

*Donald Burke, Colin J. Campbell, Thomas Laughlin,
Jonathan Luftig, Stefano Marino*

Introduction: Romanticism and Popular Music

It is probably trivial to say that twentieth-century popular culture was marked by a “romantic” streak. The “romantic”, after all, is widely associated with the assertion of the individual against the group, ranging his (the presumed subject is more often than not male) powers of imagination, inspiration and intuition against reason and logic, valuing nature and the natural over and against culture – all criteria which have long since degenerated into the clichés of the modern culture industry. In other words, the problem is that, with such broad and shallow parameters, it would be hard to say what part of life has *not* been touched by the romantic or “romanticism” with a small “r”, and how any of it can be distinguished from the general commercialization and industrialization of culture. To make the claim, then, that not merely the “romantic”, but Romanticism in its proper sense – invoking the aesthetic and cultural movement which fomented at the end of the eighteenth century in close cultural proximity with the events of the French Revolution – has relevance to twentieth-century and contemporary popular music would call for more rigorous premises. What we now refer to as the Romantic movement, with a capital “R”, escaped triviality because it was just as much concerned with community and the collective as with the individual. For Romantic artists (and critics) the imagination and intuition were valued precisely because of the way they both served and consummated reason and logical thinking.

The subject of Romantic art, often depicted in sublime images of the ruination of culture, was primarily the *relation between* culture and nature rather than “authentic nature” in itself. Romantic imagery contested the growing ascendancy and hegemony of commercial interests and industrial capitalism over both human and non-human natures, helping to give shape to a budding anti-capitalist and ecological counter-culture and politics (which was sometimes extended to the arena of sexual politics as well, in Mary Wollstonecraft’s call, for example, for a complete “revolution in female manners”). At the beginning of the twentieth century, the surrealists eagerly embraced this revolutionary side of Romanticism. In

the first Manifesto of Surrealism, André Breton cited “romantic ruins” as a good reason to “smile” at the “incurable human restlessness” that would also buoy the Surrealist movement and revolution. Surrealism, in turn, exerted a pronounced influence on Francophone-Caribbean artists and anti-imperialist politics, most notably in life and work of Aimé Césaire and the concept of Négritude. Romantic anti-capitalism, however, has had proponents on both the left and right, was not in any way pre-determined from the start with a liberal or radical orientation, and has sometimes even been a vehicle for fascist and racist ideologies. Of the two most famous theorists of the sublime, the first, Edmund Burke, was an archconservative and antagonist of the French Revolution, whereas the second, Immanuel Kant, was an enthusiast of the Revolution and a champion of the Enlightenment project more generally.

Despite this political “diversity”, Romanticism was oriented around a shared preoccupation with the aesthetic as a crucial dimension of human experience. In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodor W. Adorno specifies that it was during the Romantic period that the dimension of the aesthetic and of art as a distinct, secularized entity was first explicitly formulated. More than a bucolic celebration of “nature”, Romanticism, with the notion of the *cultural landscape*, conceived art as a site of reconciliation and mutual in-formation of the natural and the cultural (Adorno 1997, p. 64). Romantic artworks, above and beyond a murky reflux of “feeling”, are held to convey *meanings* or ideas, albeit not ones objectified in significative language. “This”, Adorno writes, “is the locus of one dimension of romantic experience that has outlasted romantic philosophy and its outlook” (Adorno 1997, p. 71).

