Stefano Marino, Giovanni Mugnaini

Aesthetics and Musical Subcultures Today: A Conversation with Simon Reynolds

(1)

Stefano Marino and Giovanni Mugnaini (SM and GM).

Dear Prof. Simon Reynolds (currently professor of Experimental Pop at the California Institute of the Arts), we would firstly like to thank you for having accepted our invitation to make this interview on the relation between aesthetics and musical subcultures today. We believe that this is a very important topic and we are grateful to have the opportunity to discuss this topic in an interview with an expert author like you, whose works on popular music, both as a critic and as a scholar, certainly are amongst the most famous and most inspiring in this field: for example, your books *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-84*; *Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture*; *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*; and then, of course, your numerous contributions to a wide range of publications, including *Melody Maker*, *Pitchfork*, *The New York Times*, *New Statesman*, *The Guardian*, *Artforum*, *The Wire*, *The Face*.

We would like to start our conversation from a few general questions related to the central topic of this issue of the journal *Scenari*, namely the difficult relation between philosophical reflection and popular music, in order to go then into detail with more particular questions about specific topics. Traditionally, and especially in the context of Anglophone countries, philosophy as a discipline has usually been kept far from the engagement with phenomena of popular music (at a "safe distance" from them, so to speak), while being at the same time tied with classical forms of musical production and appreciation, and traditional genres. As critically noted by the philosopher Richard Shusterman – who, in his book *Pragmatist Aesthetics* (1992[1]; 2000[2]), has rather attempted to develop an aesthetic defense of the popular arts, including funky music and rap –, "popular art has not been popular with aestheticians and theorists of culture […]. When not altogether ignored as beneath contempt, it [has

been] typically vilified as mindless, tasteless trash". On the basis of your experience as a researcher, a professor and a music critic, do your agree with such a critical diagnosis of the problematic relation, especially in the past, between philosophy and popular music? If so, in your opinion, how do you think this has been possible and what could be the underlying reasons of such a difficult relation?

Simon Reynolds (SR).

I am not actually a Professor – I teach in the Experimental Pop program within the Herb Alpert School of Music, which is part of California Institute of the Arts. But I am just a plain old "Mr". I often have to tell the students not to address me as "Professor" – I guess I must appear professorial!

On the subject of philosophy and popular music. Well, I guess my impression is different – I haven't really sensed a disdain for popular music coming from philosophy. But I suppose it depends if we are talking about philosophy in a narrow sense as a scholarly discipline, or whether we are talking about Theory in a more diffuse and expansive sense. There have been plenty of theorists and philosophy-informed scholars who have taken popular music rather seriously, and on a varying range of different axes by which you might measure seriousness (aesthetic, social, political etc). Then there are "amateurs" like myself, who didn't formally study philosophy or indeed theory (I studied history at Oxford but only up to BA level – I never did a postgraduate course or a PhD). But I and others with similar levels of education write about popular music critically, using ideas and theories and approaches that we've borrowed from philosophers and theorists.

One of the first examples of an interface between philosophy and popular music criticism dates back to the late Sixties, when Richard Meltzer – then doing graduate studies in philosophy at Yale – wrote *The Aesthetics of Rock*. There is an aspect to the style of the book that is like a parody of academic language, but there is no doubt that it is informed by his reading of philosophy and it attempts to broach serious questions at the same time as being a provocation and a form of mischief. For Meltzer there was an interest in collapsing the boundaries and hiearchies between high and low culture, but also to collapse the emerging hierarchies within rock culture that differentiated between "serious" rock and allegedly more trivial kinds of pop music.

There are many other examples of the interface between philosophy and popular music criticism:

Canadian theorist Arthur Kroker of CTheory wrote a book about sampling in music, *Spasm: Virtual Reality, Android Music, and Electric*

Flesh – and even made a CD of sample-based music that accompanied the book. His work was informed by thinkers like Baudrillard, Virilio, Lyotard, et al.

