**On Cultural Contact in Popular Music
and the Case of Iceland**

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Introduction:

What follows is enquiry into artistic statements and their ability to communicate aspects not only of the individuals behind them, but also the cultures they arise from. This enquiry deals with dialogue, for there is a connection made in every artistic act, one that has the potential to convey much more than the meanings or messages apparent on the surface of the work. Revealing this level of communication will be the aim here, and we will approach the task following a course of selected philosophical postulates.

We will use isolation and estrangement as a point of departure, and concepts thereof will be laid out in the first section of this paper, along with some notions of communication and bridging. For, to be human beings is not only to come up against a near-endless amount of boundaries and exclusions – some self-imposed, some imposed socially, and some inherent – but also to be able to map and communicate our experiences with our every action, whether intentionally or not, and in so doing bridge the distances that constitute a significant aspect of our world-experience. Contact, therefore, is the main topic of this thesis, and in the second section we will be building some definitions thereof and examining just how contact comes to be through art, as well as how contact and communication can occur cross-culturally.

Our eventual focus will be on music, and, more specifically, popular music in the contemporary context as a medium for cross-cultural communication. In this pursuit, we will turn our attention to music in the third section and visit some conceptions of popular music in order to establish just what we mean by the term, as it is a notoriously confusing area and our investigation will be working toward a specific conception thereof which highlights folk music traditions and a shift in Western popular music discourse that occurred in the mid-1970s, exemplified by the punk happening and the decade that followed. We will look at how the rise of popular music and certain technologies associated with it since the middle of the twentieth century have facilitated international contact through music in a way that had never been possible before and, furthermore, how at the present point in time access to seemingly infinite musical content from each and every corner of the globe through the internet provides an unprecedented resource. But we will also be looking deeper into the essence of the phenomenon of music, insofar as that essence can be comprehended and dealt with in words – the theme of music and language, their similarities and differences, will be something we address – weighing the opinions of musicologists and neurologists on the subject of just why music moves us the way it does, and why, therefore, it can be such an effective mode of communication; and how, furthermore, music functions within industrial society as both product and vital expression.

Finally, in the last section of the thesis we'll turn to Icelandic popular music for some examples of what we have addressed in the previous sections, for it is the

assertion here that Iceland provides a unique model of popular music culture, and this study will delineate just why this is so. We will, therefore, briefly survey Icelandic popular music, following certain threads from the country's first encounters with popular music and its growth through its first decades, to the early 1980s and Iceland's emergence on the international popular music stage in the post-punk period, and from there on to the present day, wherein the country's pop scene is an important aspect of its international image.

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Contents:

<u>Isolation and Facticity:</u>

I – Agency and Emptiness

The first words of this world were ours. The same can be said of any reasons, meanings, perceptions, explanations, and judgements associated therewith. We confront the world that surrounds us at every moment as vastness in which no other voice but the human one can be discerned. We confront an emptiness. Not an emptiness of the world itself, but rather an emptiness regarding what we are often brought to expect of the world. Centuries of anthropocentric thought and teachings, at least in the Western traditions, have left a sense of expectation, a sense of entitlement to things that could never possibly be claimed. This is to say that there is, indeed, no voice but our own and none but ourselves to listen to it, and accordingly, we place ourselves in a strange relation to the world when we look at it as though we are somehow not one of its many inter-connected components, and thus entitled to exclusive answers and dominion. Thinking in this manner we cause emptiness to unfold before us like an expanse more immense than we could possibly comprehend. The fact of the matter is that there is no security, no favour for human beings, that is the emptiness addressed here; the silence of our surroundings in relation to our activity; our presence within a solitary expanse where nothing speaks of (or back to) us.[1] It must be stated again, however, that the world itself is not empty; far from it, it teems constantly with stupendous amounts

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[1] Indirect quote from "The Guest," by Albert Camus. From *Exile and the Kingdom*.

of life, but it is empty of concern or privilege for us. The surrounding world simply does not exist for or because of human beings, and this is the emptiness which haunts our every action.

But within our actions lies the way forward, for it is through our actions that we define and consecrate our being in and relation to this world. By way of our abilities to think, will, and act - our *agency* - we are able to develop ourselves and our relation to the world through interaction and reflection. Human agency shall be therefore, from the very outset, taken as the fundamental concept in the following investigation as it is the basis of everything that will be discussed here. As such, it is key to establish a point: our relation to the world develops from our interaction with it: thoughts, sensations, and actions; our *human* interpretations of and responses to what we experience. It is our physiology that enables our agency, and, in turn, it is our agency that enables us to be what we choose and make for ourselves what we will. All of this is stated here at the beginning of our investigation in order to face emptiness directly and remove any supposed connection with or dependence upon extra-human agency; to place us back in the world, for, there are ultimately no answers available to us that do not come out of our own agency, and there is nothing that does not result from the surrounding world. This notion of *correspondence*, of human reality corresponding to human biological capacity, is articulated by Noam Chomsky when he states, for example, that "our systems of belief are those that the mind, as a biological structure, is designed to construct. We interpret experience as we do because of our special

mental design." [2] And, what's more, "[t]hinking of humans as biological organisms in the natural world, it is only a lucky accident if their cognitive capacity happens to be well matched to scientific truth in some area." [3]

To speak of agency in this way, to situate it solely within ourselves and recognise the correspondence between our abilities and the surrounding world, brings the realisation that there is an amazing relationship between the world and our abilities to perceive it. From one moment to the next we have astounding ability to catalogue, interpret, decide and make judgements upon, and communicate anything we experience. Indeed, the inner life of a human being, and the capability therein, expands endlessly, just like the physical world that surrounds it. We can render our perceptions however we desire, through image, sound, words, even movement, and it is thus we are able to find meaning in, to relate to, and, ultimately to share this world we find ourselves in. It is this ability that we will be concerned with here, how it is that we are able to create for ourselves perspectives of the world, and, what's more, how we share these perspectives with one another. These actions, the very capability behind them, though, must be solely of natural order. For, to regard this inherent ability as something other than biological endowment in continuity with the surrounding world, is to rob both it and the world of all their wonderful intrinsic value.

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[2] Noam Chomsky, *Reflections on Language.* Republished in *On Language*, The New Press; New York, 2007. 7.

[3] Ibid, 25.

The declaration here is this: it is the miracle of human physiology, the Earth and the Sun, that brings our incredible experience of life to us. As Albert Camus states: "This world has ceased to have its reflection in a higher universe…the heaven of forms is figured in the host of images of this earth." [4] With this in mind, we must always remember that it was human agency that created the vast ensemble of various gods, creation stories, and mythologies throughout history from experiences in the world. This agency we possess, and the emptiness that faces it form a complementary pair, each one infusing and affecting the other. As Jean-Paul Sartre states: "[I]t is on the ground of the engagement which I am that [my world] appears," [5] a statement which illustrates that although each of us is able to delineate amazing conceptions of the world, and generate all manner of explanations and descriptions thereof, in the end, no matter how accurate they may seem, they remain but human interpretations. There exists no one objective interpretation of the world, outside of our capabilities, as we create them all based upon interaction with the surrounding world. We craft our own understandings based upon our experiences (or derive them from the accounts of others), but none of these can in any way be definitive. To see this effect, one need only imagine certain things that one experiences pleasurably as being unpleasant to another, for example. And this is, in fact, saying nothing of non-human beings. One must imagine the world sounding or appearing completely differently, for example, if one wishes to even begin to

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[4] Albert Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*. Trans. Justin O'Brien. London; Penguin, 2000. 47.

[5] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Freedom and Responsibility." *Essays in Existentialism.* Ed. Wade Baskin. Carol Publishing; New York, 1990. 63-68. 63.

conceive of the nature of the world outside of human experience. For indeed, such a nature does exist, but all we have as humans is the understanding of things that our particular physiology allows us, and in this statement resides the germ of *estrangement*, while, on account of our agency there is always a distance to be managed, not just between the individual's inner life and the surrounding world, but between each individual as well.

II – Estrangement.

There is a simple paradox to the human situation, and it is summed up by the following: we are all alone, each of us, together. The question is, if we are all in the same situation, why are there distances to be managed between us? Why is there such estrangement at the heart of our experience of the world? The answer has to do with our agency. If we recognise that each of us is a thinking, acting being unto him or herself, thereby possessing a perception of the world based primarily upon individual experience, then each of us is an existence unto her or himself. But why is it that the human being should find itself in this situation? Of course, it cannot be assumed that other creatures might not face a similar situation, but, that is not a matter we are able to pursue here, and so our question remains why are *we* alone in a world full of life?

If we turn to Jean-Paul Sartre's explanation of our condition, we will find some ideas to aid in our investigation. What Sartre refers to as the ontological separation is where we begin:

At the origin…there is a fundamental presupposition: others are *the Other*, that is the self which *is not* myself. Therefore we grasp here a negation as the constitutive structure of the being-of-others…This *not* indicates a nothingness as a *given* element of separation between the Other and myself. Between the Other and myself *there is* a nothingness of separation. This nothingness does not derive its origin from myself nor from the Other, nor is it a reciprocal relation between the Other and myself. On

the contrary, as a primary absence of relation, it is the foundation of all relation

between the Other and me. [6]

Separation, therefore, fundamental and unalterable, is the very basis of our

experience of individuality. We are perpetually estranged from one another, but

why is that so? It is, as Sartre says, because our ability to step back and observe (i.e.

negate) ourselves at the heart of our individual world-view brings about separation.