It was Romantic art, furthermore, where the “inwardly infinite compartment of art” – the aesthetic expectation of what Adorno cites in French as the *apparition*, the spiritual vision – distinctly appeared and could be formulated as a concept: “Romanticism wanted to equate what appears in the *apparition* with the artistic. In doing so, it grasped something essential about art, yet narrowed it to a particular”: “romanticism imagined that through reflection and thematic content it could grasp art’s ether” (Adorno 1997, pp. 82-83). Following Adorno’s reflections and further developing them, we could say that in Romantic art the idea of artistic genius crystallized in the idea of the *new appearing as the re-discovery of the archaic*. We might add that Romantic works, properly speaking, were marked by a distinct resistance to neoclassical ideas of mimesis as a delimited and contained imitation of the universal in the particular. This is what accounts for Romantic art’s sublime aspect and for the richness of its formal innovations and new forms of mediation. From this perspective, Romanticism appears not as an endorsement of the “more natural” or “authentically individual”, but rather as a field

of contradictions and tensions *between* feeling and reason, formlessness and form, individual and collective, nature and history. It is therefore also possible to associate in variety of ways the concepts of the Romantic and Romanticism, broadly understood, to phenomena of contemporary culture, in general, and contemporary music, in particular.

In this special issue of *Scenari*, the editors are therefore most gratified to be able to offer a diverse variety of reflections on Romantic ideas, or ideas closely related to Romanticism, as they have surfaced in popular music. The subject matter of the essays ranges over a continuous spectrum, from examination of the works of the musicians themselves to thinking of the diverse modes of their reception. Of course, the latter issue – reception – cannot be avoided in considering pop and folk music, and a unifying theme of each essay is the “intertextuality”, the collective-improvisatory-aspect of popular music, which also marks its divergence from a rigorous idea of autonomous art. Perhaps not surprisingly, the price that is sometimes paid – in both aesthetic and human terms – as “compensation” for this lack of autonomy is also a common theme across the papers.

Theodore Gracyk’s marvellous piece, “Romanticism Redux: the Triumph of the Allman Brothers Band” leads the issue, with an in-depth examination of both the musical and lyrical work of the Allman Brothers Band. Gracyk links the Allmans to Romanticism, not through the now-iconic figure of Duane Allman as the-artist-dying-young, but rather in direct musical and aesthetic terms, through the band’s unique adaptation and re-imagining of the Romantic genre of musical *fantasy* by interweaving country, jazz and blues material. Employing a “cluster concept” model, Gracyk attends in particular to the role of the collective, spontaneous practices of improvisation which the Allmans’ treasured, and whose integrity they defended against commercial-industrial pressures. Eschewing a teleological concept of music history, Gracyk questions the critique that Romanticism has degenerated into a mere recycling of the past. Rather, the Allmans’ triumph was to have retrieved, from the group-improvisatory matrix of American folk music, a level of formal complexity and development approaching that of the great serious composers of musical fantasy, including even Bach and Beethoven.

Following Gracyk’s piece we fly across the spectrum, from production to musical reception, *via* Colin Campbell’s “The Magpies, the Prize, and Coleridge’s Imagination in *The Creation Records Story*”. While this piece considers post-punk “indie” rock in the UK, especially the often-dismissed, highly imaginative “Scene that Celebrated Itself” (often now reduced to the genre of “Shoegaze” music), its actual subject is not the music itself but music writing, in the form of David Cavanagh’s epic book, *My Magpie Eyes are Hungry for the Prize: The Creation Records*

Story. Campbell argues that between the covers of what might appear a typical work of commercial scandal-writing can be found a profound reflection on the ideal and the history of “independence”, precisely as a locus of a rebellion on behalf of the *imagination* as it was theorized by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The ever acquisitive-mimetic magpie turns out to be both the object and the quasi-totemic subject of Cavanagh’s book, as well as Campbell’s essay, a figure of the ominous intertwining of nature and culture. As early as Ovid, the magpie was a metaphor for the voice of the people as against the classical imperial elite. In modern Europe, it has evolved to be an ironic projection of its human observer or listener’s possessive-individualist presuppositions. The resonance of the magpie image with punk music in particular is traced through the *in situ* theory of progressive and reactionary aspects of punk subcultures that was developed by Dick Hebdige in his 1979 classic *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. The tragic end of David Cavanagh’s life (he committed suicide in 2018) is interwoven with the story of the tragic collapse of the UK indie rock into Britpop, its eventual co-optation by New Labour and neoliberalism, and today’s dispiriting resurgence of racism and right-wing nationalism.