The Cybernetic Culture Research Unit, active in the 1990s and attached to the Philosophy Department at the University of Warwick, was founded and run by Sadie Plant and Nick Land (author of the Bataille study *The Thirst for Annihilation*). Among its graduate students were produce figures like Mark Fisher, Steve Goodman (also known as Kode9), and Robin Mackay. Jungle and other forms of electronic dance music were central to their thinking. Mark Fisher, I'm sure, needs no introduction. Goodman later wrote the MIT Press book *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect and the Ecology of Fear* and for many years was a professor at University of East London while also running the innovative record label Hyperdub and deejaying and making records under the name Kode9. Mackay runs the theory / philosophy publisher Urbanomic, which recently published *Dialectic of Pop* by Agnès Gayraud, a serious attempt to deploy Adorno's ideas to understand popular music (despite Adorno's own disdain for jazz and "light music").

Roger Scruton, a conservative philosopher, wrote appreciative things about Metallica and also celebrated the popular dance sounds of his youth (albeit invidiously comparing modern dance music like techno to the rock and roll and body-to-body close dancing of the past).

Simon Critchley, the Hans Jonas Professor of Philosophy at the New School for Social Research, wrote a whole book about the David Bowie from a philosopher's perspective, *On Bowie*.

McKenzie Wark, another New School professor, recently wrote an auto-theory monograph on club culture and queer theory, titled *Raving*.

I could go on – and so far I have only stayed within the Anglophonic sphere. In Europe, you have figures like Diedrich Diederichsen who spent years as a music journalist in Germany, then became Professor for Theory, Practice and Communication of Contemporary Art at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, and has published dense, theory-laden books like *Über Pop-Musik* (2014) and *Aesthetics of Pop Music* (2023). I am sure there are equivalents in every country in Europe – indeed throughout the West.

But going back much further – take Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*. Although its primary reference point is opera, he does speak favorably of folk music, celebrating the way that folk singers mangled language into indecipherability (he disliked the dominance of the libretto in opera). I would not be the first person to assert, whimsically yet with an undertone of seriousness, that *The Birth of Tragedy* is the earliest work of rock criticism, even though it came out in 1872, nearly eighty years before the emergence of rock'n'roll. Nietzsche is philoso-

pher popular with a certain kind of rock'n'roller and a certain kind of rock critic. There are clips of Iggy Pop talking about the Dionysian versus the Appollonian on TV shows from the late '70s. I first encountered Nietzsche's comments about folk music in the UK rock weekly magazine *New Musical Express*, when the writer Barney Hoskyns quoted them in a piece on The Fall.

The *NME* was where I first came across names like Foucault, Derrida, Bataille, Kristeva, Barthes, as deployed by writers like Hoskyns, Ian Penman, Chris Bohn, and Paul Morley. For sure, this would probably be considered by professional scholars as a kind of illegitimate and poorly grounded use of philosophical ideas, but it's where I and many others got our first taste for Continental philosophy, French theory, etc.

(2)

SM and GM.

With regard to the aforementioned lack of interest that philosophy and, more generally, traditional academic disciplines have apparently shown towards popular music, do you think that such a lack of interest was ideologically motivated (i.e., grounded on a sort of "aesthetic ideology" one-sidedly favorable only to the so-called "high fine arts")? Or does it reside, for example, in the incapacity of certain genres belonging to the multi-faceted universe of contemporary popular music to offer a solid, proper and stimulating background for philosophical endeavors?

SR.

I just don't see this disdain and condescension towards popular music and popular culture in the academy. A huge range of disciplines have engaged with aspects of popular culture and youth subcultures – urban studies, sociology, art theory (paralleling the great number of contemporary visual artists who are fascinated by pop culture and reference it in their work), media studies, literature, American studies, performance studies. I could pull off my book shelves dozens and dozens of books about music by scholars that use the perspective of their discipline (often in quite an incongruous way, admittedly). Just one example – Robert Pattison's *The Triumph of Vulgarity: Rock Music in the Mirror of Romanticism*. This was published in 1987 by Oxford University Press, when Pattison was teaching humanities at Long Island University. His previous books included *Tennyson and Tradition* and *On Literacy: The Politics of the Word from Homer to the Age of Rock.* I actually enjoyed this book

although some American critics from the first generation of rock critics were dismissive of it, regarding Pattison as an outsider who didn't really get it and was imposing external criteria on the subject. But the book is certainly intended a celebration of rock music.