In other words, our agency enables us to plot complex relations, but doing so

requires negation, marking us from what we are not. We are not one another, as

there is insurmountable individuation that separates us, but how does that come to

be? One of Sartre's central notions is that "man is the being through whom

nothingness comes to the world," [7] by which he meant that due to our capacity for

reflection and abstraction – i.e. delineating what we are *not* – we cause nothingness

and separation to enter the world. If that was not the case, we can assume we would

merely be pure being in flow, completely unaware and incapable of thought,

individuation, or particular willed action of any sort. Thus, from nothingness we are

able to create ourselves and a world according to our experience. Sartre explains

this by the following:

[B]y the mere fact that *there is* a world, this world can not exist without a univocal

orientation in relation to me…it is through human reality that there is a world. Man and

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[6] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes. Washington
Square Press; New York, 1984. 312-313.

[7] Ibid, 59.

the world are relative beings, and the principle of their being *is* the relation. It follows that the first relation proceeds from human-reality to the world. To come into existence, for me, is to unfold my distances from things and thereby cause things "to be there." But consequently things are precisely "things-which-exist-at-a-distance-from-me." Thus the world refers to me that univocal relation which is my being and by which I cause it to be revealed. [8]

This adds depth to the idea of emptiness we previously established, for, as human beings, we indeed stand at all times in a unique position of distance and estrangement in a world to which we are directly connected and dependent upon. What's more, as Jean Baudrillard points out, the integration of and increased reliance upon technology in our lives has the effect of adding further distance between us and the world:

[H]ousehold appliances, cars, gadgetry, heating, lighting, communications and transport systems – all require no more than minimal energy and action in order to function properly. Often a slight motion of the hand or eye suffices; no dexterity is called for – at the most, reflexes. The domestic world, almost as much as the world of work, is governed by regular gestures of control and remote control. Buttons, levers, handles, pedals (even nothing at all – as when one passes in front of a photo-electric cell) have thus replaced pressure, percussion, impact or balance achieved by means of the body, the intensity and distribution of force, and the abilities of the hand (from which little more than quickness is now asked). A prehension of objects involving the whole body has given way to simple contact (of hand or foot) and simple surveillance

[8] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness.* 406-7.

(by the eye or, occasionally, by the ear). In other words, only man's 'extremities' now

have an active part in the functional environment. [9]

Baudrillard continues, saying that "abstractness of energy sources is thus

accompanied by a concomitant abstractness of human praxis with respect to

objects," [10] a concept that illustrates how our ability to remove ourselves both

mentally and, increasingly, physically from the world – to affect it and make of it

what we envision from a distance – serves to exacerbate our estrangement from it.

What's more, this opens up a dangerous path, for, once one is distanced, removed;

once one perceives no vital connection with something, it becomes very easy to

make judgements on its value according to wholly human standards. Regardless of

perceptions and judgements, however, the surrounding world abides, just as it was

before humankind ever came to create abstractions of it, and as it will be when

perhaps no evidence of us remains but those abstractions, useless to any other

being. Thus we can begin to see what it is to exist as beings of agency in emptiness.

Does the view we have established here so far correspond to the sort of

anthropocentrism derided in the previous chapter, however? If we recall the earlier

statements about correspondence from Chomsky, keep Sartre in mind, and add what

Joseph S. Catalano says about Sartre's ideas, we will be able to see past the trap of

anthropocentrism: "[I]n its most general sense the ontology of [Sartre's] *Being and*

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[9] Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*. Trans. James Benedikt. Verso; London, 2005. 50.

[10] Ibid.

Nothingness has a twofold purpose: first, to show that the world is the way it is because our body is the way it is; second, to show that all our interpersonal relations arise from a specific contact with another person, that is to say, from the contact of one body upon another… ." [11] Catalano continues by saying that "[t]he general direction of this ontology is to reveal the intimate tie between any type of structure and human existence…each facet displaying its own unique characteristics, but only because *we* exist." Thus, "Sartre's ontology is an anthropocentrism that is not a relativism. Given that all structures exist only in relation to us, they are still objective…," which avoids anthropocentrism (and solipsism) by establishing the individual as the centre of her or his world, as such, but also as just one being among others in the same situation. [12] So while it can be said that we all create worlds for ourselves, we do so – with similar capacities – from a given world which does not exist for us and which we did not cause to exist. It, and we, simply are, together yet apart. Thus we arrive at another of Sartre's central notions: freedom. To connect this notion with those of negation and nothingness, he offers the following:

Man is free because he is not himself but presence to himself. The being which is what it is can not be free. Freedom is precisely the nothingness which *is made to be* at the heart of man and which forces human-reality *to make itself* instead of *to be*. As we have seen, for human-reality, to be is to *choose oneself*; nothing comes to it either from the outside or from within which it can *receive or accept*. Without any help whatsoever, it

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[11] Joseph S. Catalano. "Sartre's Ontology from *Being and Nothingness* to *The Family Idiot.*" *Sartre Today: A Centenary Celebration*. Eds. Adrian van den Hoven & Andrew Leak. Berghan Books; Oxford, 2005. 17-30. 19.

[12] Ibid, 19.

is entirely abandoned to the intolerable necessity of making itself be – down to the slightest detail. [13]

And furthermore:

In fact we are a freedom which chooses, but we do not choose to be free. We are condemned to freedom, as we said earlier, thrown into freedom or, as Heidegger says, "abandoned." And we can see that this abandonment has no other origin than the very existence of freedom. [14]

As Heidegger himself puts it, concerning the human entity (Dasein): "[It] is essentially ahead of itself, it has projected itself upon its potentiality-for-Being before going on to any more consideration of itself. In its projection it reveals itself as something which has been thrown. It has been thrownly abandoned to the 'world'…" [15] He continues:

While Dasein can indeed be brought authentically face to face with its thrownness, so as to understand itself in that thrownness authentically, nevertheless, this thrownness remains closed off from Dasein as regards the ontical "whence" and "how" of it. But the fact that it is thus closed off is by no means just a kind of ignorance factually subsisting; it is constitutive for Dasein's facticity. It is also determinative for the

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[13] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness.* 568-9.

[14] Ibid, 623.

[15] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time.* Trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson. Blackwell; Oxford, 1962. 458.

ecstatical character of the way existence has been abandoned to its own null

basis…Proximally, the "throw" of Dasein's Being-thrown into the world is one that

does not authentically get "caught." The 'movement' which such a "throw" implies

does not come to 'a stop' because Dasein now 'is there'. Dasein gets dragged along in

thrownness; that is to say, as something which has been thrown into the world, it

loses itself in 'the world' in its factical submission to that with which it is to concern

itself. [16]

One may ask, with all this talk of thrownness, what choice does one have in all of

this? To which the response must be simply that on account of our situation and

our agency, and how they function together, one has every choice except that of

being born into the world. We are, by all measure, thrown into this life. And so,

here we are.

There is, as was stated earlier, no guiding voice, no set path, and no extra-human

agency to make sure everything works out right for us in this world. There is

nothing for us but what we make for ourselves, to paraphrase Sartre. [17] What reason

or sense is there in such a reality?, one might ask. Certainly none if we are

expecting some end result from all of this, or assuming that we have some special

privilege in the world. But this seeming lack of sense is precisely why Albert

Camus refers to our situation as absurd. For Camus, our thrownness constitutes an

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[16] Heidegger, *Being and Time*. 399-400.

[17] Re: "Man is nothing else but what he makes for himself," a statement found in
"The Humanism of Existentialism." *Essays in Existentialism*. 31-62. 36.

important point: "The absurd is essentially a divorce. It lies in neither of the elements compared; it is born of their confrontation…I can therefore say that the absurd is not in man…nor in the world, but in their presence together. For the moment it is the only bond uniting them." "The absurd has meaning only in so far as it is not agreed to." [18] And for Camus it is our lot to take up the cause, the struggle of the absurd, as such; to act and define ourselves despite there being no reasons (other than our own) for doing so, nor any end result provided for us. The fact that no reasons or answers are provided, however, is not the point. But then, one might raise concerns about the timeliness of these views. Does any of what we have included thus far still bear relevance on the condition of people in the world today? "To the extent that existentialism reflects the experience of Western Europe in the 1940s, it seems inextricably tied to its own facticity," [19] states Thomas R. Flynn. "As Sartre liked to quote from Hegel, its essence is its history (*Das Wesen ist was gewesen ist*). But to the extent that it addresses the human condition (of situation, choice, mortal temporality, and the like), its relevance transcends the historical values one attaches to these variables. The drama may shift with the dramatis personae, but…the 'plot'…remains the same: people trying to make sense of an increasingly complex, threatening, and impersonal world." [20]

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[18] Camus, *Myth of Sisyphus*. 33.

[19] Thomas R. Flynn. "Sartre at One Hundred – A Man of the Nineteenth Century Addressing the Twenty-First?" In *Sartre Today*. 1-14. 11.

[20] Flynn. "Sartre at One Hundred… ." 11.

III – Bridging.