Next, the spectral pendulum (as it were) swings back to production, with Donald Burke’s examination of the multimodal work of Nick Cave in light of the Romantic concept of the Gothic. Burke’s piece draws Bram Stoker, Andre Breton, Flannery O’Connor and Novalis (among others) into Cave’s force-field, remaining sharply focused on lyrical and poetic figures of the grotesque and the marvellous, and how these reflect Nick Cave’s complicated public persona, particularly given the recent writing published in his blog, *The Red Hand Files*.

Following Burke’s piece, Pippa Casey’s essay brings a special focus to the matter of reception in her radically self-reflective writing, “Understanding the Ghosts of 20th-Century Troubadors: Romanticizing Tragedy as a Means of Grieving a Time Before our Own”. Employing the concept of *Anemoia*, nostalgia for what we have never experienced, Casey examines the curiously simultaneous intimacy and distance of her relation to her trinity of subjects: Jackson C. Frank, Nick Drake and Jeff Buckley. With refreshing frankness, Casey acknowledges how our attention to their work is often primarily drawn by the ‘romanticizing’ cult of the artist-dying-young. However, the genius of each of these artists, she observes, was to have created music that speaks directly and without reservation to that ‘romanticized’ listener, in a way that brings them into unexpected and at times uncomfortably close contact with an artist of an era now-long-past. Casey examines the lyrics, music and biographical aspects of the artists to show how they created music from which we can learn valuable lessons about trauma, through and beyond its romanticization.

After Casey, we return once again to Romantic “content”, but now in a deeply comparative key. In “The Pastoral Elegy Rocks”, Janneke van der Leest examines the romantic appropriation of the elegy-as-form in Percy Shelley’s ode to John Keats in comparison and contrast to Jim Morrison’s ode to Brian Jones in the wake of the latter’s death by drowning in 1969. Both are, additionally, compared with Peter Townshend’s somewhat more “accidental” ode to Jones, written in lieu of an apology after an insensitive public remark about Jones following his death. Van der Leest’s theory, articulated through the modality of the elegy-as-form, demonstrates the curious role of referentiality and intertextuality not only in pop music, but in the great Romantic works as well. Without denying the relative distance of Keats and Shelley from the more “theatrical” life of the culture-industry, van der Leest nevertheless draws out striking connections in terms of both content and form – ranging from Virgil to Shakespeare. The elegy-as-form, in the classical, romantic and post-modern contexts, emerges as a curiously simultaneous respect for and appropriation of past models.

Finally, we are most happy to conclude this special issue with a piece by Alessandro Giorgio (“‘Tu con la testa, Io con il cuore’: the Influence of Romanticism in the Life and Texts of Piero Ciampi”) whose subject, while maybe somewhat familiar to an Italian audience, may yet be new for others, particularly in the English-speaking world. Giorgio sympathetically examines Ciampi’s role as a self-professed “poet”, pouring out his pharmakotic wine in defiance of that toxic blend of petroleum (“*petrolio*”) and ‘detergent’ (“*detersivo*”) which flows from capitalism. If in this case, as in too many others, we are confronted with the sacrifice of the artists, as artists and as humans, to the homogenizing and anti-ecological forces of the capitalist music industry, nevertheless we also find a deeper obligation: to taste this “wine” – so bitter, yet so sweet – they offer us. If these brief, unusual forays into popular and Romantic culture do nothing more than encourage others to hear and read the diverse work of their subjects with new ears, the editors will consider our “Mountain Jam” (per the Allman Brothers) to have been a great success.

Bibliography

Adorno, Th. W.

1997. *Aesthetic Theory*, transl. by R. Hullot-Kentor, Continuum, London-New York.

Cavanagh, D.

2000. *My Magpie Eyes are Hungry for the Prize: The Creation Records Story*, Virgin Publishing, London.

Hebdige, D.

1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Routledge, London.

Kant, I.

2000. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. by P. Guyer and A.W. Wood, Cambridge University Press.