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Popular Music, Creativity and Bildung. A Social-Analytical Approach to the Question: Why is Music Important?

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Background

The aim of the paper is to explore the question: 'why is music important?' in order to develop a richer understanding of the relation between creative activity and personality formation.

The background to this topic is the idea that music as a special kind of art and sensuous praxis pinpoints this problem. Music is characterized by its paradoxical character: "Since music is the only language with the contradictory attributes of being at once intelligible and untranslatable, the musical creator is being comparable to the gods, and music itself the supreme mystery of the science of man" (Lévi-Strauss 1970: 18). However, the paradoxical or mystical character does not only apply to music as a language (text) in the nature of 'creatio ex nihilo', but also as a social relation (context) affecting the personality: "Music for those who love it is so important that to be deprived of it would constitute a cruel and unusual punishment [...] Both musicians and lovers of music who are not professionally trained know that great music brings us more than sensuous pleasure, although sensuous pleasure is certainly part of musical experience. Yet what it brings is hard to define" (Storr 1992: xi-xii).

Research Questions

The focus of the enquiry is that the double paradox of music is not an accidental coincidence. On the contrary, the paper argues that this coincidence is due to the fundamental relation between creativity and formation of the personality, a relation which is fundamental and vigorously at play in music.

The general hypothesis is, then, that music is an exemplary case for confirming and developing the social-analytical theory of creativity in which creativity is understood as a question of Bildung (Hammershøj 2009). Bildung is the German Neo-humanistic concept of the formation of the personality according to which the formation of the personality is brought about by a 'transcendence in the sociality'.

Furthermore, the specific hypothesis of the paper is that music can be understood as a creative and formative praxis constituted by style and mood which in the social-analytical sense refers to the more general problems of taste and transcendence. Thus, the idea is that these categories make possible an alternative interpretation of music in which the interrelation of the creative and formative dimensions of music is more explicit.

Methods

The paper builds on the social-analytical theory of creativity understood as a question of Bildung. The theory is developed through an interpretation of the original notion of the 'four stages' of the creative process (Poincaré 1908; Wallas 1926) by using the social-analytical perspective of self-Bildung (Schmidt 1999; Hammershøj 2003) and it is further developed through a discussion with relevant creativity research (Gardner 1994; Boden 1994; Csikszentmihalyi 1996; NACCCE 1999; Craft et al. 2001; Feldman et al. 2006).

That music is constituted by style and mood is more explicit in popular music which is characterized by its physicality (Covach 2001; Middleton 2001, 2006). However, in a social analytical-perspective style is not only to be understood in the narrow or technical sense of the characteristics of the musical language, but in the broader sense of the characteristics of the persons whole approach

or way of relating to the social, style as ethos that is (Foucault 1983; Nietzsche 1882). Similarly, music is not about feelings, but about arousing or throwing people into a certain mood. The difference is that feelings are individual or tied to the individual, whereas mood is a social state. This distinction may explain music's redemption or heartening power in the common experience of being lifted out of one's private feelings and elevated into the common mood established by the music, quite similar to the experience of participating in sociality (Simmel 1910).

Frame

The overall theoretical frame of the paper is the social-analytical theory of creativity as a question of Bildung.

The analytical approach consists of an interpretation of music as style and mood in the social-analytical sense which refers to the problems of taste and transcendence.

More specified, the analytical approach consists in an attempt to demonstrate the interrelation of style and mood by looking into the different main genres of popular music in order to identify differences in the relation of the type of style expressed and the kind of mood aroused in these different kinds of musical genres:

- - Electronic appear to establish a mood of attunement disclosing how one is 'placed' in the world (is experienced as 'ambient', 'ecstasy', etc.) by means of the style trait 'repetition'.
- - Jazz establishes a mood of sociability which discloses the more or less cheerful state of the community (is experienced as 'soul', 'swing', 'kind of blue' etc.) by means of the style trait 'improvisation'.
- - Rock/pop establishes a mood characteristic of a relation which discloses the one individual's relation to the other individual (most pop/rock songs are constituted by the theme 'You and I' / 'Me and you') by means of the style trait 'refrain'.
- - Hip hop establishes a mood characteristic of an attitude and discloses the sovereign individual's ways of relating to him- or herself and to his or her surrounding world (most rap songs are constituted by the theme of 'Me, Myself, and I') by means of the style trait 'statement'.

Research findings

The paper contributes to knowledge in more ways:

First, the analysis of the different genres of popular music appears to confirm the idea that music is constituted by the interrelation of style and mood understood as problems of taste and transcendence.

Second, this makes possible an interpretation of music as a creative and formative praxis, an interpretation that develops a richer understanding of the notion of creativity as a question of Bildung.

Third, this interpretation of music as a creative and formative praxis suggests that music is important not only because it expresses subcultural affiliation (Middleton 2001), or expresses universal human feelings (Storr 1992), but because music shapes the very relation between the self and sociality.