

# ‘Nice Tune, but what does it Mean?’: Popular Music Studies, Ethnography and Textual Analysis

*Adrian Renzo*

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Why was hip hop quickly embraced in places like Campbelltown, western Sydney? Was Kylie Minogue’s *Body Language* a ‘sexy’ album? How do you know when you’re listening to an ‘authentic’ country song? Although these questions address diverse musics, they have two important threads in common. First, all of them might easily be asked in either the popular or the academic press. Ideas about race, sex, and authenticity are frequently bound up with talk about popular music, whether that talk be on commercial radio or in the pages of *Context*.<sup>1</sup> Second, all of these questions deal with musical *meaning*. How music comes to mean particular things, why it does so, and what this might tell us about the social world (our identities, power relations, and so on) are questions that have emerged as central concerns in popular music studies.<sup>2</sup> This is not surprising: a cultural form which is used in political rallies and in Kleenex advertisements—and which millions of people use as a way of shaping their own identities—must have considerable power. It is only natural that, as music researchers, we should want to explore how popular music achieves some of its effects.

However, while it is generally accepted that popular music’s meanings are an important site for research, there is relatively little agreement on the best way to approach this issue. This situation has been exacerbated by the very nature of ‘popular music studies,’ a field that encompasses a wide variety of academic disciplines. In this article, I will review how two different fields of research—musicology and cultural studies—have contributed to popular music studies.<sup>3</sup> Musicology and cultural studies are often seen as diametrically opposed; musicology deals with sounds, cultural studies deals with everything else. Here, I wish to

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<sup>1</sup> See Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1996) 123–44.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of the field, see David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus, ‘Introduction—Popular Music Studies: Meaning, Power and Value,’ in David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus, eds, *Popular Music Studies* (London: Arnold, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> In particular, I will be focusing on ‘cultural’ or ‘critical’ musicology. See Lawrence Kramer, ‘Subjectivity Rampant! Music, Hermeneutics, and History,’ in Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert and Richard Middleton, eds, *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2003) 126. For further details on ‘subcultural’ approaches to popular music, see Ken Gelder, ed., *The Subcultures Reader*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

point out some of the continuities between the two areas. I will argue that both approaches seek implicitly to recuperate popular musics and cultures from dismissive portrayals of them, and that both treat *audiences* (as much as producers) as the makers of popular music's meanings.

This discussion is divided into two parts. The first section is intended as an introduction to popular music studies, with a focus on the underlying links between apparently disparate research areas such as musicology and cultural studies. The second part takes up one of the debates that have come to the fore in popular music studies. In recent years, much musicological research has been criticised for its reliance on textual analysis. (I use the term 'text' in its widest sense, to refer to any cultural phenomena that may be 'read' or interpreted by analysts.<sup>4</sup>) Researchers such as Tia DeNora have argued that the textual analysis of popular music (indeed, of any music) is based on mistaken premises about the nature of the making of meaning in music. DeNora notes that music does not produce or communicate meanings. Rather, listeners create such meanings in the very act of using music. Consequently, she argues that textual analysis should be replaced with ethnography.<sup>5</sup> This article argues that while there may be problems with the close reading of texts, a musicological approach can still make valuable contributions to the study of popular music.

### Musicology Meets Cultural Studies

The realm of popular music studies is not a unified 'discipline' in the strictest sense of the word. It is rather an umbrella term (or 'co-disciplinary' field)<sup>6</sup> for a diverse range of approaches to the topic. Scholarly research on popular music has emerged from departments of sociology, media and cultural studies, (ethno)musicology, psychology, and anthropology, to name just a few.<sup>7</sup> Popular music studies often overlaps with studies of popular culture more generally. This is partly an acknowledgement of the fact that music is never made or heard in a vacuum, but rather is socially situated. Hence, some of the most influential approaches to popular music have stemmed from studies that seemingly discuss everything *but* the music. Many of these studies, however, share certain preoccupations. One is the desire to 'rescue' popular music from various influential dismissals of it. For example, much early work on popular music foregrounded the ways in which it could be seen as complex or challenging, in order to counteract prevailing stereotypes of 'simple,' 'primitive' music.<sup>8</sup> Many scholars took issue with critics of mass culture, arguing that, whatever 'commercial' trappings the music had, mass-mediated popular music was one of the means by which social groups defined themselves

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<sup>4</sup> For example, a 'text' could include the studio production techniques employed to create a particular sound on a pop recording (rather than just the lyrics being sung on that recording). Textual analysis might be used to explain how several aspects of popular music come together to convey particular connotations.

<sup>5</sup> Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge, UK: CUP, 2000) 45.

<sup>6</sup> Mike Jones, review of Jason Toynbee's *Making Popular Music*, in *Popular Music* 22.2 (2003): 247.

<sup>7</sup> Hesmondhalgh and Negus, 'Introduction' 1.