Yes, there have always been people from the academy and the world of high culture who have regarded pop music as formulaic, mercenary, and superficial, and who have blamed it for loosening morals, eroding the ability of people to respond to more demanding and challenging forms of art, declining literacy etc. You still get people who regard most popular culture as damaging to the attention span and destroying linear thought, bombarding the consumer with hyperstimulation and encouraging poor impulse control. Often these attacks have come from the Left side of the theory-political spectrum (Adorno obviously). Pop culture is seen as an instrument of capitalist hegemony.

But from quite early on you had serious people, steeped in high culture, fans of Ingmar Bergman and abstract expressionist painting, who said, "there's good things in pop culture". One of the first might have been Susan Sontag, who wrote in the mid-1960s about a "New Sensibility":, in which you could be equally thrilled by a Supremes song or "the music and personalities" of The Beatles as you were by Optical Art or Kinetic Art, the Nouveau Roman or the films of Antonio. Latterday examples of this stance would be the literary and art historian Camille Paglia, who's written about the greatness of Madonna and pop music generally. And even her mentor Harold Bloom, who wrote about the threats to the Western Canon of literature and despised MTV, was a big fan of jazz. That would have been the music of his youth that he remained attached to all his life, and followed its trajectory into ever greater sophistication.

Most people in the academy today have grown up with popular music as part of their lives and they know – viscerally, experientially – what it has to offer, even though it's not as complex or challenging as avant-garde composition. Its powers operate in different ways, completely outside those high culture metrics.

(3)

SM and GM.

Apropos of some aspects already emerged in the previous question, we would like to quote a passage from the Preface to Theodore Gracyk's relevant monograph *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (1996), where this American philosopher argues that, for example, "categories [like] authenticity and originality", especially when (wrongly) treated

"as fixed universals dwelling in some Platonic heaven", "carry a certain amount of ideological baggage, inherited from the high-art tradition", and rock, as one of the most important genres of 20th-century popular music, has been "largely unified by an intellectual framework in which 'high art' categories have been appropriated and deployed in the creation and consumption of popular music. Not that there has been a conscious construction of such a framework", as Gracyk explains, "but it is present in the opinions of the musicians, critics, and fans". What is your view, in general, of the complex and changing relations between so-called "high" arts and "popular" (or "low") forms of artistic expression? Have these relations influenced in some way the development of your unique musicological perspective and your work as researcher, professor and music critic?

SR.

One interesting syndrome is that quite early in the evolution of rock music, there was the installation *within* rock culture and rock critical discourses of this high versus low distinction. (I mentioned this earlier in regard to Richard Meltzer and his book *The Aesthetics of Rock*). So you had "serious" rock, which was indeed bound up with concepts of authenticity and related concepts like originality, innovation, progression. So rather than being manufactured in the typical pop fashion (separation of roles between songwriter, performer, and producer / arranger; heavy-handed management bossing the performer around; stylists and photographers taking charge of the group's image), the serious rock artist was an autonomous creative unit: the band or singer wrote their own songs; they had a more equal partnership relationship with the producer or they simply produced their own records; they took a strong interest in and were directly involved in the artwork and packaging of the records, stage presentation and costuming, and sometimes even the promotion and marketing of the group. And instead of simply parroting showbiz platitudes and courtesies in interviews, they were opinionated, irreverent, humorous, sometimes offensive, and decidedly informal in their manner. The opposite of "showbiz" in other words – not content to simply be an entertainer, acting a role, but believing that it was possible to be their true self in public.