Everything we encounter incorporates a division in its own way. We perceive these divisions by the very processes of our existence. And perhaps it is the ultimate humour of our circumstance that it is the very agency that enables such powerful and detailed experience of the world which keeps us alone in it at every step. But at this point let us take care to avoid an easily-reached (though wholly unnecessary) conclusion with existentialist rhetoric and not paint a dismal scene in which nothing knows connection and is merely unaccounted-for being, toiling absurdly in a limitless emptiness. The burdens of freedom and estrangement, as found in the sources we've used, are indeed formidable, but what must be observed is that, though relentless, they do not obliterate us. Although, to an extent, we each carry individualised, exclusive worlds with us, and there is an undeniable, unending emptiness always present at the very core of our relation to others and the surrounding world, the very agency that enables our comprehension of that emptiness and estrangement (to turn the earlier statement around) also enables connection and togetherness.

Sartre said the following: "Everything would be very simple if I belonged to a world whose meanings were revealed simply in the light of my own ends…I would be the one by whom meanings come to reality in itself." [21] This, of course, is not the case, he continues: "There exists, in fact, something in 'my' world other than

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[21] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness.* 654.

plurality of possible meanings; there exist objective meanings which are given to me as not having been brought to light by me. I, by whom meanings come to things, I find myself engaged in an *already meaningful* world which reflects to me meanings which I have not put into it." [22] One of the most significant aspects of our thrownness is that we are, in fact, all in the same situation. And that being the case, we all have certain responses and possibilities available to us within said situation. This fact in itself is a point of bridging, and as Sartre has pointed out, there exist certain techniques of appropriating the world and ourselves that we all have in common: "[O]n the level of techniques of appropriating the world, the very *fact* of the Other's existence results in the fact of the collective ownership of techniques." [23] Common exposure to the same situation results in commonality in reaction, and that is where bridging begins.

Despite all our inherent separation and difference of experience, there is very little, really nothing, that cannot be conveyed from one person to another, because, although it may seem that an infinite number of alienations and exclusions confront us in our lives, whether cultural, social, biological, or even down to matters of taste and preference, we are all ultimately reacting to a common situation in similar ways. We exist in a world full of our individual worlds, as it were, and through our actions, whether intentionally or not, we reveal those worlds to one another. Furthermore, we also reveal our integrations in and interactions with the

[22] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness.* 655.

[23] Ibid, 657.

surrounding world. We find this notion of *apparentness* in Sartre: "[T]he world announces the Other to me in his totality and as a totality…nothing is hidden and in so far as objects refer to other objects, I can increase indefinitely my knowledge of the Other by indefinitely making explicit his relations with other instruments in the world;" [24] and also in Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his ideas about picturing relationships: "The fact that elements of a picture are related to one another in a determinate way represents that things are related to one another in the same way…*That* is how a picture is attached to reality; it reaches right out to it…It is laid against reality like a measure." [25] We will discuss these ideas further in upcoming sections, but for now it can be said that we observe the actions and statements of others, interpreting, processing, and applying them to our own perceptions of the world, thereby connecting separate existences. Revealing one's world and one's interaction with the surrounding world is as easy as existing and utilising one's agency. In this manner, we add our meanings to our worlds, while populating the surrounding world with refracted images of us and itself which are then taken up by our fellows, proving that someone, somewhere, has indeed passed along the same way. The notion of bridging existential alienation is present in these statements, as they show how individual existences can find connection based upon a similar situation, illustrating the concept of *universality*.

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[24] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness.* 389.

[25] Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus. Trans. D.F. Pears and
  B.F. McGuinness. London: Routledge, 2001. 2.15-2.1512.

In Sartre, we find the notion of the universality of human experience, as opposed to the universality of human nature. If we adhere to Sartre's fundamental assertion that human existence precedes any sort of essence (which is developed only by one's interactions with the surrounding world and other people, and, ultimately, one's choices associated therewith), then we can proceed here with his idea of the universal human situation in mind. Sartre's assertion was that there was no universal human nature, but a universal human condition, and that "…although the configurations [of other human experiences and realities] may differ, at least none of them are completely strange to me, because they all appear as attempts either to pass beyond these limits or to recede from them or deny them or adapt to them. Consequently, every configuration, however individual it may be, has a universal value." [26] To put it in a way that we will return to: "Every configuration has universality in the sense that every configuration can be understood by every man." [27] Therein lies the way in which our investigation will proceed, for, if every configuration of human existence can, in fact, be envisioned by every person, there exists an amazing capacity for connection that transcends exclusions and points of alienation – individuality, language, location, class, biology, etc. – that contribute to estrangement between people in the larger world. In the end, let us say of isolation and facticity that, for human beings, everything incorporates division, but also communication, and there is much being said if we know how to listen.

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[26] Sartre, "The Humanism of Existentialism." 52.

[27] Ibid, 53.

Communication in the Discourse of Art:

I – Resonance and Contact.

Common elements of communication - evidence of presence, understanding, empathy, and so on - can be conveyed with but a couple of words: yes, I have seen. I hear, I know, etc. Deeper, more complex relations and connections through linguistic interactions follow from simple examples such as these, of course, but what sort of communication is to be found outside of linguistic engagements? The principal points for our investigation into this topic will be: a) that human language enables meanings to be conveyed from one person to others and therefore needs meanings placed into it, something to convey and be understood; and, b) that language requires a common understanding of particular rules and forms in order to function properly.

Language systems, despite their similar purpose, are, for the most part, not easily interchangeable. There is immense variation between human languages, and having command of one or even a number of languages does not enable possession or comprehension of them all. Not even close. But surely there must be some commonality. Human languages, as constructions of human agency, can only differ so much, and only in certain ways, from one another, as they all require and use the same means. If we are to proceed with the notion of universality in relation to human experience of the world, it will be essential at this point for us to find a way

to explain the concurrent variations and similarities between languages. Keys to such an explanation are found in Noam Chomsky's notions of universal grammar. "[H]uman cognitive systems, when seriously investigated, prove to be no less marvellous and intricate than the physical structures that develop in the life of the organism," he states. "Why, then, should we not study the acquisition of a cognitive structure such as language more or less as we study some complex bodily organ?" [28] He goes on to say that "[a]t first glance, [this] proposal may seem absurd, if only because of the great variety of human languages. But a closer consideration dispels these doubts. Even knowing very little of substance about linguistic universals, we can be quite sure that the possible variety of languages is sharply limited." [29] This is expanded with the following:

> [I]t is clear that the language each person acquires is a rich and complex construction hopelessly underdetermined by the fragmentary evidence available [to it]…The conscious mind is endowed with no advance knowledge…[but] [n]evertheless, individuals in a speech community have developed essentially the same language. This fact can be explained only on the assumption that these individuals employ highly restrictive principles that guide the construction of grammar. Furthermore, humans are, obviously, not designed to learn one human language rather than another; the system of principles must be a species property. [30]

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[28] Chomsky, *Reflections on Language*. 10.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid, 11.

Chomsky states that languages must necessarily correspond to certain rules which must themselves correspond to certain biological principles. [31] Each human language will conform to universal grammar, he says, but "languages will differ in other, accidental properties. If we were to construct a language violating UG, we would find that it could not be learned by [natural process]. That is, it would not be learnable under normal conditions of access and exposure to data." [32] Universal grammar, he explains, "is an innate property of the human mind," [33] and thus his likening of it to a bodily organ. "A physical organ, say the heart, may vary from one person to the next in size or strength, but its basic structure and its function within human physiology are common to the species," he points out. "Analogously, two individuals in the same speech community may acquire grammars that differ somewhat in scale and subtlety." [34] Language, he points out, is "…acquired by virtually everyone, effortlessly, rapidly, in a uniform manner, merely by living in a community under minimal conditions of interaction, exposure and care…Individuals of a given community each acquire a cognitive structure that is rich and comprehensive and essentially the same as the systems of others." [35] Once again, we see here the concept of universality. Despite the variety of human language systems, and the fact (already stated) that said language systems are often

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[31] Chomsky, 29.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Ibid, 34.

[34] Ibid, 38.

[35] Ibid, 144.

not easily interchangeable, the faculty of language in the human being is universal –
given the proper physical/social conditions for it to develop, of course.

By viewing language in this manner, we can connect it up to what we have
already covered regarding the place of the human being in the world and the
relation of human agency thereto because Chomsky's universal grammar fits
perfectly with the conception of humans having generally the same capacities to
deal with the same situation of existence. Turning once again to Jean-Paul Sartre
now, we will further develop a notion of how we actually use our language abilities:

> Since the verbal unity is the meaningful sentence, the latter is a constructive act
>
> which is conceived only by a transcendence which surpasses and nihilates the given
>
> toward an end…To understand a sentence spoken by my companion is, in fact, to
>
> understand what he "means" – that is, to espouse his movement of transcendence, to
>
> throw myself with him toward possibles, toward ends, and to return again to the
>
> ensemble of organized means so as to understand them by their function and their
>
> end. [36]

As is indicated in this quote, the meaning behind what is conveyed by language
comes first, is then placed into linguistic form by the speaker and interpreted by the
listener. We return to human agency again as our key concept, as it is what enables
exchange between individuals in any case, but it is our ability to step back from
ourselves and the surrounding world that enables us to envision states and

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[36] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*. 660.

occurrences, meanings and results, before they ever come to be. In dialogue, then, we are able to move together through possibilities and envisioned circumstances and come to some similar point in the end. But how could this sort of connection occur outside of language held in common? What sort of dialogue is there to be found outside of linguistic engagements that enable more-or-less direct communication of thoughts and meanings?

