on paying respectful attention to what people or 'audiences' have to say about their lives (an attention which undoubtedly requires methodological vigilance). The anxiety felt about young people's music by older people in certain cases may be an example of this.

This article also discussed projection as a feature of people's aesthetic relationship to music. The point here was that an apparent connection with other social groups might involve fantasies that link up with discourses which serve ultimately to belittle those very same people. This does not undermine the cases made by Frith and Garnham, which are about the implicit political potential in value talk. Rather, it shows that discussion of such potential needs to be informed by analysis of the actuality of how people tend to talk about what they like and dislike. Such analysis needs care – what sounds like élitism about 'commercial' music, for example, may reflect a yearning for better communication between people. Such analysis of aesthetic discourse, undertaken through the rather more hopeful lens provided by writers such as Garnham and Frith, also shows why the notion of the public sphere still has some critical purchase. There are numerous, well-rehearsed problems in Habermas's work (the most helpful collection of discussion is still to be found in Calhoun, 1993). But the great advantage of the public sphere, when used appropriately and with attention to other Habermasian concepts such as discourse ethics, is that it can encourage us to think properly about the institutional conditions that make it possible for people to question simplifications and projections of the kind discussed here. These institutional conditions would take into account education, including education specifically about cultural production; also, they would consider the media themselves, which play such a huge part in determining perceptions of aesthetics, culture and collective identities (it was striking how many of the participants, in seeking to make sense of their likes and dislikes, made reference to television programmes about music and musicians). The idea of an aesthetic public sphere relates not so much to debates that take place in homes, schools, workplaces and bars, where people argue passionately over their musical tastes, as to the degree to which a social space provides those participating in such debates with the resources to undertake discussion in a thoughtful and informed way. This may matter more when people discuss global warming, or HIV treatments, than when they discuss why a particular record is beautiful, obvious or hopelessly pretentious. Also, of course, rationality has a somewhat different role in the aesthetic sphere than it does in these areas, where scientific knowledge is central. But ultimately, if aesthetic experience matters, then so does aesthetic discourse – and not just when it serves to sustain and reinforce power.



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Notes

1. Some people might say that this notion of commonality is not in itself 'political' in any meaningful sense of that term. Following Couldry, Raymond Williams and others, I would disagree.
2. But see Bowie (1990) for an argument that the German tradition of aesthetics involved a much more complex and nuanced notion of the subject than post structuralist and deconstructionist critiques suggest.
3. Some social theorists often accuse Habermas of a naive belief that antagonism can be eliminated from communication and/or society. He may downplay or underestimate antagonism at times, but at least he is addressing how it may be contained.
4. The Music in Daily Life project (Crafts et al., 1993) was a rare example of a study where people talked about what music they liked and why. But the researchers attempted no interpretation of the fascinating material they collated; the book consists almost entirely of excerpts from interview transcriptions.
5. Aesthetic experiences are, as Frith emphasizes, emotional, subjective experiences, perhaps especially when it comes to music. If we really want to hear what people say about the culture that they like and dislike, that means engaging with the emotions of subjects to a greater degree than has been the case with much recent cultural studies and sociology of culture.
6. The interviewer did not ask how often Jackie listens to this piece, but it may well be rarely. Here we encounter a problem with the method of eliciting discussion of value that was used in the interviews. By asking the participants to bring out music which was significant to them, the extraordinary, rather than literally 'everyday' aesthetics, were being privileged. Other aspects of the interview dealt with more mundane aspects of musical practice.
7. 'Inside' and 'outside' can be deconstructed to death, but to abandon the notion of interiority altogether seems to be a heavy price to pay for the probing of metaphors. The concern here is more with the different ways in which this notion can be put into operation, and what it might tell us about people's musical practices and tastes.
8. It is worth noting that this was the only time that any of the 40 interviewees used the word 'authenticity'.
9. The interviewers on the project were asked to challenge such doxa, to give the interviewees the opportunity to reflect on their views. In this case,



the interviewer asked: 'But hasn't music always relied on machines and technology to an extent?' Dorne replied:

I think so. I think perhaps when you are younger you just take it in your stride and as you get older you are just aware of what is going on, you become a little more dismissive and it is ... I'm sure it is an age thing, because it probably wasn't terribly different when I was younger. It's just that it doesn't have the same impact, so I'm not as interested in listening to it anyway now.

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