Another connotation of authenticity would pertain to the actual content of the music – lyrically and in terms of sonic form. Songs, when written by the artist themselves, reflected personal experience or passionate personal opinions (political, mystical, etc). From the mid-1960s onwards, there was a great emphasis on truth-telling – honesty and candour, but also speaking out about the issues of the day. Authenticity of form would be related to

the idea that musicians should evolve and grow ever more sophisticated, expanding their horizons of influence, as opposed to becoming trapped in their own formulae, repeating themselves, pandering to their existing audience's expectations etc. So rock artists took on the modernist credo of innovation, originality and constant change: you shouldn't repeat what others had done, but nor should you repeat yourself.

These sort of ideas emerged very rapidly in the mid-to-late Sixties, with records by the Beatles, Bob Dylan, the Rolling Stones, the Doors, Frank Zappa, Cream, etc. From being considered an essentially teenage form of entertainment, with trivial concerns (sex, dancing, cars, etc) it rather quickly came to see itself as an art form and as a conduit for a politicized and emancipatory generational consciousness.

This is where the split came about where people thought of certain kinds of rock (the Beatles concept album tradition, the jazz influenced improvisational mode of acid rock and jam bands, progressive rock, singer-songwriters, folk-rock and blues-rock with the reverence for history and tradition and craft) as more elevated and radical than mere pop music of the kind that a label like Motown put out, or teenybopper-oriented pop music (so-called bubblegum).

However, almost immediately, you had some critics – and certain musicians too – who reacted against this self-seriousness and pomposity of the new art rock. Critics like Lester Bangs and Nik Cohn argued that the essence of rock was teenage and delinquent – rock'n'roll needed to be simple, direct, rooted in basic id-energies of lust and aggression. They also argued that pop was essentially a pulp form: it was like a cartoon or a comic strip – not about depth or profundity, but about superheroics.

The most prominent musician who reacted against the new "art" status of rock was one of the people who had caused it to happen in the first place– John Lennon. Even while still in the Beatles he instigated a back-to-basics, back to blues and 1950s rock'n'roll direction with "Revolution" and "Cold Turkey", then carried it on with his first solo album. The glam movement in many ways was a backlash against prog rock and the spacey, expansive Underground sounds of the late 'Sixties, a return to rock that you could dance to, melodic hooks, short songs, and a stylish, sexy image'. In other words, to a teenage idea of rock'n'roll.

This high / low divide within rock culture has recurred repeatedly – punk initially was aggressive, narrowly focused, and teenage oriented, but then was superseded by the more intellectual and artistic experimental styles of postpunk, which brought back ideas of constant artistic evolution and musical sophistication, eclecticism, etc. Then in the '90s, you had a split in electronic dance music between the hedonistic hardcore rave sounds and so-called Intelligent Dance Music, which was designed more for contemplative listening than dancing.

I find it fascinating that even within the supposedly "lower" domain of popular music, you get the same kind of divisions, the same rhetoric, and the same class stratification, recurring – and mirroring the high / low distinction in culture that originally condemned all pop and rock music to the category of lower and lesser. People *within* the rock formation direct the same kind of condescension and derogation towards the "childish" forms of rock and pop that the parent culture once directed towards the entirety of rock music.

But within the rock discourse itself, a counter-move against these sort of middlebrow notions of "art" and "seriousness" and "maturity" is always an option: as a critic or a fan, you deliberately celebrate the least sophisticated, most vulgar, most juvenile forms of popular music – the lowdown and low-brow, rather than the elevated, uplifting, high brow. This is a move I have done many times myself as a critic – it's simultaneously a game and a serious opinion (I genuinely thought supposedly "barbarian" styles of dance music like jungle or gabber were more exciting, weirder, potentially more musically adventurous than the supposedly "musical", intelligent forms of techno that other critics were celebrating).

The game has a political valence to it: rock gets bourgeois and gentrified, so then you have this re-proletarianization of it. Mark E. Smith of The Fall said he hated it when "the students took over rock", in reference to The Soft Machine (who were associated with the Canterbury Sound – Canterbury being a genteel town in the South of England with the highest per capita proportion of college students in the population of the whole U.K). Distancing the Fall from their arty postpunk contemporaries, Smith liked to describe the Fall as primitivists and talked about being influenced by 1950s rockabilly, performers from the Deep South like Charlie Feathers. Yet at the same – contradicting this anti-art stance – he was a big fan of avant-garde writers like Wyndham Lewis and his own lyrics were fractured and experimental.