Keeping with the notion of a universal condition, we will now put forth *resonance* and *contact* as the next fundaments in our investigation. It should make sense at this point that what a person might say in one particular language *can* very well be understood and related to by someone outside of that language group, provided that person has the ability to decipher what's being said. What if, however, we are dealing with two persons who have no common language? Should a person say or write something, anyone who has common language with this person could, hypothetically, comprehend the statement. If no common language exists, however, translation and deciphering is required in order to comprehend the statement. That requires, somewhere along the line, specialised knowledge and skills that are (for numerous reasons) not possible for everyone to possess. And what's more, if translation is not done correctly, intended meanings could possibly be altered in some way, constituting false, or broken, communication. In any case, if common language were to be removed from the scenario, to what extent could dialogue take place? If a statement were put forth in a strictly artistic manner, just how much could be conveyed or understood?

Let us begin to address this by turning to Ludwig Wittgenstein, and a selection of remarks on *propositions.* First of all, Wittgenstein says that "[a] proposition is a description of a state of affairs. Just as a description of an object describes it by giving its external properties, so a proposition describes reality by its internal properties." [37] "To understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true," [38] he says, as "[a] proposition *shows* its sense. A proposition *shows* how things stand if it is true. And it *says that* they do so stand," [39] and, furthermore, "[t]o understand a proposition means to know what is the case if it is true." [40] For our purposes, we will use these conceptions to look beyond the problems of non-common language by pointing out again, as David Stern does, that the essential meaning behind any statement exists before the statement itself:

The mental entity or process, whatever it may be, that animates our use of language is what distinguishes the merely mechanical process of simply manipulating signs and behaving in the appropriate way from genuine understanding. Thus a thought, in the *Tractatus* sense of the term, is intrinsically related to its object – there is a logical connection between the two – a connection that could only be established by the mental activity of applying language to the world…On this view, our language is like paper

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[37] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. 4.023.

[38] Ibid, 4.024.

[39] Ibid, 4.022.

[40] Ibid, 4.024.

currency in an economy on the gold standard, only meaningful insofar as it is backed up by gold in the bank – that is, intrinsically representational processes. [41]

Let us conceive of this in terms of what Walter Benjamin refers to [42] as pure language: "[T]hat which is meant in all languages…," [43] or: that which exists within a statement that transcends the language used to convey it. Insofar as there is no need to translate every word of a sentence from one language to another, as Benjamin states, we can see the evidence of this. It is something both Benjamin and Wittgenstein show, actually, as the meaning behind any statement is not entirely constituted by the words used to convey it. In translation this is encountered regularly, insofar as once meaning is conveyed, certain words become superfluous. "When translating one language into another," Wittgenstein says, "we do not proceed by translating each *proposition* of the one into a *proposition* of the other, but merely by translating the constituents of the propositions. The meanings of simple signs (words) must be explained to us if we are to understand them. With propositions, however, we make ourselves understood." [44] In this view, says Michael Morris, "[t]he extra-linguistic items which linguistic items have to be correlated with for languages to be meaningful are items in the world." [45] This is to

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[41] David G. Stern. *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language*. Oxford University Press; New York, 1995. 69.

[42] In "The Task of the Translator." Found in: *Selected Writings Vol. 1*. Ed & Trans. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. Belknap: Cambridge, 1999. 253-263.

[43] Ibid, 261.

[44] Wittgenstein, 4.025 – 4.026.

say that languages are not systems of arbitrary signs, [46] and that the correlations between linguistic and non-linguistic elements, therefore, must have primary human meanings. Morris explains that

> [I]f we are to understand what Wittgenstein is proposing, it is crucial to see that his account of language is really *rooted* in thoughts about models…[but] [i]n understanding [his] theory we should not be looking for analogies between paintings or photographs, on the one hand, and sentences on the other. We should be trying to understand what is important about the kind of model in which we might '[put] a world together experimentally'…: [A] model is composed of a number of movable things arranged in a certain way. Each of the movable things in some sense stands for, or represents, a movable thing in the real world. And the range of ways in which the movable things in the model might be arranged is exactly the same – allowing for scale – as the range of ways in which the movable things in the real world might be arranged….Movability is just possibility made vivid: what is movable *can actually* be differently located…even what is fixed *could have* been differently located… [47]

Morris explains how this modelling principle, as he calls it, relates to translation and the difference between linguistic systems:

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[45] Michael Morris. *Wittgenstein and the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. Routledge; London, 2008. 59.

[46] Ibid, 59-60.

[47] Ibid, 119.

[S]ameness of form between a model and reality is *nothing but* there being a rule of translation between the two. This is, in effect, a maximally abstract conception of similarity. A translation of a text from one language to another produces something which is in a certain way *equivalent* in the second language to what the original text was in the first. Such a notion of equivalence is what the demand of sameness of form eventually amounts to…which is to say that what is depicted can be recovered…as the symphony can be recovered from the score…The important thing about the notion of translation in play here is that it does not involve piecemeal translation, of a single text or sentence of one language into another language: it is the idea of one whole language being translated into another… [48]

This concept of *equivalency*, of whole languages translating into one another illustrates, albeit abstractly, Chomsky's concept of language being a fundamental component of human physiology. We can, furthermore, tie this in with the aforementioned notion of correspondence by stressing the following: we come upon things in the world as basically objects to our agency and therein connections are made, for we name and explain things according to our capacity for doing so. Thus our world takes on the character we give it. And so we come to the conclusion that "[a] proposition communicates a situation to us, and so it must be *essentially* connected with the situation. And the connexion is precisely that it is its logical picture." [49] The conveyance of this propositional mental unity is facilitated by language, of course, but also by art. In fact, it could be said that the artistic

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[48] Morris, *Wittgenstein and the Tractatus.* 154.

[49] Wittgenstein, 4.03.

experience is simply an encountering of the propositions of others. A work of art in any form is, essentially, some aspect of the surrounding world as envisioned and represented by another. If, then, this propositional essence exists at the core of any human statement, it must follow that said propositional essence holds meaning for whomsoever encounters it just as it did for the individual who stated it. Meanings, again, are not constituted solely in the language used to convey them, and so artistic action, in whichever form, is then, essentially, another mode of externalising propositions, and as such is a mode of communication perhaps analogous to, but not the same as language.

Let us state again that language signifies meaning, but add that it also signifies belonging. Each grouping of people uses its own language system to some extent, and knowledge of such languages signifies, both inwardly and outwardly, belonging to the group the language corresponds to. Language works in this respect without us even being aware of it much of the time, as anyone who has experienced being outside of the cohesion a language creates among its users will understand. Now, if there were such a thing as a universal language, we can assume that anyone could understand what anyone else had to say. We are not afforded any such luxury, however, and the countless different languages we use serve as significant points of alienation. An important reason for this is that languages (*vernaculars*) are connected to specific places and/or groups. Any vernacular, be it, for example, national language or dialects thereof, subculture slang, or technical jargon, is an expression of a certain place, group, or discourse, and thus signifies presence and

recognition thereof. By speaking a particular vernacular, one assumes membership in the collectivity that it corresponds to, whereby affirming it to him or herself and demonstrating it to others.

Any grouping of people requires bonds, and externalising those bonds is part of belonging to a collective identity. In regards to language, one has to be immersed in it in order to fully externalise the bond to whichever discourse it corresponds to, making it an immediate connection, but one which is easily exclusive. We will return to the topic of vernaculars, but for now let us continue looking beyond the realm of linguistic interaction and show how cultural contact can be facilitated within artistic statements.

II – Cultural Communication.

At this point, we have reached the notion of externalising propositions in artistic discourse, and have set it up as a means of communication. If we look now at group behaviour in relation to this notion, we will arrive at the next step of our investigation, the process of externalisation and bonding that brings about cultural contact.

Before venturing into the topic of communication and cultural contact, though, let us take care not to lose sight of what we mean by "culture," as it could be interpreted in a number of ways. Suffice it to say that culture will, for our purposes here, simply refer to discourses which particular groupings of people use to state their collective identities. When we look at cultures, we see signifiers, that is how we recognise any particular culture as such, and it is through signifiers that a culture not only appears to the world, but how it defines itself. In order to be distinct, a culture must essentially have some points of bonding and particular ways of externalising and internalising these bonds. Thus signifiers must be *apparent*, as a culture collectively measures and conducts itself thereby. Signifiers are what ultimately indicates belonging to participants and non-participants alike, and language is only one of many possible signifiers. It happens to be a very immediate and powerful one but, as was already stated, one that is rather exclusive. If this seems to echo statements we've already made regarding alienation, it is because group identity, just like individual identity, is formed upon negation. In place of the

I, there is a We, determined by what We are not. Thus, alienation between groups is as simple and fundamental as it is between individuals. But let us not forget the statement of universality we've been adhering to, for therein lies the way out of the mire of cultural isolation. The sentiment we are aiming at here is simple: if a group of people have come together, what is common between them is not beyond the comprehension of any person outside of the grouping, for all is present in the surrounding world each of us inhabits. Certainly, there are things we may never experience first-hand, and the particulars of various cultures may not be entirely apparent to everyone at first, but, the conditions for their presence can be understood, perhaps in the modern world more so than ever, universally. The words may be different, but the meanings are not.