<sup>8</sup> See Dick Bradley, *Understanding Rock 'n' Roll: Popular Music in Britain 1955–1964* (Buckingham: Open UP, 1992) 32–54; Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Buckingham, UK: Open UP, 1990) 115–26. More recent work has focused on the converse situation, in which critics elevate particular genres to the status of 'art.' See: Motti Regev, 'Producing Artistic Value: The Case of Rock Music,' *The Sociological Quarterly* 35.1 (1994): 85–102; Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002) 161–224.

in relation to other groups.<sup>9</sup> For this reason, it was seen as deserving solid, critical attention.<sup>10</sup> This partly explains the explosion of interest in popular music *audiences*.<sup>11</sup>

Within musicology during the 1970s and '80s (although not necessarily at the heart of the discipline), Philip Tagg offered one of the most rigorous ways of attending to these issues. In his monumental studies of television themes (such as *Kojak*) and Europop (ABBA's 'Fernando'), Tagg attempted to provide answers to the question: 'why and how does who communicate what to whom and with what effect?'<sup>12</sup> Already, this form of musicology (which borrowed heavily from semiotics) diverged considerably from certain schools of musicology in which intra-musical concerns, rather than socio-cultural concerns, were foregrounded. Tagg was interested in the ways popular music conveyed extra-musical *meaning*. His work has been (justifiably) criticised over the years, so it is worth emphasising that some researchers working in popular music studies are still opposed to the very basic premise that discussion of 'the music itself' should be linked to its socio-cultural meanings.<sup>13</sup>

At the risk of simplifying matters, Tagg's approach—like semiotic approaches to language—reduced popular music to a number of identifiable 'musemes,' and he set about tracing the history of associations that each museme carried. Although the results of this research might seem obvious to the layperson, Tagg's aim was not simply to identify such effects but to trace where these associations came from in the first place.<sup>14</sup> In other words, he was interested in *why* particular musical gestures conveyed particular meanings. His approach involved

<sup>9</sup> The work of the Frankfurt School, and Theodor Adorno in particular, has been hugely influential here, both as an inspiration and as a punching bag. For a recent review, see Richard Leppert, 'Commentary' in Theodor W. Adorno, ed. Richard Leppert, *Essays on Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) 327–72.

<sup>10</sup> The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu remains significant for his explanation of how prestige is accumulated and used in the cultural sphere. See his *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Polity, 1984) and 'The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed,' *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> This focus can be seen, for instance, in Daniel Cavicchi, *Tramps Like us: Music and Meaning among Springsteen Fans* (Oxford: OUP, 1998); Ben Malbon, *Clubbing: Dancing, Ecstasy, Vitality* (London: Routledge, 1999); and Gerry Bloustien, *Girl Making: A Cross-Cultural Ethnography on the Processes of Growing Up Female* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003). See also Sarah Baker's contribution to this volume. For an overview of scholarly approaches to the media, see Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst, *Audiences: A Sociological Theory of Performance and Imagination* (London: Sage, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Philip Tagg, 'Analysing Popular Music: Theory, Method and Practice,' *Popular Music* 2 (1982): 39.

<sup>13</sup> For example, John Covach and Walter Everett frame this argument in terms of 'intellectual freedom.' Whittled down to its crudest form, the argument seems to be: 'if I want to focus on the harmonic properties of Jimi Hendrix's music, then that's my business.' See John Covach, 'We Won't Get Fooled Again: Rock Music and Musical Analysis,' in David Schwarz, Anahid Kassabian and Lawrence Siegel, eds, *Keeping Score: Music, Disciplinarity, Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997) 85; Walter Everett, 'Confessions from Blueberry Hell, or, Pitch can be a Sticky Substance,' in Walter Everett, ed., *Expression in Pop-Rock Music: A Collection of Critical and Analytical Essays* (New York: Garland, 2000) 337.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, if we were to apply Tagg's analytical model to the atonal strings in the horror film *The Evil Dead*, we would most likely arrive at the conclusion that they connote 'creepiness'—something that any viewer of the film would have been able to identify without writing a dissertation on the topic. The point of the approach is not to simply point out the obvious meanings, but to test empirically the extent to which these meanings apply to particular pieces of music, and to examine what ideological content is being conveyed through the music. For more on semiotic approaches to film music, see Anahid Kassabian, *Hearing Film: Tracking Identifications in Contemporary Hollywood Film Music* (London: Routledge, 2001) 30–36. See also Kathryn Kalinak, 'The Fallen Woman and the Virtuous Wife: Musical Stereotypes in *The Informer*, *Gone with the Wind*, and *Laura*,' *Film Reader* 5 (1982): 76–82; Kathryn Kalinak, *Settling the Score* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992). The main approaches to film music have been summarised in Claudia Gorbman, 'Film Music,' in John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson, eds, *Film Studies: Critical Approaches* (Oxford: OUP, 2000).