(4)

SM and GM.

One of the guiding ideas that have originally led us, together with our colleague Anna Scalfaro, to plan this monographic issue of *Scenari*, is that not only popular music can offer interesting affordances for philosophical reflection; at the same time, we also think that nowadays the veritably globalized pervasiveness of all popular genres (and hereby, in using the term "popular", we broadly refer to the whole spectrum of the different manifestations of "not highbrow music") has formed in a sense the com-

mon backdrop of aesthetic preferences and represents the largest share of the music that is sold, circulates and is listened to in the world. Do you think that the various claims traditionally brought forward by the critics of popular music – such as its (supposed) lack of complexity, its melodic, harmonic or rhythmic simplicity, its relation to "standardized musical materials" (using here the terminology of Theodor W. Adorno), its connection to the decline of old and more "structural" modes of listening, etc. – are on point? Or do they represent, instead, a mere attempt to re-establish long gone aesthetic hierarchies within the field of contemporary music? Moreover, what do you think about the claim that the galaxy of pop is often considered as something monolithic by its harshest critics? Wouldn't it be useful to map and try to consider each genre and subculture for its own specific musical, social and technological features?

SR.

Again, I don't know where these sorts of argument are still being made. Within the field of serious academic study of popular music, it's not just that no one shares Adorno viewpoint – I can remember a period when scholars would bring up Adorno's ideas in an almost ritual manner, specifically *in order* to ridicule them or tear them apart. That was what was so surprising about Agnès Gayraud's book – that she attempted to use Adorno's ideas to create a pro-pop argument. (There is another critic I think of who is an Adorno-ite but writes about rock – Ben Watson, but he is a fan of Frank Zappa and like his hero has a rather disdainful attitude to most popular music).

I think most intellectuals and academics who've grown up with rock and pop and retain love and respect for it, they understand that it makes no sense to talk about it using the kind of criteria or metrics that you would with classical music or modernist composition. Nor does it make sense to use post-bebop jazz criteria either. The harmonic or melodic language of pop music is not as complex as a Boulez symphony or an Anthony Braxton composition. The things that pop, rock, etc have going for it reside in areas like simple melodic beauty; emotional expression; rhythm (in the sense of groove rather than metrical complication); sonic timbre and texture; the spatial organization of sound (using the recording studio as an instrument); unorthodox and quirkily individual modes of vocal delivery or vocal grain (many rock and pop singers have bad technique, according to voice coaches, but they do things that trained singers aren't capable of).

If you were to compare a modern composer's work to pop music from the same era (adventurous rock music – Jimi Hendrix, Can, My Bloody Valentine; expansive R&B and rap- Sly Stone, J. Dilla, D'Angelo; inventive

electronic dance music – Aphex Twin, Drexciya, 4 Hero), the examples from popular music would not be equal on the melodic or harmonic level. But texturally – in terms of all the colors of the sound, their spatialized relationship within the mix, the layering and mingling of sound-textures – it would be much richer than the sound palette offered by an orchestra or ensemble. Rock / pop / electronic dance music explores all the possibilities of effects, processing, amplification, studio overdubbing, stereo panning, etc etc. Things that the non-electronic forms of classical music and most forms of jazz (apart from 1970s jazz fusion) have failed to explore.

A piece of music like Joni Mitchell's *Hissing of Summer Lawns*, or Radiohead's *Kid A* actually is doing interesting things with melody and harmony but where it really surpasses its avant-garde counterparts is in the panoply of tone-colors and the creation of a shimmering soundscape.

The other point to make about pop music is that it's not best understood as a purely musical phenomenon. It's an audio-visual hybrid – or rather, to be precise, it's an audio-visual-*textual* hybrid. The sonics may arguably have priority, but close behind in importance there's the lyrics (yes, there are genres of popular music that are instrumental – certain kinds of prog, a lot of dance music – but the bulk of it involves text, language, meaningful and communicative utterance). There's also image and performance – clothes, promo videos, staging, gesture, dance, record packaging. And there's the aspect of being a pop musician that involves being a public figure: persona, fame itself as an expressive medium. Which the Beatles may have been the first to do, but David Bowie is the paragon and pioneer here (although he was in a sense simply following the example of Warhol).