But how do we interact with said meanings? What we are looking at here in terms of cultural contact is common experience revealed through the lens of a specific grouping of people. This is not to say that cultures present themselves as one single entity, however. This is an important point, as cultures are not created from, nor do they represent, one point of view, and therefore a culture cannot be regarded as a singular entity. Cultural discourse, in and of itself, does not define or speak entirely for the individuals who give rise to it, but it does reveal the perspectives and interactions thereof, particular configurations of particular people and the surrounding world. As John Shepherd puts it,

> [s]ociety is neither a 'thing' nor simply a collection of people, events and objects to
> which reference can be made by phenomena (such as art) which are inherently 'less'

social. Sociality is manifest in structured relationships between people and the worlds they create, and in the structures of the symbolic and cultural forms which arise through and give expression to such relationships. 'Culture'…may be thought of as the processes through which the logics of these structured relationships are made manifest in perceptible forms. [50]

Thus, an important point of clarification to our investigation: when we look at other cultures, we are not seeing some totality that represents a people definitely. That would remove the very notion of sociality, as Shepherd puts it. Rather, when looking at a culture we must take into account that the apparent entirety is actually a model of the inter-relations of its constituents. We are observing, then, not "a people," but rather people, in a functioning collectivity that has risen from the particular place or situation they find themselves in. People enter into relationships in order to survive, Shepherd states, and,

> [r]eproducing this order of relationships involves…processes of communication.
> People…act in terms of the meanings that the world has for them…[and] if they are
> to act in ways which are more or less consistent with the order of relationships within
> which they live, then people need to symbolize this order to themselves in
> consciousness. It is through cultural processes that people represent to themselves in
> perceptible and symbolic forms the nature of the public, social world in which they
> live…Sociality, then, is as manifest in the private, internal world of individual

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[50] John Shepherd, "Music as Cultural Text." *Companion to Contemporary Musical Thought, Volume 1*. Ed. Tim Howell. 128-155. Routlidge; New York, 1992. 134.

awareness as it is in the external, public world of shared behaviour. The two put each other in motion, and are never static, either in themselves, or in relationship to one another. [51]

We are constantly affirming ourselves and our world, to ourselves and to others, in order to maintain our existence and identity. Social bonding is key to this, and, as Shepherd states, "although people are individuals, there are ways also in which the logics of their inner lives become codes for the orders of relationships in which they live." [52] To observe culture, then, is to observe a model of an intricate system of relations between agency and world.

The discourse of art – creative expression and reception thereof – is an act of presenting and gathering around expressions that we identify with, externalising and affirming our bonds, thereby incorporating them into our identities. It functions by way of presenters and observers as elements in a sort of dialogue, finding opportunity within to reveal and exchange perceptions, thus facilitating evaluation and reinforcement of the experiences, beliefs, and perceptions of each. In this dialogue, each participant is both speaker and listener, constantly evaluating what is being said, applying it to her or himself and allowing a reciprocal action, both participants influencing each other not only in terms of performance in the dialogue, but also in terms of perception outside the event. Artistic actions are ultimately gestures of sharing, through which individuals, alone and within cultural groupings,

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[51] Shepherd, 144-145.

[52] Ibid, 146.

are able to define themselves both to themselves and to others. We affect one another in this manner through the various forms of human art, and the variation of statements being produced in the global context of human cultures are all in relation, constantly influencing and defining one another. This process and its effects may be direct, as in cases where there is commonly-held language and clear communication along those lines, but, artistic discourse does not necessarily require common knowledge of rules in order to facilitate contact. It can be a form of communication unto itself, separate from any vernaculars used in conjunction with it. Observers who are outside of a particular culture will observe and interpret the products of that cultural discourse differently than those who created them, and as such, will appropriate them in different ways, bringing one cultural discourse into play with another. In this process, the universality of the human situation is made apparent, as we see how the meanings of other groupings of people fit alongside our own. Observing what other people have decided to convey through artistic gestures enables us to see how they have responded to our common situation. It is, again, as Sartre puts it: "…each type of human conduct, being the conduct of man in the world, can release for us simultaneously man, the world, and the relation which unites them…,"[53] insofar as "…nothing is hidden and in so far as objects refer to other objects, I can increase indefinitely my knowledge of the Other by indefinitely making explicit his relations with other instruments in the world."[54] Again, the configurations may be different, but what we express, and the manner in which we

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[53] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness.* 34.

[54] Ibid, 389.

express it, are often quite similar. Thus, to observe the experience of another is a crucial step in our own personal definition. "In order to get any truth about myself, I must have contact with another person," Sartre says. "The other is indispensable to my own existence, as well as to my knowledge of myself. … Hence, let us at once announce the discovery of a world which we shall call intersubjectivity; this is the world in which man decides what he is and what others are." [55] When, therefore, a person sees similarity of experience in art, or when a participant in one particular culture sees that culture reflected back through the works of another, something deeply significant has occurred.

We are now at the threshold of the meaning of cultural contact. It has to do with depictions and apparentness, as we have seen, and if we consider an artistic gesture to contain a depiction of agency and world, then each of us has our own world to depict. We do so, however, not as singular voices in the vastness, but as participants in various cultural groupings which operate amidst countless others, constantly presenting and observing, influencing and being influenced in turn. In this process of gesturing, the full discourse of global art and culture comes to be: art follows art.

But it is now time to turn to the main topic of our investigation: music. So far, no reference has been made to music in any of the sources we have looked at, but in the following chapter we will show how music is a perfect medium for the manner of contact we have presented here.

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[55] Sartre, "The Humanism of Existentialism." 52.

III – Music as Medium.

From this point on, we'll be increasing our focus on music, narrowing down closer to our main topic. Here now, we are at the mid-point of this investigation, a place where the philosophical and cultural study elements converge. Our present question: how does music enable contact between individuals, and how, furthermore, does it enable the sort of cultural contact that was discussed in the previous chapter?

In certain art forms, we can rely on language or images to convey meaning, but in music, we have only structured sound. Why then would it be suggested here that music is such an excellent medium for communication? We'll address this by examining some thoughts on music and language. Robert Jourdain states that "[a]lthough minds communicate through many sorts of symbols and gestures, only language and music – whatever their differences may be – operate on a large scale and in great detail. And while other forms of communication are found throughout the animal kingdom, only human beings are capable of producing and comprehending music and language." [56] Diana Raffman explains why there is a relationship perceived between the two, but why music is set apart from other non-linguistic arts: it is a result of "…[music's] apparent possession of grammatical structure – or, more properly, the listener's apparent possession of (domain-specific)

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[56] Robert Jourdain, *Music, The Brain, and Ecstasy*: How Music Captures Our Imagination. HarperCollins, New York, 1997. 274.

psychological rules for apprehending that structure." [57] "[M]usic's grammatical

structure," she cautions, "may mislead us into semantic temptation. Music may be

intended, but it isn't intentional: it isn't *about* anything." [58] This idea that music and

language function similarly but are nonetheless fundamentally different is found in

numerous sources, but in Theodor Adorno's writings we find some of the best

explorations thereof. "Music is similar to language," he says, but "[w]hoever tries to

take music literally as language…shall only end up confused." [59] This is because the

exchange, the experience of and interaction with musical process, is fundamentally

different from that of language. "[M]usic's exchange unfolds in another manner than

meaningful language: not in inter-personally referenced meanings, but in their

absorption in organisation," [60] Adorno says. He continues:

> To distinguish music from bare succession of sensory stimulation, we have given it a
>
> sense- or structural coherency. Insofar as nothing stands isolated within it, everything
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> in musical contact with what comes next and everything in spiritual connection with
>
> its distants, in memory and expectation we let every word pass…The whole realises
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> itself against the intentions and integrates them through negation. Music…receives

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[57] Diana Raffman. *Language, Music, and Mind*. MIT Press; Cambridge, 1993. 41.

[58] Ibid.

[59] Theodor W. Adorno, "Fragment über Musik und Sprache." Trans. A.S. Kitchen. *Musikalische Schriften I-III*, Suhrkamp; Frankfurt, 1978. 251-256. 251. *This text is published in a slightly different format, in English, as: "Music, Language, and Composition" from *Essays on Music*. Ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie. 2002; Berkeley: University of California Press. 113-126.

[60] Ibid, 254.

intentions, not diluting them into an abstract higher intention, but, in the blink of an eye, joining them…

We can see here the notion of intention, a propositional unity (as established earlier), residing at the core of musical statements, albeit incorporated into the medium itself moreso than in language. That is to say that the medium of music requires incorporation of intentions into the musical act itself, as we are not expressing direct logical thoughts through music, as Adorno shows:

In the case of linguistic forms, their participation in the medium that is simultaneously the medium of cognition (*Erkenntnis*) always lends them the appearance of something like "transparency" or comprehensibility…In the visual arts, their constitution, in the external sense, which after all conveys the outer world of objects, diminishes their enigmatic character. The relationship to objects is merged with the content, even in the case of the associations of abstract painting. While such elements, in the non-musical arts, may ultimately reinforce irrationality by concealing it, in music this irrationality is located immediately within the phenomenon itself…All music is characterized, first of all, by what happens to language when concentration is abandoned. Music gazes at its listener with empty eyes, and the more deeply one immerses oneself in it, the more incomprehensible its ultimate purpose becomes, until one learns the answer, if such is possible, does not lie in contemplation, but in interpretation. [61]

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[61] Adorno, "On the Contemporary Relationship of Philosophy and Music." *Essays on Music*. Ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie. 2002, Berkeley: University of California Press. 135-161. 139.