extensive testing of these 'associations' with listeners, to find out what 'meanings' were being 'received.' The research also involved extensive content analysis. In order to make any claim about a basic musical unit (or 'museme'), Tagg had to trace the appearances of that unit in a vast number of other pieces belonging to the same repertoire (and, where relevant, in several related genres—hence the references to Bach in the ABBA analysis).<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, Tagg's approach raised the sorts of questions that would be discussed heatedly a decade later in what has been variously dubbed 'new,' 'cultural,' or 'critical' musicology.<sup>16</sup> In discussing the 'meanings' of given musical texts (that is, recordings), Tagg interrogated the sort of ideological baggage that was (often inadvertently) communicated through popular music. For example, his analysis of 'Fernando' demonstrated how the potentially progressive lyrics were undercut by musical gestures that conveyed a more conservative message: 'whereas the words say "If I had to go back and fight for freedom in Latin America, I would," the music expresses the affective attitude "I may be longing for something here at home but I'm really quite content with things as they are".'<sup>17</sup>

This sort of commentary foreshadowed the research of critical musicologists, who, rather than exploring Paul Simon's 'crisis of chromaticism,' would be far more likely to be found dissecting the gender politics of Madonna or Bon Jovi songs.<sup>18</sup> Critical musicology was useful to scholars of popular music for several other reasons. Its extensive self-critique drew attention to the ways in which the discipline's core concerns, methods, and terminology were ideologically loaded in a way that privileged a particular repertoire (Western art music) and acted to perpetuate that privilege. As Richard Middleton put it: '[c]ompare melody (something graceful? Mozart?) and tune (you whistle it in the street).'<sup>19</sup> The fact that scholars were beginning to emphasise this music's grounding in socio-cultural and political structures paralleled the concerns of researchers in cultural studies (such as Dick Hebdige and Angela McRobbie) who had drawn attention to the political ramifications of ways in which popular music had typically been appraised in the past.<sup>20</sup>

According to Hesmondhalgh and Negus, this work has made two significant contributions to popular music studies: it has attempted to discuss the 'sounds themselves' (drawing attention to such areas as timbre) and it has underlined the ways in which seemingly 'innocent' or 'untainted' musical resources are related to specific political/social/cultural agendas.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Tagg, 'Analysing Popular Music' 60. More recently, Tagg has published the findings of extensive empirical research in Philip Tagg and Bob Clarida, *Ten Little Title Tunes: Towards a Musicology of the Mass Media* (New York: The Mass Media Musicologists' Press, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> See: Nicholas Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: OUP, 1998) 116–17; Hesmondhalgh and Negus, 'Introduction' 4–5; Kramer, 'Subjectivity Rampant!' 125.

<sup>17</sup> Tagg, 'Analysing Popular Music' 60.

<sup>18</sup> See Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) 148–66; Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993) 120–24; David Brackett, *Interpreting Popular Music*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* 104.

<sup>20</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979); Angela McRobbie, 'Settling Accounts with Subcultures: A Feminist Critique,' *Screen Education* 34 (1980): 37–49. See also the review of these influential perspectives and their critics in Andy Bennett, *Cultures of Popular Music* (Buckingham: Open UP, 2001) 18–22.

<sup>21</sup> Hesmondhalgh and Negus, 'Introduction' 5.

Significant contributions to this field have come from the likes of David Brackett, Susan McClary, and Robert Walser.<sup>22</sup>

This recent trend in cultural musicology mirrors developments in other areas of popular music studies, particularly the branch that has not typically concerned itself with the ‘sounds themselves’: cultural studies.<sup>23</sup> Here, researchers have frequently addressed issues of power, identity, and the social meanings of popular culture. This can be seen in one of the dominant concepts in this field, the notion of ‘subculture.’ The study of subcultures emerged in the sociological writing of the Chicago School in the 1920s and ‘30s, and became increasingly popular in the post-war years.<sup>24</sup> Writers such as William Whyte challenged the idea (which is still influential in news reports today) that crime and ‘deviance’ can be explained in terms of individual psychology. Instead, he explored the ways in which such ‘deviant’ behaviour came to be regarded as ‘normal’ by the members of youth gangs, and the ways in which this was partly a reaction and/or an adjustment to the social situation these youths found themselves in.<sup>25</sup> The term ‘subculture,’ then, became a way of foregrounding the very *normality* of these activities (that is, ‘normal’ for the network of people involved in them).<sup>26</sup>

The study of subcultures found an institutional home in the 1970s and ‘80s in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), based in Birmingham and directed for several years by Stuart Hall.<sup>27</sup> The most well-known works to emerge from the Birmingham School include Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson’s *Resistance Through Rituals*, and Paul Willis’s *Profane Culture*.<sup>28</sup> These writers—adopting a Marxist approach—extended the Chicago’s School’s reassessment of ‘delinquent’ gangs, but their focus was increasingly on ‘youth’ styles rather than specific, locally anchored communities.<sup>29</sup> In his influential book, Hebdige provided interpretations of many facets of youth subcultural styles, such as punk. An example of his approach is as follows:

the most unremarkable and inappropriate items—a pin, a plastic clothes peg, a television component, a razor blade, a tampon—could be brought within the province of punk (un)fashion. Anything within or without reason could be turned into part of what Vivien Westwood called ‘confrontation dressing’ so long as the rupture between ‘natural’ and constructed context was clearly visible (i.e. the rule would seem to be: if the cap doesn’t fit, wear it.)<sup>30</sup>