The hybrid nature of pop is one reason why so many different approaches of pop criticism and music journalism have developed – it's possible to focus on different aspects, use different kinds of metrics and critical criteria and terminology. And it probably explains why so many different academic disciplines find something to grab onto. Probably the best academic book on glam rock is *Performing Glam Rock* by Philip Auslander, who isn't a music scholar or a sociologist, but a professor of theatre and performance studies.

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SM and GM.

The philosopher Alva Noë, in the chapter of his book *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature* (2015) entitled "Air Guitar Styles" and dedicated to "pop music" (which, for Noë, includes "a whole gamut of musical

forms: rock, rhythm and blues, soul, hip-hop, top forty, reggae", and so on), has claimed that "pop music is always tribal. And that's why it is also always generational. Pop music is directly concerned with identification". The popular forms of listening, producing and living the various music subgenres, in connection with their subcultural milieu, represent in a sense different aesthetic niches, each with its particular systems of values, modes of listening, and ways of experiencing and enjoying the music. Do you agree with the aforementioned characterization of pop music (in a broad sense of this concept) as intrinsically "tribal" and "generational" (for example, with reference to glam rock, punk, grunge, etc.)? And, in your opinion, is a philosophical investigation of the aesthetic niches of the different musical subcultures worth the try?

SR.

I think the tribal theory works well with the forms of popular music that are, well, tribal – youth subcultures. And often the most subcultural scenes are relatively unpopular forms of music – like extreme metal, or gabber techno. Part of the appeal is the effect of cultural intimacy in being involved in a small scene. You have a private language, a set of rituals, and it's like being in a secret society, or a religious sect. Which is why some of my own writing on subcultures has certain resemblances to anthropology or ethnomusicology: I was a "participant-observer" in rave or scenes like jungle, joining the tribe while also analysing its rituals and belief-system.

The word "underground" continues to have this appeal, even though the sense of oppositionality encoded in it is usually quite vague – it gestures, rhetorically, against the mass music mainstream, which is felt to be commercial, formulaic, and appealing to conformist people who are undiscerning and lazy. Being involved in a subculture is felt to involve more commitment, perhaps even some degree of discomfort and difficulty – small, dirty clubs with poor facilities; raves in out of the way areas, possibly illegal spaces with no toilets; noisy music through overloaded sound systems. But this element of danger and challenge is positively attractive. That's why a rhetoric of militancy and even militarism often pervades the discourse of subcultures – I can remember junglist deejays and MCs talking about being a "soldier" or describing the music as a "cause".

But there's a lot of fans of popular music who aren't particularly invested in the idea of subculture or tribalism or the notion of an Underground. They don't care if the music is released by a big corporation or a tiny independent label. They listen to a wide range of music and none of it has necessarily played a role in identity formation. Probably other activities, leisure pursuits or cultural identifications have taken that role

– it might be sports, or an outdoor activity, or videogames, or it might be religious or political. Music has more of a background role, it's useful or pleasant or relaxing or energizing, but it isn't the way that these people define themselves existentially or socially.

Often the more intense identifications with music are associated with adolescence (and are considered a mode of engagement and affect that you eventually grow out, or perhaps keep faith with in a limited, irregular and nostalgia-tinged way as you become middle-aged – going to festivals full of bands that have reunited, you might put on your Goth clothes and make-up for that once-a-year occasion).

So that may be why the sense of generation is connected to musical ca-thexis. It's you and people from the same age group. But any generation will contain a huge spectrum of musical identifications and allegiances (and a lot of people for whom music is not the site of a particularly in-tense engagement at all – this might actually be the majority). So any generalisations about generations have to be taken sceptically, I think.

