

Popular Music and Society:
A Mission for Money or an Expression of Self

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In her article “Same As it Ever Was: Youth Culture and Music,” Susan McClary claims that unless we have an understanding “of shifting musical strategies and priorities...we can’t account for how musical styles, genres, conventions, artists, or songs participate in social formation” (McClary 32). In music over the past few decades, particular strategies have been constantly recurring. Through their music and performances, artists will make a controversial statement, often by promoting sex or drugs. Such a statement stimulates listeners, provokes discussion about the artist and music, and thus increases the artist’s audience and revenue.

The most recent example of this strategy is Miley Cyrus’s VMA performance. The provocative act stirred debate about the singer, whose album is currently ranked third on the iTunes Top Albums chart. Music scholar Theodor Adorno might argue that musical performances like Miley’s are just advertisements meant to attract buyers who are too simple to judge the content of the music they are listening to. Others like McClary and Tia DeNora, though, believe that music appeals to the body, and that we actively listen to it to achieve certain needs.

In his article “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening,” Theodor Adorno argues that primarily commercial interests drive music. Adorno studied the works of Karl Marx, from which he coined the term “commodity fetishism.” A fetish is a substitute object of desire, and Marx claimed that commodities could be fetishes (Adorno 37). Adorno describes the process of how music becomes a commodity and the journey to commodity fetishism.

In the article, the displaced desire referred to is that for freedom and the benefits of hard work. When a person works, he or she is separated from the benefits of their labor. In return, the person obtains money, but also wishes for freedom from work and an opportunity to enjoy

themselves. After the person works enough, they are able to afford a commodity like a concert ticket, which makes them happy. However, Adorno argues that this feeling of satisfaction is not real, but is an illusion. We are not so much happy with the music itself, but with our ability to purchase the ticket with our hard-earned money, and our feeling of fitting in with the crowd.¹ What we really get is “fake music” which will soon be replaced by new fake music, and the cycle will continue.

Adorno suggests that the commodity system of music requires regressive listeners. He says, “[Our] primitivism is not that of the undeveloped, but of the forcibly retarded” (Adorno 47). That is, music has become transparent, and its listeners are too simple to think otherwise. This is arguably true for much of today’s popular music. If you were to listen some of the top rated songs over the past few years, you may notice repetition in many song’s lyrics.

Take, for example, Justin Bieber’s smash hit “Baby,” which has over 900 million views on YouTube. The lyrics of the chorus are, “Baby, baby, baby oh/ Like baby, baby, baby no/ Baby, baby, baby oh.” The lyrics in Miley Cyrus’s “We Can’t Stop,” which she performed at the VMAs, are similarly repetitive. The chorus reads “And we can’t stop/ And we won’t stop/ Can’t you see it’s we who own the night/ Can’t you see it’s we who ‘bout that life.” The simplicity in these lyrics is almost comical, yet each of these two songs generated enough attention to earn a Number 1 spot on the iTunes Top Singles chart.

As Adorno claims, listeners today are too simple-minded to challenge any unoriginal music and will embrace almost anything.² Such regressive listening is “tied to production by

¹ On page 38, Adorno says, “The consumer is really worshipping the money that he himself has paid for the ticket...He has literally ‘made’ the success which he reifies and accepts as an objective criterion, without recognizing himself in it.” Adorno, T. “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening.” (1938).

² Page 47, “They are not merely turned away from more important music, but they are confirmed in their neurotic stupidity, quite irrespective of how their musical capacities are related to the specific musical culture of earlier social phases.” Adorno, T. “On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening.” (1938).

advertising,” which he explains in his example of Watney’s advertisement (Adorno 47). The ad reads, “What We Want is Watney’s.” The advertisement intrudes the audiences mind, putting in their mind an idea of what they want and need. And because, as Adorno claims, we are too simple-minded to argue, we fall into the ad’s trap and believe that we do in fact need product being advertised.

In today’s society, Adorno argues “Music...serves...as an advertisement for commodities which one must acquire in order to be able to hear music” (Adorno 48). In other words, Adorno suggests, instead of products like CDs, iPods, and concert tickets existing to make music available to listeners, commercial music exists to sell the products.