The subcultural approach to youth music cultures has been exhaustively critiqued. Some researchers pointed out that a focus on subcultural ‘style’ tended to privilege those cultures that were the most *visible*. It was no surprise that subcultural theory largely ignored the ‘teeny

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<sup>22</sup> See Brackett, *Interpreting Popular Music* 108–56; McClary, *Feminine Endings* 148–66; Walser, *Running With the Devil* 108–36.

<sup>23</sup> For an introduction to the field, see Chris Barker, *Making Sense of Cultural Studies* (London: Sage, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Andy Bennett, *Popular Music and Youth Culture: Music, Identity and Place* (London: Macmillan, 2000) 14.

<sup>25</sup> See Bennett, *Popular Music and Youth Culture* 15. Key texts of both British cultural studies and the Chicago School are discussed at length in Elihu Katz, John Durham Peters, Tamar Liebes, and Avril Orloff, eds, *Canonical Texts in Media Research: Are there Any? Should there be? How about These?* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> Bennett, *Popular Music and Youth Culture* 15.

<sup>27</sup> Victoria Alexander, *Sociology of the Arts: Exploring Fine and Popular Forms* (London: Blackwell, 2003) 197.

<sup>28</sup> Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, eds, *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1976); Paul Willis, *Profane Culture* (London: Routledge, 1978).

<sup>29</sup> Bennett, *Popular Music and Youth Culture* 17–18.

<sup>30</sup> Hebdige, *Subculture* 107.

bopper' culture of young girls, given the preponderance of this culture in the home and the bedroom rather than the street.<sup>31</sup> Others criticised the tendency in this work to reify subcultures, treating them as relatively stable, concrete entities. Gary Clarke pointed out that the products (the dress codes, the music, and so on) of teddy boy or mod or punk subcultures were not only used by 'fully paid up members',<sup>32</sup> and Simon Frith argued that most youth in fact pass through a number of affiliations, rather than being loyal to one subculture.<sup>33</sup> Others have suggested terms like 'scene' to more adequately capture the provisional nature of people's attachment to particular forms of music.<sup>34</sup>

Given that research on subcultures has often neglected the *sounds* of those cultures, it may seem odd to draw connections between this field and the musicological work reviewed above. However, I would argue that there are several underlying links between these areas. First, researchers in both fields have frequently sought to *re-evaluate popular culture*, and they have often achieved this by re-evaluating the relationship between popular music and its audiences. This applies as much to cultural studies as to musicology. Tagg, Walser, and others were not only exploring the 'unintentional complexity' of popular music texts (and hence deliberately or inadvertently legitimating it), but they also insisted on taking seriously the views of popular music's listeners. Similarly, many researchers of subcultures examined the uses to which certain audiences put popular cultural products.<sup>35</sup> In doing so, they questioned the stereotype of audiences as 'manipulated' or 'brainwashed' dupes of the culture industries. For example, the 'uses and gratifications' approach that developed in media studies explored the ways in which audiences for mass cultural forms approached these products (rather than assuming that those products had transparent 'effects' on a passive audience).<sup>36</sup> Several sociological studies have explored the meanings of popular cultural 'texts' (from the nightly news to soap operas) for their audiences, with particular attention paid to the many ways in which consumers 'resist' the dominant meanings of the available texts.<sup>37</sup> Janice Radway's classic study of a group of romance readers found that these women often used reading time as an 'escape' from the constant demands of their families. Even as they read books which were arguably based on 'patriarchal' principles, their reading time was one of the few times in the day when their own needs were prioritised.<sup>38</sup> Admittedly, this notion of resistance has been taken to extremes in the work of some researchers, but nonetheless, the basic idea remains central to

<sup>31</sup> Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber, 'Girls and Subcultures: An Exploration' in Hall and Jefferson, *Resistance through Rituals* 219; see also Bennett, *Cultures of Popular Music* 20. Sarah Baker's contribution in this issue of *Context* provides a useful corrective to the shortcomings of the subcultural approach.

<sup>32</sup> Gary Clarke, 'Defending Ski-Jumpers: A Critique of Theories of Youth Subcultures' in Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin, eds, *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word* (London: Routledge, 1990) 83.

<sup>33</sup> Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock* (London: Constable, 1983) 219–20.

<sup>34</sup> See Sara Cohen, 'Scenes' in Bruce Horner and Thomas Swiss, eds, *Key Terms in Popular Music Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); Will Straw, 'Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music', *Cultural Studies* 5 (1991): 368–88.

<sup>35</sup> Hesmondhalgh, *The Cultural Industries* 43.