I actually wrote a whole semi-scholarly essay on the notion of the gen-eration (and related concepts like eras, periods, Zeitgeists, etc), wonder-ing if this was just a form of "calendrical mysticism"

https://theravingage.com/documents/reynolds-the-generation-game

(6)

SM and GM.

Shifting now our attention to the famous distinction between "main-stream" and "underground" (or "alternative") music, do you think this division still has a grip with the current situation? Is the underground music scene still alive in our hyperconnected world permeated and domi-nated by the omnipresence of social media?

SR.

People still seem to have a residual attachment to the notion of "un-derground", but it grows more hazy in terms of what that means. As rhetoric, it conjures a sort of topographical conception of music, but I feel like the internet confused that a great deal, since it is a post-spatial domain. Everything on the internet is right next to everything else, liter-ally a click away. It's a realm of absolute proximity.

Whereas in the pre-internet era, undergrounds had a geographical re-ality. Not that they were literally underground, but you would have to go to specialist record stores, or clubs that were usually on the periphery of

a city or in a somewhat seedy and dodgy downtown area – post-industrial spaces, former warehouses and things like that. You would have to listen college radio stations or pirate radio stations, buy certain magazines and fanzines (again not necessarily available in mainstream bookstores or magazine stores), perhaps have to mail-order certain records or fanzines. Undergrounds weren't invisible, but you might have to look further to find them. It was unlikely to be on the television or the mainstream radio. You might have difficulty finding the records.

Nowadays the internet means that almost anywhere in the world, you can access the sound – nearly everything is on Spotify and the other streamers, and if not on Spotify, then it's on Bandcamp. And with YouTube, you can access the sound but also the visuals too – you can look at the ritual behaviour of underground scenes from footage. And finally it's much easier to read about them in blogs and webzines, you don't have to mail order obscure fanzines. Search engines have largely abolished obscurity – so long as you know what to search for, of course.

So there's a strange sort of proximity of the mainstream monoculture and the incredibly obscure marginal. And mainstream magazines will often quickly write about niche cultures anyway.

The other thing that has faded a lot is the sense of undergrounds as oppositional – it's not clear what the difference between underground music and overground music means politically or in terms of a value-system. "Underground", more often than not, nowadays mainly signifies "something that not many people listen to, that not many people know about". It starts to seem more like a form of elitism or obscurity-for-its-own-sake, rather than an active antagonism to the status quo.

That sort of enjoying-being-a-minority aspect had always been an element within underground scenes. And it's not to say that opting out of mainstream culture is not a kind of statement in itself, to some degree – you are abstaining from or distancing yourself from sounds, and their attached value systems, that you find repulsive or reprehensible, or maybe just boring and static and safe.

But at the same time, quite a lot of undergrounds can be conservative – relatively static and settled. A lot of experimental music is simply carring on traditions that started with John Cage, or Derek Bailey, or Throbbing Gristle. You go to this kind of music and you know what to expect. It's not really challenging anybody. The same applies to sounds like noise, drone, and extreme metal. They might still be extreme or hard to take for the average pop fan, but within the micro-culture itself, it's formulaic and ritualistic.

Returning to the idea of topography and spatiality, there was a scene thriving some years ago that was *literally underground* – hardcore punk concerts that took place in the basements of suburban American hous-

es. Most American family houses have a basement room which is large enough to serve a recreational purpose, or you might have washing machines down there. There's enough space for a band to set up and maybe 20 to 40 people to cram in there and watch them play. Obviously this is illegal, since it probably breaks laws about fire safety, and the noise might also be a nuisance to neighbours, along with loads of kids arriving and parking their cars in the neighbourhood. But yeah, it was a sign of the punk scene getting so small and tribal that it literally had to go underground to keep going!

(7)

SM and GM.

We would like to ask you a final question related to the (until just a few years ago absolutely unthinkable) development of AI music composition and generation. Do you think that the advent of AI will revolutionize the way we think and produce music? If so, do you mostly envisage positive and fruitful potentialities in the use of AI in the field of music (not only in pop music, but at all levels, inasmuch as the impact of AI will probably condition in different ways, and hence lead us to rethink, the totality of musical practices), or negative aspects and dangers?