The fact that music requires a different level of immersion than other art forms should, at this point, be clear, but we still take meaning from music, much like from other, more concrete communicative actions, how is that so? Let us look at Adorno's ideas regarding interpretation, about which he says:

Music and language both demand [interpretation] equally, but differently. Interpreting language means to understand language. Interpreting music: making music…This requires imitation of itself, not decodification. Only in mimetic praxis, which internalises the silent imagination, in much the same way as silent reading, does music develop; never in examination, in which it is interpreted free of its execution. If one wants to compare it to an act in spoken language, it would be closest to the copying of a text to accord with a specific point of view. [62]

We will discuss notions of making music shortly, but for now let us make clear a central point of Adorno's: musical discourse requires immersion in the form its content is presented in. Much like language exchange requires knowledge of and adherence to specific rules and certain actions in order to take meaning from it, so does musical experience, but music requires us to be immersed in it in order to understand what it offers, as, unlike language, the musical act is, itself, its meaning. But then what is it, exactly, that we hear in music? At foundation, we are hearing sounds arranged into form, the product of another's agency, in much the same way as in language or through visual arts, but, it goes beyond that because in music we

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[62] Adorno, "Fragment… ." 253.

are unable to follow along directly while meaning is disclosed. As Jourdain points out, "…as much as we would like to regard a melody as a sentence, there can be nothing like a language's grammar in music. The grammars of natural languages are designed for exactitude. Particular kinds of words in particular forms and sentence positions generate precise meanings…But musical phrases are highly malleable and tolerant of ambiguity." [63] At this point, however, we are still holding music and language too close to one another, looking to explain them together, but Adorno can help us to find a new approach: "Meaningful language would like to express the apprehended absolute, but it slips from the grasp of its every intention, leaving each and every one behind, ultimately. Music, however, meets the absolute immediately, but in the same blink of the eye it is obscured…such that that which is completely visible can no longer be seen." [64] This is to say that language is direct, but unable to express fully what music, the more indirect medium can. How is that so? It is because language generates descriptions of the world, while music embodies its processes. Or, as Jourdain puts it: "Music mimics experience rather than symbolizes it, as language does. It carefully replicates the temporal patterns of interior feeling, surging in pitch or volume as they surge, ebbing as they ebb." [65] Despite their differences, he goes on to say, "parallels between music and language are still very much a topic of research," [66] as

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[63] Jourdain, 274.

[64] Adorno, "Fragment… ." 254.

[65] Jourdain, 296.

[66] Ibid, 277.

…both language and music are founded on generative hierarchies. These hierarchies start from a surface structure consisting of patterns of notes or words that make melodies or sentences. In the levels beneath, relations among surface patterns, and relations among such relations, extend downward in increasing abstraction. At bottom resides a hierarchy's deep structure, a stripped-down representation of fundamental properties. It is at these deepest levels that we understand and remember and reason. And it is from these quintessential representations that we generate further surface representations, whether improvising on a guitar or telling a story. [67]

Music and language are similar tasks, it can be said, but they reach their results in different ways. If we return now to the notion of vernacular language and interpretation, we will see that music requires no real translation or deciphering. "Music is not tied down to specific meanings and functions, as language is," [68] say Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff. "In a sense, music is pure structure, to be 'played with' within certain bounds." [69] Music-making has specific rules, yes, but it requires only attention to itself to interpret, rather than the specific knowledge language systems require.

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[67] Jourdain, 296.

[68] Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff, *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music* (The MIT Press, 1983). 8.

[69] Ibid.

What vernacular distinction comes down to ultimately in music is coding. As participants in cultural discourse, we operate by means of internalised codes, and as Lorenz Reitan puts it:

Although music is non-verbal, and not based on cogent structural and epic rules and semantic units, it is, like all cultural phenomena, made up of signals organized in structures that give musical meaning within particular cultural environments…Music is a form of communication; the originator of a musical composition is transferring it to a receiver or listener. To achieve that goal the sender must utilize a code that can be understood by the listener, assuming that both parties are sharing musical experiences within a common cultural frame. [70]

But how is it that we end up with this vernacular musical coding? As Reitan and Daniel Levitin both point out, it comes from exposure to and interaction with the particular cultural discourses we take part in. "Familiarity with codes is always a result of training, [whether] the passive influence of loudspeakers in supermarkets or scholarly studies," [71] says Reitan, while Levitin states that "[a]ll of us have the innate capacity to learn the linguistic and musical distinctions of whatever culture we are born into, and experience with the music of that culture shapes our neural pathways so that we ultimately internalize a set of rules common to that musical

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[70] Lorenz Reitan, "Does It Really Mean Anything? Some Aspects Of Musical Meaning." *Companion to Contemporary Musical Thought, Volume 2*. Ed. Tim Howell. 625-633. Routlidge; New York, 1992. 626.

[71] Ibid, 631.

tradition."[72] This, then, brings us to the notion of a universal musical grammar, analogous to Chomsky's linguistic counterpart.[73] Perhaps, Levitin says,

…the ultimate illusion in music is the illusion of structure and form. There is nothing in a sequence of notes themselves that creates the rich emotional associations we have with music…Our ability to make sense of music depends on experience, and on neural structures that can learn and modify themselves with each new song we hear, and with each listening to an old song. Our brains learn a kind of musical grammar that is specific to the music of our culture, just as we learn the language of our culture.[74]

Following up on this, Levitin says, "I believe that we all have an innate capacity to learn any of the world's musics, although they, [like languages,] differ in substantive ways from one another."[75]

As we have shown, precise language deciphering requires specialised skill if it is to be done cross-culturally. Music, however, does not. There is very little translation to be done with music, apart from, possibly, lyrical content, but here we will not view that as absolutely central to overall interpretation. The main point is

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[72] Daniel Levitin, *This is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession.* London; Penguin, 2007. 27.

[73] This notion is explored in technical detail by Lerdahl and Jackendoff in *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music*.

[74] Levitin, 108.

[75] Ibid, 109.

this: cultural differentiation within music is established with codes, and there are innumerable codes within musical discourse, but they are all understood by the nature of the discourse itself. This is to say that if one enjoys music, and has an understanding of how musical principles – rhythm, pitch, melody, etc. – function, one will be able to move from statement to statement, recognising and appreciating cultural contexts. Propositional unity resides in every musical statement, but it is not incorporated nor interpreted as directly as it is in other kinds of statements. Music explains itself by its very function, and it is "…the act of modelling deep relations among sound components that constitutes our final comprehension" [76] of it, says Jourdain. To which he adds: "[M]ost compositions lack a specific, agreed-upon reference to the contents of the world. But when we bring our own life situations to music, we can make of music what we will. Music idealizes emotions negative and positive alike. By so doing, it momentarily perfects our individual emotional lives." Thus, he says "[t]he 'meaning' we feel is not in the music as such, but in our own responses to the world, responses that we carry about with us always. Music serves to perfect those responses, to make them beautiful... ." [77] Jourdain goes on to state, therefore, that

[i]f music describes essential mental processes, then shouldn't all human beings have an intuitive understanding of the music of all cultures?...[M]usic always exists as a confined system of relations, of conventions for how melodies and harmonies and rhythms are to be composed. Certain elements imply other elements, and so force the

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[76] Jourdain, 55.

[77] Ibid, 322.

mind toward the anticipations that let us perceive large musical structures. Without such a system, any musical event would be equally probable at every moment and we would forever be in the position of a child learning to hear music for the first time. So music's meanings, its motions and emotions, must necessarily be expressed through the devices of musical custom, and will be perceived only by those steeped in those customs. [78]

We can hear one another, as it were, and also invest our own meanings in our musical customs, which makes music a medium of communication that, while not as direct as some, allows us nonetheless to express fundamental truths. And if we return to the idea of cultural discourse representing the network of people that gave rise to it, and apply it to what we have said about music, we will see that much indeed can be observed in a musical statement. Touching on correspondence again, Shepherd states that "[t]he ability of music to evoke meaning is facilitated through a conformity between the *structures* of music and the *structures* of the human mind." [79] "When an individual invests an aspect of their inner life in the medium of music, therefore," he says "they are probably investing the medium with a meaning which will resonate with the logics of broader social and cultural contexts. It is this resonance which enables music to 'communicate' powerful cultural meanings…Music, like any other symbolic medium, 'communicates' both commonalities and differences. In this way it is capable of mediating powerfully

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[78] Jourdain, 297.

[79] Shepherd, 130.

between the individual and society." [80] Music, indeed, is a tool for personal

definition and the types of music one enjoys can be powerful signifiers. It is

certainly the case that numerous subcultural discourses over the last half-century

owe much to musical discourse, for example. [81] As Shepherd points out: "Music

lovers and fans take from music meanings implicit in their inner lives which are

capable of being invested in or drawn from the music's sonic medium." [82] And,

furthermore,

> …the ability of music to 'communicate' cross-culturally suggests that music acts not
>
> only as a medium for the mapping or notating of shared cultural meanings and their
>
> individual negotiations, [but] [l]ike other symbolic media, music has an ability to
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> 'instruct' that derives from the social and cultural commonalities which form a
>
> context for its creation and appreciation. Yet, in functioning cross-culturally, music
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> also has a potential to 'instruct', the power of which does not derive from such
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> commonalities…This potential derives from the particular capacity of music to speak
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> directly and concretely to the logics of an individual's inner life, a capacity which
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> derives in turn from the distinctive experiential qualities of sound. [83]

But what is it about sound in particular that is so important to this medium? We

have yet to address the specifics of sound in musical experience, but will do so now,

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[80] Shepherd, 146.