<sup>36</sup> For example, see Elihu Katz, et al., 'Utilization of Mass Communication by the Individual' in Jay G. Blumler and Elihu Katz, eds, *The Uses of Mass Communications* (London: Sage, 1974) 20.

<sup>37</sup> David Morley, *The 'Nationwide' Audience: Structure and Decoding* (London: British Film Institute, 1980); Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1985).

<sup>38</sup> Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*, 2nd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991) 89–96.

much research in popular music studies.<sup>39</sup> While the cultural industries wield considerable power in determining the shape and content of popular texts, it is generally acknowledged that audiences do the ‘other half’ of the work, the making of meaning out of the texts, perhaps even using them to undermine intended meanings.<sup>40</sup>

Both musicology and cultural studies, then, implicitly respond to the work of theorists like Theodor Adorno. They both reject Adorno’s claim that audiences are passive recipients rather than active *creators* of meaning. Consequently, they frequently question established canons of taste, not only between ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultures but within and between various popular music cultures. McClary’s analyses of Madonna songs, for instance, purposefully read socio-cultural meanings off particular texts and she explicitly champions this work as ‘transgressive.’ Cultural studies, meanwhile, have often been motivated by a similar concern to re-evaluate the cultures of oppressed socio-cultural groups, and to legitimate practices and sounds that formerly have been dismissed by the popular press or by academia. The celebration of punk, the varied uses to which the memory of Elvis Presley may be put, and the phenomenon of ‘filksong’ (fan-authored songs about TV characters) all in their own ways defend forms of popular culture from various ‘enemies’ (whether they be elitist ‘snobs’ or simply other, competing popular cultures).<sup>41</sup>

A second, related, link between these two broad approaches to popular culture is the firm belief that the meaning of a ‘text’ can never be taken for granted: the ‘meaning’ of a song is determined as much by the listener as by the ‘author.’<sup>42</sup> In light of this premise, several of the studies surveyed thus far—musicological and otherwise—have been criticised for their insufficient attention to audiences.<sup>43</sup> To address this problem, many researchers have advocated a return to ethnography, with some going so far as to suggest that textual analysis is an unacceptable ‘shortcut’ to understanding the relationship between music and its meanings in society. In the following section, I shall question whether all textual analysis is as problematic as these critics have suggested.

### Textual Analysis: An Unacceptable ‘Shortcut’?

For David Muggleton, most classic accounts of subcultures were irrelevant because they neglected the views of the participants themselves (the ‘indigenous meanings’).<sup>44</sup> The resulting

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<sup>39</sup>For an example of the extremely optimistic approach, see John Fiske, ‘Productive Pleasures’ and ‘Politics’ in his *Understanding Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1989). His perspective has been criticised in Frith, *Performing Rites* 14–15. See also John Frow, ‘The Concept of the Popular’ in his *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 65.

<sup>40</sup>The idea of popular music consumers as ‘dupes’ of the music industry is a key inheritance from Theodor Adorno. See Adorno, *Essays On Music*. Other recent appraisals of Adorno’s work include Robert W. Witkin, *Adorno On Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2003) and John Durham Peters, ‘The Subtlety of Horkheimer and Adorno: Reading “The Culture Industry”’ in Katz, et al., *Canonic Texts in Media Research*.

<sup>41</sup>See Hebdige, *Subculture* 100–12; Sue Wise, ‘Sexing Elvis’ in Frith and Goodwin, *On Record*; Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992) 250–76.

<sup>42</sup>This idea stems from Roland Barthes’s influential article ‘The Death of the Author’ in his *Image Music Text* (London: Fontana Press, 1969).

<sup>43</sup>The issues that follow have, of course, been debated at length by ethnomusicologists, who are very familiar with the problems involved in establishing links between music and social life. I shall restrict this discussion to the dialogue between popular music studies and musicology. See Hesmondhalgh and Negus, ‘Introduction’ 3–4, for a brief overview of ethnomusicological work in this area.

<sup>44</sup>David Muggleton, *Inside Subculture: The Postmodern Meaning of Style* (Oxford: Berg, 2000) 3.

studies may have said something about the researcher's theoretical proclivities, but relatively little about the actual beliefs and practices of actual punks, teddy boys, mods, and so on.<sup>45</sup> Mark Duffet, meanwhile, laments various 'academic portrayals' of Elvis fans and uses evidence from 'biographers and fans *themselves*' as a corrective.<sup>46</sup> Ruth Finnegan, who demonstrated her preferred research method in *The Hidden Musicians*, has attacked the very idea that one might examine musical 'texts.'<sup>47</sup> The mere mention of 'text,' for her, invokes the spectre of self-appointed 'experts' decoding works for everyone else, passing off provisional readings as concrete fact.<sup>48</sup> Sydney-based researcher Ian Maxwell adopts a similar perspective. Paraphrasing Signe Howell, he argues that an 'ethnographic, fieldwork-based approach privileges ... *people*, rather than representations; experience, rather than abstractions.'<sup>49</sup>