SR.

I think it's early days still – it's just too soon to say what the implications are for music, or for any cultural form. For the most part, AI is currently being used for what I call "recreativity" – pastiche, mash-up, the uncanny forgery of well-known artists. It's just adding to the garbage heap of meme culture. It's regurgitative and imitative and not bringing anything new into the world.

That said, I have heard interesting work done by experimental musicians using AI – patten's *Mirage FM*, Debit's *The Long Count*, Lee Gamble's *Models*, Holly Herndon's records. But it's hard to identify as yet what the signature of AI is in terms of music. That would most likely be a kind of a "it sounds wrong but maybe this wrong can be a new kind of right" effect. As of now, I don't feel like I can hear AI as a self-evident presence within music at this point. So I ask myself, if I hadn't read that patten or Debit were using text-to-sound commands through AI, would I have known just from the sound of the records? Maybe I would have thought the ghostly voices on *Mirage FM* or the strange sourceless sounds on *The Long Count* were created by other, earlier technologies.

Every new piece of technology in music seems to have a unique capacity within it – usually unintended by the manufacturer – to create sounds that are disconcerting, disorienting, glitchy, grotesque… So in the case of sampling, users soon discovered that you could take a vocal sample and distributed across a keyboard, then play it at different pitches, and often in stab patterns or in a kind of hyper-syncopated jazzy kind of solo. So what you heard on these records (usually club tracks or early house records) was the instrumentalization of the human voice. It sounds human but mechanistic, like a distorted mirror image of the human. A similar effect was discovered with Auto-Tune when pitch-correction was pushed to an extreme: brittle but glittering distortions of vocal timbre, still recognisably of human origin but ethereal or hallucinatory. Auto-Tune became an expressive tool for rappers, a way to generating strange textures and vocal FX, and also, through melodicizing their speech, it created a hybrid style midway between rapping and singing.

I think it was Dan Lopatin of Oneohtrix Point Never who said, it's the *failure* of the technology to do the job it's been tasked with that creates the interesting, eerie, compelling effects. There's an emulative shortfall. The synth doesn't sound like a saxophone; the Roland 303 doesn't create a satisfactorily realistic bassline, as it was intended to by the manufacturer, but it turns out be capable of generating alien wibbles of abstract bass texture, and these became the hallmark of acid house and trance.

Aesthetics and Musical Subcultures Today:
An Interview with Simon Reynolds

In this interview Stefano Marino and Giovanni Mugnaini posed some questions to a great expert of popular music at an international level, Simon Reynolds, who offered extensive and detailed replies. The result is a dense conversation that summarizes all the main themes animating this issue of "Scenari": the relationship between philosophy and popular music; the intersection between technology (AI) and popular music; the Adornian legacy in the philosophy of music and in musicology; the heuristic validity of the concept of subculture. Reynolds' observations allow for a more detailed reconstruction of the relationship between philosophy, understood as cultural production and theory (not merely as an academic discipline) and popular music. Indeed, numerous precedents of "philosophical" interest in the popular are cited, offering a historical perspective on this relationship. This approach helps evaluate the concepts and theories underpinning it.

Keywords. Aesthetics, Popular music studies, Subcultures, Artificial Intelligence.

In questo contributo presentiamo ai lettori di "Scenari" una conversazione sull'estetica, sulle sottoculture e sul paesaggio mediatico contemporaneo con il critico musicale Simon Reynolds. Il testo comprende sette domande scritte insieme da Stefano Marino e Giovanni Mugnaini e altrettante lunghe, complesse e dettagliate risposte scritte da Reynolds. Le domande e le risposte contenute in questa intervista si basano su argomenti quali: la rilevanza del concetto di sottocultura, l'invecchiamento della teoria critica di Adorno, la ricezione della musica e della cultura popolare nel mondo accademico di oggi e i potenziali rischi dell'intelligenza artificiale.

Parole chiare. teoria critica, sottocultura, Simon reynolds, Adorno, cultura pop.