[81] See: Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style.* Routledge; London, 1979.

[82] Shepherd, 147.

[83] Ibid.

as it is a key component to musical experience. Shepherd states that "[s]ound brings the world into people from all directions, simultaneously and dynamically," and "[w]hile sound may have a discrete material source…it is experienced as a phenomenon that encompasses and touches the listener in a cocoon-like fashion. Since people typically hear not one, but several sounds at once, they are encompassed and touched by a world of simultaneously existing objects and events...a world that only exists while it is being articulated through sound." [84] He continues on by saying that

[s]ound reminds people that there is a world of depth which is external to them, which surrounds them, which touches them simultaneously from all directions, and which, in its fluidity and dynamism, constantly requires a response. It is revelationary rather than incarnate…Equally, the human experience of sound involves, in addition to the sympathetic vibration of the eardrums, the sympathetic vibration of the resonators of the body. Sound is thus *felt* in addition to being heard….[it]…enters the body and is in the body. Sound reveals not only the internal properties of inanimate material sources in the external world, but also the inner life of the individual in terms of the way the internal configurations of the individual's body affect the quality of sound production…[it] is thus ideally suited as a material medium on which to map the somatically experienced inner lives of individuals, the complexly structured and simultaneous interactions of people in the external social world, *and* the fluid and dynamic relations between the two. To create music is to create the potential to draw out and influence the structure of the individual's inner life in a manner that does not flow from surrounding social and cultural commonalities. Music, in other words has

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[84] Shepherd. 147.

the power to 'pull out' of the individual directly and concretely certain

'unprecedented' orders of meaning, and in this way to influence the reproductive

processes of the social and cultural formations within which the individual

lives…This power lies in the way in which music brings into play the *inherent*

qualities of sound in the evocation of the internal and external social worlds and the

order of relations between them. Music reminds people of their inescapable

involvement in these worlds. And it does this because, as projected into the sounds of

music, these worlds enter into a direct and tangible dialogue with the meanings of the

listener's inner life as *somatically coded and experienced.* It is this tangible, bodily

interaction between the sounds of music and the meanings invested in them that

makes the symbolic awareness of self and society as evoked through music more

direct and concrete than language or other, visual media of communication…[85]

Thus it is dialogue that is at work in music, just as in any other art form. Music is,

though, a phenomenon that affects us entirely, producing reactions throughout the

body and enabling both investment and conveyance of personal experience to a

remarkable extent. And so, as observers of cultural discourse, we can gather much

from musical statements. In the end it is not all down to obtaining a meaning,

however, as "[i]n music, what is at stake is not meaning, but gestures," Adorno

says. "To the extent that music is language, it is, like notation in music history, a

language sedimented from gestures. It is not possible to ask music what it conveys

as its meaning; rather, music has as its theme the question, how can gestures be

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[85] Shepherd, 148-9.

made eternal?" [86] We are, then, experiencing pure gesture in musical statements, pure proposition, as such. Musical discourse facilitates contact to such an extent therefore, that it matters very little if we don't understand specific signifiers in it, for it offers a mode of communication that goes beyond the need for explicit understanding of signifiers. It is here now, in conclusion, that we come to one of Friedrich Nietzsche's grandest statements, and see him eye to eye:

> Singing and dancing, man expresses his sense of belonging to a higher community; he has forgotten how to walk and talk and is on the brink of flying and dancing, up and away into the air above. His gestures speak of his enchantment. Just as the animals now talk and the earth gives milk and honey, there now sounds out from within man something supernatural: he feels himself to be a god, he himself now moves in such ecstasy and sublimity as once he saw the gods move in his dreams. Man is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art… [87]

Associated with any artistic action there is a truth, a resonance, a connection, as well as redemption, release, and metaphysical transfiguration, as Nietzsche puts it. [88] Music indeed "…speaks from the heart of the world," [89] as he stated, whence it

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[86] Adorno, "On the Contemporary Relationship… ." 139.

[87] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings.* Trans. Ronald Spiers. Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1999. 18.

[88] In *Birth of Tragedy.*

[89] Nietzsche, 103.

reveals us to ourselves, enabling us to share our respective worlds, and the

surrounding world, with one another.

<u>Toward a Contemporary View of Popular Music:</u>

I – Popular Music and Folk Traditions.

Having discussed how music enables contact, we must now move into the topic of music as it is implemented and received, and look at some topics regarding popular music. There is much that can be said here, so we must limit ourselves to discussing only what is necessary for our investigation, for, popular music is a complex and often confusing, contradictory discourse, but one in which there is much evidence of and opportunity for connection.

To begin, a broad definition: essentially, popular music is the music of modern industrialised society, which has evolved from pre-industrial musical roots – so-called folk traditions. Contemporary popular music is a vast, varied discourse containing many different styles and sub-styles, all of which can trace their heritage back, in some way, to certain aspects of folk music traditions. Unfortunately, though, popular music is most often regarded as a particular sort of Western music industry product – world-renowned superstars touting hit songs and such. This makes popular music easy to define in terms of its most ubiquitous facets, but we will stay away from that here, because while what we are seeking does have much to do with the widespread nature of popular music, it lies beyond the surface-level, the product-level, which is too often assumed to represent and explain the whole.

As Reebee Garofalo explains, popular music and the common perceptions of it arrive in the present day as a result of cultural inheritance:

[Throughout a large portion of their history] European societies were characterised by a two-tiered system of culture that was composed of folk culture and high culture. While there is ample evidence to suggest that there was considerable interaction between the two…these different levels of culture were officially considered separate and distinct. Historically, folk culture has been associated with the poor and those lacking formal education – in European feudal societies, the peasantry; after the Industrial Revolution, agricultural workers and the urban proletariat. It was a collective and participatory culture, shared by a particular community of people. The music arising from it was comparatively simple in form…performed by nonprofessionals [and] its production and consumption were non-commercial. At the other end of the European cultural spectrum was high culture, which was associated with the ruling classes – the feudal aristocracy and the capitalist bourgeoisie. Its music was more complicated in form…and composed by paid professionals who were commissioned through a system of patronage. Because this music was notated…it required a certain literacy and training for its performance. High culture thus imposed a separation between artists and consumers that was unknown in folk culture. What was a community in folk culture became an audience in high culture. [90]

As industrial society developed, popular culture "insinuated itself between folk culture and high culture as a third cultural category," Garofalo explains, "a hybrid

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[90] Reebee Garofalo. *Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the U.S.A.* Pearson; Upper Saddle River, 2005. 2.

that was distinguishable from both but borrowed freely from each as needed." [91] As a result of this high/low culture model, however, popular music has often been looked down upon through the years. For some, the notion still remains that pop is less important, less valuable than "…so-called serious or, as it is known in the realm of informed barbarism, 'classical' music," [92] as Adorno says. Adorno himself, for that matter, was in strong opposition to the popular music of his time, and although his writings contain splendid insight into the phenomena of music, he did not attribute the same value to all musical praxis. And rightfully so, as the term popular, or pop, has always been connected to engineered entertainment, something that was already big-business in Adorno's time. The problem that Adorno's critique of popular music poses to our age, is, however: that he was writing in and of a particular time and the landscape has changed since, but, his critique still carries significant weight, as Adam Krims points out: "His well-known, perhaps notorious, rubrics…seem to lie inextricably as a foundational trauma in the discipline; and even those of us, perhaps the majority, in popular music studies who contest his descriptions nevertheless find it necessary to confront them." [93] We will return to Adorno's critique again later, but our aim for now is to get beyond the standard perceptions of popular music, by highlighting the elements thereof that constitute valuable cultural discourse.

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[91] Garofalo, 2.

[92] Adorno, "On the Contemporary… ." 135.

[93] "Marxist Music Analysis Without Adorno: Popular music and Urban Geography" by Adam Krims. *Analyzing Popular Music.* Ed. Allan F. Moore. Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 2003. 131-157. 131.