There are good reasons to advocate a return to empirical work, particularly in the field of popular music studies. As Victoria Alexander has pointed out, it is very easy for analyses of popular cultural texts to offer inappropriate readings when there are no 'insiders' to offer verification of a researcher's findings. Interpretative freedom can easily slip into an interpretative free-for-all.<sup>50</sup> When the journalist Paul Burston ridiculed a collection of essays about Madonna, he may have been invoking a familiar anti-intellectualism, but he was also reacting to the vast gap between academic readings of popular music and his own experience of that music:

What [*The Madonna Connection*] really amounts to is an exercise in naked opportunism—which, given the nature of the subject, seems to me entirely excusable. Far harder to forgive is the tendency towards wild exaggeration ... and gross sentimentalizing of what is, after all, only pop music (see for example, Melanie Morton's 'Don't Go For Second Sex, Baby!', in which a fairly good pop tune is transformed, note-by-note, into a 'decimation' of 'patriarchal, racist and capitalist constructions').<sup>51</sup>

All of these ideas may be found in the sociologist Tia DeNora's discussion of 'semiotic decodings,' which is one of the most detailed and convincing critiques along these lines. DeNora points out that no 'utterance' has an inherent meaning.<sup>52</sup> Rather, there is

an array of received meanings that may be linked ... to any utterance. An analyst of spoken interaction cannot therefore deduce meaning from a particular text object,

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<sup>45</sup> Muggleton, *Inside Subculture* 2-3.

<sup>46</sup> Mark Duffet, 'Caught in a Trap? Beyond Pop Theory's "Butch" Construction of Male Elvis Fans,' *Popular Music* 20/3 (2001): 395-96. Emphasis added.

<sup>47</sup> Ruth Finnegan, 'Music, Experience, and the Anthropology of Emotion' in Clayton, Herbert, and Middleton, *The Cultural Study of Music* 188-89. See also Ruth Finnegan, *The Hidden Musicians: Music-making in an English Town* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989).

<sup>48</sup> Finnegan, 'Music, Experience' 189.

<sup>49</sup> Ian Maxwell, 'The Curse of Fandom: Insiders, Outsiders, and Ethnography' in Hesmondhalgh and Negus, *Popular Music Studies* 111. Here, Maxwell draws on Signe Howell, 'Cultural Studies and Social Anthropology: Contesting or Complementary Discourses?' in Steven Nugent and Cris Shore, eds, *Anthropology and Cultural Studies* (London: Pluto Press, 1997) 107-8.

<sup>50</sup> Alexander, *Sociology of the Arts* 270.

<sup>51</sup> Paul Burston, 'Rescue Me: Sex, Subculture and the Material Girlie' in his *What are you Looking at? Queer Sex, Style and Cinema* (London: Cassell, 1995) 24. The book in question is *The Madonna Connection: Representational Politics, Subcultural Identities and Cultural Theory*, ed. Cathy Schwichtenberg (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993).

<sup>52</sup> By 'utterance' she means linguistic, musical, and other 'corporeal' types of utterances. We could easily include Tagg's basic unit, the 'museme' in this definition.

whether that object is one utterance or an entire conversation, to which he or she was not party unless he or she is familiar with the local circumstances that surround it.<sup>53</sup>

If we substitute the term ‘spoken interaction’ with ‘music,’ we start to see why DeNora is suspicious of the close analysis of musical texts. This seems to distill the views of Muggleton, et al. The assumption on which it is based—that audiences are largely responsible for the ‘meanings’ they take from popular music—is largely consistent with the perspectives that were reviewed earlier. DeNora takes this assumption to its logical conclusion, however, and argues that the only viable path for music research is ethnographic in nature. We should be focusing on *experiences* rather than musical texts. The language she uses in the following passage is telling:

To determine the meaning of an utterance *from outside* is ... to forgo an opportunity to investigate how particular actors produce indigenous maps and readings of the scene(s) in question and how to read them. *Real actors* engage in semiotic analysis as part of the reflexive project of context determination and context renewal. Telling what the meaning is, and deftly deflecting dispreferred ... readings, is part and parcel of the semiotic skills of daily life.<sup>54</sup>

According to DeNora, then, the task of a researcher should be to ask participants how they use music in everyday life. This claim is much more grand than that of Sara Cohen, who has argued that ethnography constitutes ‘an alternative or complementary’ perspective.<sup>55</sup> For DeNora, anything other than ethnography is an unacceptable ‘theoretical shortcut.’<sup>56</sup>

While ethnography is undoubtedly an important aspect of popular music studies, I believe there are two reasons why we should treat DeNora’s suggestions with caution. First, DeNora is dismissing all ‘discursive’ research before it has been done. She believes that such work is based on epistemological naivety, and that it is automatically compromised. If you do not ask participants how they interpret music, your approach must necessarily be hostile to them. However, consider—in the field of media studies—Herta Herzog’s 1941 essay ‘On Borrowed Experience,’ about the female listeners to daytime radio serials.<sup>57</sup> Herzog’s choice of method—in-depth interviews—implied that the author would provide a space for the ‘multiple’ readings of the phenomenon of serials consumption, by drawing on the words of the respondents themselves. As Tamar Liebes puts it, the decision to conduct focus interviews with fans was often ‘read as treating audiences with respect, analyzing the content from their own perspective.’<sup>58</sup> A close reading of Herzog’s text, however, reveals that she adopted a more negative perspective on her respondents, treating them as ‘helpless victims of mass society’

<sup>53</sup> DeNora, *Music In Everyday Life* 37.