In regards to Miley Cyrus’ controversial VMA performance, Adorno might argue that the performance itself was an advertisement for Miley’s album *Bangerz*, on which the performance song “We Can’t Stop” is featured. The VMAs were broadcasted to thousands of viewers, all of whom witnessed her act. Because of the (to many people) scandalous elements of the act –like her revealing costumes and sexually suggestive dance moves –Miley’s performance garnered a lot of attention and fueled much discussion about her music. Some of the attention was positive, praising Miley for her confidence; while much was negative, shaming her for poor taste and showoff behavior. Whether the attention she has received from the VMAs is positive or negative, however, is not really significant. What matters is that as a result of all the talk about the performance, people have shifted their attention to her music. Consequently, they are listening to the album, which is evident on iTunes, where *Bangerz* is currently number 3 on the Top Albums chart.

All scholars do not share Adorno’s belief that our relationship with music is passive –that we simply fall into the advertisement of music and performances. In her article “Same As it Ever

Was: Youth Culture and Music,” Susan McClary discusses how listeners have a more complex relationship with music as it appeals “to the body” (McClary 31).

McClary uses the term “technologies of gender” to describe the ways in which we as a society learn what it means to be male or female. She suggests that different types of media –like television and music –contribute to the cultural construction of this meaning.³ In Miley’s case, the media might be considered her performance. Miley (a female) is depicted wearing revealing clothing, singing about drug- and sex-related topics. From this, McClary might say, the performance, and the song itself, constructs the image that females should wear skimpy clothes and act in sexual manners.

McClary expands her ideas to suggest a two-way relationship between music and listener. She says that music establishes how we experience our bodies, and our bodies simultaneously establish how we experience music. In the 1960s, “The impact of ‘sexual’ tunes on Americans...contributed to sexual liberation” (McClary 36). This may still be happening today, as is evident in Miley Cyrus’ performance. The song she sang, which repeatedly references sex (“Bet somebody here might get some now”), somewhat promotes sex and sexual experimentation. Celebrities in today’s society or looked at as idols or experts by non-celebrities. So hearing a celebrity like Miley say, “We can kiss who we want” assures the listener that he or she can do the same, and encourages them to do so.

Even if the listener does not apply the music’s lyrics directly into their lifestyle, it is possible that the listener can take the music and, in a way, live vicariously through it. In “Music

³ On page 33, McClary says, “gender –far from being determined by nature or biology –is produced and shaped by social discursive practices. I want to propose that music is foremost among cultural ‘technologies of the body.’” McClary, S. “Same as it Ever Was: Youth Culture and Music” in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music and Youth Culture*, edited by A. Ross and T. Rose. New York: Routledge, 29-40.

as a Technology of the Self,” author Tia DeNora says that music “provides a virtual reality in which listeners can express themselves” (DeNora 56).

As opposed to Adorno’s belief that music is simple and that its audience passively listens to it, DeNora suggests an even more active relationship between music and listener. She claims that listeners “engage in self-monitoring and self-regulation” (DeNora 52). That is, individuals actively select what music they listen to and when they listen to it. DeNora’s reasoning for such participation from the listener is that we use music in a sort of uses-and-gratifications model, implying that we seek out specific media (in this case, music) to satisfy particular needs. For example, if a college student finds out they failed a big exam and wants to feel better, he or she might play a song like “Walking on Sunshine” to feel happy. Perhaps the student is preparing to go to a party with friends. In this situation, he or she may play Miley Cyrus’ “We Can’t Stop” to set the mood for partying and fun.

In the first situation, the student uses music as a mood changer. In the second, music serves as a precursor to an associated activity. In addition to these uses, DeNora says, music also functions “in relation to...memory, spiritual matters, sensorial matters... and mood enhancement” (DeNora 47). How the music effects us is determined by the way we interpret it, a belief that would not be shared by Adorno.

If we are, in fact, active selectors of what music we listen to, why is there a pattern in society of provocative popular music? Perhaps, like Adorno suggests, this is due to society’s overall decline in taste (Adorno 29). However, good taste is not something that can be defined objectively, because every individual has different definitions of what is “good” and what is “bad.” Not only in music, but in clothes, food, etc. I suggest the reason is a combination of the three author’s theories. We sometimes actively choose to listen to popular music (McClary),

which has an image of being “cool” in society, because listening to it makes us feel “cool” by association (Adorno). Listeners who may not lead provocative lifestyles live vicariously through the music to feel like part of the “cool” crowd (DeNora). Artists like Miley Cyrus see this desire for such music, and create it themselves, thus continuing the cycle. This is just one theory among many concerning popular music in society. Perhaps in years to come, a new motif other than provocative subject matter will rise in popular music.