<sup>54</sup> DeNora, *Music In Everyday Life* 37–38. Emphasis added.

<sup>55</sup> Sara Cohen, ‘Ethnography and Popular Music Studies,’ *Popular Music* 12.2 (1993): 126.

<sup>56</sup> DeNora, *Music In Everyday Life* 22. It should be noted that DeNora uses the term ‘semiotic’ rather sweepingly. For her, the term seems to refer to any interpretative analysis of any text. As Daniel Chandler makes clear, however, semiotics is actually a more specific field with its own traditions and its own set of practices. See Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2002). Arguably, the term ‘discursive’ analysis would more accurately represent the target of DeNora’s attack.

<sup>57</sup> Herta Herzog, ‘On Borrowed Experience,’ *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 11.1 (1941): 65–95.

<sup>58</sup> Tamar Liebes, ‘Herzog’s “On Borrowed Experience”: Its Place in the Debate over the Active Audience,’ *Canonical Texts in Media Research* 40.

rather than as active consumers who knowingly use the products of mass culture for their own ends.<sup>59</sup> In other words, her methodology did not guarantee in advance the kinds of conclusions she would draw from the study, or the kind of attitude she would bring to it. I would argue that the converse of this situation is also true: the practice of textual analysis has the *potential* to shut down multiple readings or to concoct inappropriate readings, but this cannot be guaranteed in advance.<sup>60</sup>

Second, DeNora's approach seems to rely on a model of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' that we have good reason to be wary of. She assures us that the interpretations of 'professional semioticians' should not be trusted, since these people are hopelessly compromised by their 'ergonomically designed' armchairs, their 'lap-top computers,' and their offices 'with a view.'<sup>61</sup> Instead, we should be paying attention to 'real actors.' Her arguments resonate with those of cultural theorist John Frow, who argues that even academics who claim to speak as fans cannot be trusted: they are always class-privileged and used to switching between 'cultural codes' (between the language of 'the street' and the language of the lecture theatre) in a way that the 'core audiences' of popular culture are not.<sup>62</sup> David Morley and Michael Schudson have made similar arguments.<sup>63</sup> However, these critiques overlook the extent to which academics avidly consume popular culture.<sup>64</sup> Cultural critic and Elvis fan Gilbert Rodman goes so far as to suggest that a 'detached' perspective might be undesirable in popular music research. A neutral, 'objective' position implies that the researcher does not know enough of a cultural form to have developed strong feelings about it in the first place.<sup>65</sup>

Even if we ignore the ethnomusicological critique of this insider/outsider distinction, there are other reasons to be wary of it.<sup>66</sup> DeNora seems to lambast McClary simultaneously for being too much of an *insider* (she uses her own responses as a resource) and for being too much of an *outsider* (she is emphatically not a 'real actor').<sup>67</sup> The interesting part of this double take is that much of it is true. It is true, for example, that many cultural critics and musicologists place themselves 'within' the popular music scene, and are actually *constructing* the music they discuss, rather than innocently describing it. What is not so clear, however, is why this

<sup>59</sup> Liebes, 'Herzog's "On Borrowed Experience"' 40.

<sup>60</sup> Burston's example deserved to be singled out. See Melanie Morton, 'Don't Go For Second Sex, Baby!' in Schwichtenberg, *The Madonna Connection* 226–29.

<sup>61</sup> DeNora, *Music In Everyday Life* 22.

<sup>62</sup> Frow, 'The Concept of the Popular' 65.

<sup>63</sup> David Morley, *Television, Audiences, and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1992); Michael Schudson, 'The New Validation of Popular Culture: Sense and Sentimentality in Academia,' *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 4.1 (1987): 51–68.

<sup>64</sup> Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson and Jane Shattuc, 'The Culture that Sticks to your Skin: A Manifesto for a New Cultural Studies' in Henry Jenkins, Tara McPherson and Jane Shattuc, eds, *Hop On Pop: The Politics and Pleasures of Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke UP, 2002) 7–8.

<sup>65</sup> Gilbert B. Rodman, *Elvis After Elvis: The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend* (London: Routledge, 1996) 23. See also Andrew Goodwin, 'On being a Professor of Pop,' *Popular Music and Society* 21.1 (1997): 43–52.

<sup>66</sup> Timothy Rice, for instance, has noted the way in which his 'outsider' research practices (carefully analysing tape recordings of his Bulgarian bagpipe teacher) enhanced his 'insider' status. At one point, an 'insider' took him aside and declared: 'You speak Bulgarian, and you dance Bulgarian dances. Therefore, you are a Bulgarian.' In other words, DeNora's distinction between 'academics' and 'real actors' can be (and usually is) easily blurred. See Timothy Rice, 'Toward a Mediation of Field Methods and Field Experience in Ethnomusicology' in Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley, eds, *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology* (Oxford: OUP, 1997) 106–12.

<sup>67</sup> DeNora, *Music In Everyday Life* 28, 38.

engaged perspective should be treated with such suspicion. In his critique of McClary's work, Peter Martin echoes DeNora's concerns:

Rather than offering a detached account of the processes by which cultural configurations are formed and transformed ... McClary presents a *version* of 'social reality'; she is not so much an analyst of the conflict as a dedicated combatant *in it*.<sup>68</sup>

Again, this is undoubtedly correct. The question that needs to be asked, then, is: why should a 'detached' account be privileged? Is such a thing possible in the first place?<sup>69</sup> Even Radway has admitted that the information she gleaned from her sample group of women was largely 'mediated if not produced' by her own perspective.<sup>70</sup> To put this another way, she succeeded only in producing 'an interpretation of the interpretation that her readers gave to her about what they were up to.'<sup>71</sup> It should be stressed that this does not necessarily compromise her findings: *any* account of the world is always already partial. Lawrence Kramer has defended these kinds of readings, not by pretending that they are 'the truth' or that they accurately predict the way music will actually be pressed into service in 'real life,' but rather, by openly admitting to and emphasising their role as 'constructive':

Subjectivity ... is not an obstacle to credible understanding but its vehicle. The semantic problem is solved by seeking, not to decode music as a virtual utterance, but to describe the interplay of musical technique with the general stream of communicative actions. Musical hermeneutics is asked, not to decrypt a hidden message, and far less to fix the form of anyone's musical experience, but to suggest how music transcribes some of the contextual forces by which the process of listening to it may be or may once have been conditioned.<sup>72</sup>

There are several reasons to insist on the validity of such 'engaged' research. Just as McClary argues that her personal responses to music are a valid starting point for an analysis,<sup>73</sup> Jenkins, McPherson and Shattuc have pointed out that 'immediacy' and 'multivalence' are perhaps defining characteristics of cultural studies.<sup>74</sup> They also suggest that the new voices which are now emerging from this field (particularly those that formerly were marginalised: the voices of blacks, women, queers, and so on) lend extra urgency to the project: 'Their engagement with popular culture cannot be ... distanced. The stakes are simply too high.'<sup>75</sup> None of this, of course, rules out the possibility or validity of ethnographic research. It does, however, point to the problems with DeNora's approach, which sees ethnography as the *only* way to draw links between music and its socio-cultural contexts. Certainly, no researcher occupies an

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<sup>68</sup> Peter J. Martin, *Sounds and Society: Themes in the Sociology of Music* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995) 159. Original emphasis.

<sup>69</sup> Pini provides a good defence of ethnography taking this into account. See Maria Pini, 'Situating Voices: Towards a Post-Foundational Study of "Women's Experiences"' in her *Club Cultures and Female Subjectivity: The Move from Home to House* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2001).

<sup>70</sup> Radway, 'Introduction: Writing *Reading the Romance*' in her *Reading the Romance* 5.

<sup>71</sup> Alexander, *Sociology of the Arts* 204.

<sup>72</sup> Kramer, 'Subjectivity Rampant!' 126.

<sup>73</sup> McClary, *Feminine Endings* 21–22.

<sup>74</sup> See McClary, *Feminine Endings* 21–22; Jenkins, McPherson and Shattuc, 'The Culture that Sticks to your Skin' 6–11.

<sup>75</sup> Jenkins, McPherson and Shattuc, 'The Culture that Sticks to your Skin' 10.

omnipotent position from which they can 'see everything.' The textual analysis of popular music is always situated in a particular time and place, and always serves particular ends (and not others).<sup>76</sup> Rather than perceiving this as a dismaying *lack* in popular music research, however, we would do well to acknowledge the advantages of an 'engaged' analytical approach to popular music.

This brings us back to the connections that bind together some of the disparate strands of popular music studies. Musicology and cultural studies share a concern with the meanings of popular cultural texts, and with the notion of an active audience (active, that is, in the production of meanings). In light of the above discussion, we can now see another link between these areas. Both have a tendency towards 'engaged' research: that is, an approach in which the scholar *participates* in cultural debates rather than remaining a distanced commentator. If research is carried out by people who have at some stage been passionate fans (or detractors) of the music in question, then I would argue that the textual analysis that they provide might be a very useful complement to ethnographic studies in the same area.

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<sup>76</sup> See Robert Walser, 'Popular Music Analysis: Ten Apothegms and Four Instances' in Allan F. Moore, ed., *Analyzing Popular Music* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003) 23.