In order to accomplish this, we must first make the connection between pop and folk music traditions. We ended the last section with Nietzsche, and it could easily be asked: "Do Nietzsche's quotes really apply to the topic here? Certainly, he wasn't speaking of popular music?" Not entirely, no, but let us take note when he says that "…folk song is the 'permanent trace of a union of the Apolline and the Dionysiac'. The fact that it is so widely distributed amongst all peoples and grew ever more intense in an unbroken succession of births bears witness to the strength of that artistic double drive in nature, a drive which leaves traces of itself in popular song in much the same way as the orgiastic movements of a people are eternalized in its music." [94]

To which he adds:

[A]bove all else we regard folk song as a musical mirror of the world, as original melody which then seeks for itself a parallel dream-appearance, and expresses this in poetry. Thus melody is the primary and general element which can therefore undergo several objectifications in several texts…Melody gives birth to poetry, and does so over and over again, in new ways…in the poetry of folk song we see language straining to its limits to imitate music…with this observation we have defined the only possible relationship between music, word, and sound: the word, the image, the

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[94] Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy.* 33-34.

concept seeks expression in a manner analogous to music and thereby is subjected to the power of music. [95]

Richard Schact says of Nietzsche: "[I]n his later writings no less than at first, Nietzsche drew upon the phenomenon of music as a source of insight with respect to our human reality and possibility… ." [96] Schact explains the importance of folk tradition therein:

It is essential to recognize and bear in mind that Nietzsche thinks first and foremost of music being made, rather than simply listened to. The essence of dance obviously is dancing, rather than (voyeuristically) watching others dance. And so also for Nietzsche the *Urphänomen* of music is that of bursting into music-making, primordially in the form of bacchic-choric singing. He takes such singing to be a psychosomatic expression of ecstatic frenzy – like dancing, with which it was originally united. And even though it has been much subdued and refined in the course of its history, it still reaches and moves us (when it does) at this same elemental level. That is the basis of its ability to reach across lines of cultural difference, for it is not so much a universal language as an expression of vital excitement to which we are primed to resonate from the depths of our own vital nature. [97]

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[95] Nietzsche. 33.

[96] Richard Schact. "Nietzsche on Music." *Reading Nietzsche at the Margins*. Eds. Steven V. Hicks & Alan Rosenberg. Perdue University Press; West Lafayette, 2008. 115-134. 117.

[97] Ibid.

Our investigation places great importance in these notions of folk tradition and community, of music-making as participatory expression. Before going any further, however, we must note that folk and popular do not mean the same thing. There are distinctions to be made, as Roy Shuker explains:

> While in a sense it can be argued that all popular music is a form of folk music, more specifically, and historically, [folk] is reserved for music passed on from person to person or generation to generation without being written down. Folk is regarded as simple, direct, acoustic-based music, drawing upon the experiences, concerns, and customs (folklore) of 'common people' and their communities…Its forms and variants exist in country and are often regionally based…[98]

So, we must be careful to note that the term "popular" has no simple explanation. The simplest one possible must be derived from the music's place in the global industrial/urban paradigm, and, more often than not, it has to do with semantics: popular music is popular, i.e. appealing or belonging to many. Not necessarily in a fabricated or manipulative manner, however, as is often assumed to be the case – and certainly can be, sometimes – nor in a manner of insignificance and easiness either, for, although popular music has become inexorably bound to commercialism, that does not work as a blanket characterisation. Popular, as a term, says Peter Van Der Merwe, is "…seriously misleading." As, "[i]n the ordinary sense of the word the popularity of the music…is almost irrelevant. To be popular,

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[98] Roy Shuker. *Key Concepts in Popular Music (Second Edition).* Routlidge; New York, 2005. 112.

whether in the sense of 'generally liked' or 'of the people', is an evanescent quality."
And "[i]f history follows its usual course the popular idioms of today will become
the learned idioms of tomorrow, and the antiquated academicism of the day after
tomorrow. In short, the term 'popular' is an infernal nuisance, but there seems no
alternative to it." [99]

What we're dealing with here, ultimately, are just appellations, but, we must
understand why confusion regarding terminology within popular music impacts the
discourse as it does. Why is this so? It has to do with commodification and
specialisation, insofar as at one point there would have been no terms – something
often still seen in non-industrial musical discourse. Music has long been something
that people simply do, an act of community and expression, but, when it became
possible to commodify music, there came a need for terminology and partitioning.
Popular music was born in the industrial era, in tandem with what Van Der Merwe
refers to as "the great musical schism." He states that "…[t]he chasm that now
separates the popular musician from his 'serious' colleagues was [in the past] only a
small but perceptible rift... [as] the dances, marches, drawing room ballads, and
popular songs [of yesteryear] were regularly augmented by arrangements from
more pretentious music…" while, "[i]n the days when most musical entertainment
was necessarily home-made, arrangements of all kinds had an importance which

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[99] Peter Van Der Merwe, *Origins Of The Popular Style.* Clarendon Press;
    Oxford,1992. 5.

[is] now difficult to imagine." [100] The "home-made" in this statement meaning that there were no particular powers that directed musical discourse and no required manner in which it occurred. It simply happened at the level of the participants. This, Van Der Merwe says, is where things changed in the nineteenth century:

Popular music was undoubtedly vulgarized by the growth of commercial interests and the mass migration to cities. Classical music, as it ceased to be the diversion of a small upper class, was acquiring its present overtones of culture and uplift. Composers, far from being mere skilled craftsmen, were beginning to see themselves as rather superior beings…The upshot was that by the end of the [nineteenth] century three types of music could be recognised. There was the basic nineteenth century style, so ubiquitous and commonplace that no one thought of giving it a name – my 'parlor' music. There was 'serious', 'good', or 'classical' music, which was rapidly becoming predominantly the music of the past. And there was folk music: a notoriously confusing category. [101]

Misconceptions have been just as much a problem for folk as for popular music. In the contemporary era, folk distinguishes basically "…what is neither 'art' music nor music commercially produced for a mass audience," [102] Van Der Merwe says, and it remains a specified a form and concept unto itself. The light in which we are looking to paint folk tradition here, however, is perhaps best characterised by

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[100] Van Der Merwe, 18.

[101] Ibid, 19-20.

[102] Ibid, 20.

Christopher Small's notion of musicking: [103] a sort of primordial musical discourse,

occurring everywhere at any time; people giving music shape in the world without

the presence of any limiting or controlling factors, i.e. industry and

commodification.

Our assertion here is that popular music retains its connection to this primordial

musical discourse because it can still represent it within the modern discursive

system of commodification, control, and presentation. Generally, within popular

forms, much like the folk forms they evolved from, there are fewer restrictions and

guidelines than in the music of the conservatory, for instance; the point being not to

replicate something as noted, but rather to bring living music into the world and

share it according to the value of that very act. Creative expression, therefore, is

what enables significant contact to take place within these forms of music, as they

accommodate interpretation, enabling many different elements to be placed into

them and be reflected back. If we take a look now at some of Small's statements

regarding musicking, popular music's succession from folk tradition will become

clearer. First of all, he states that "[m]usic is not a thing at all but an activity,

something that people do." [104] From this easily-overlooked point, he shows how the

tendency to view music as a special commodity leads to the notion of the

"…unchanging, immanent meaning that [is revered in] paintings, books, pieces of

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[103] See Small's *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening.*
   Wesleyan University Press; Middletown, 1998.

[104] Small, *Musicking… .* 2.

sculpture and other art objects…" [105] being applied to it. Which, he states, comes with a few corollaries:

[One] is that musical performance plays no part in the creative process, being only the medium through which the isolated, self-contained work has to pass in order to reach its goal, the listener. [Another] corollary is that a musical performance is thought of as a one-way system of communication, running from composer to individual listener through the medium of the performer. This is perhaps just another way of stating the first, though it brings a change of emphasis, for it suggests that the listener's task is simply to contemplate the work, to try to understand it and respond to it, but that he or she has nothing to contribute to its meaning…It suggests also that music is an individual matter, that composing, performing and listening take place in a social vacuum; the presence of other listeners is at best an irrelevance and at worst an interference in the individual's conception of the musical work as it is presented by the performers. A flow chart of communication during a performance might show arrows pointing from performers to as many listeners as are present; but what it will not show is any arrow pointing in the reverse direction, indicating feedback from the listener to performers and certainly not to the composer (who in any case is probably dead and so cannot possibly receive any feedback). Nor would it show any that ran from listener to listener; no interaction is assumed there. [106]

He continues:

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[105] Small, 6.

[106] Ibid.

Neither the idea that musical meaning resides uniquely in musical objects nor any of its corollaries bears much relation to music as it is actually practiced throughout the human race. Most of the world's musicians – and by that word I mean…not just professional musicians, not just those who make a living from singing or playing or composing, but anyone who sings or plays or composes – have no use for musical scores and do not treasure musical works but simply play and sing, drawing on remembered melodies and rhythms and on their own powers of invention within the strict order of tradition. There may not even be any fixed and stable musical work, so the performer creates as he or she performs while the listeners, should there be any apart from the performers, have an important and acknowledged creative role to play in the performance through the energy they feed (or fail to feed), selectively and with discrimination, back to the performers. [107]

Small's view is that "…performance does not exist in order to present musical works, but rather, musical works exist in order to give performers something to perform" [108] and that by widening "…the circle of our attention to take in the entire set of relationships that constitutes a performance, we shall see that music's primary meanings are not individual but social." [109] "The fundamental nature and meaning of music lie not in objects, not in musical works at all, but in action, in what people do," he says, and "[i]t is only by understanding what people do as they take part in a musical act that we can hope to understand its nature and the function it fulfils in

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[107] Small, 7.

[108] Ibid.

[109] Ibid.

human life." His use of the term musicking puts forth a useful tool to help us with this understanding:

So far as I know the word *musicking* does not appear in any English dictionary, but it is too useful a conceptual tool to lie unused…[It] does have an obscure existence in some larger dictionaries, but its potential goes unexploited because when it does appear it is used to mean roughly the same as "to perform" or "to make music" – a meaning that is already well covered by those two words…I have proposed this definition: *To music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is called composition), or by dancing.* [110]

Furthermore, re-iterating points we covered in the last section, he states that

The act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies. They are to be found not only between those organized sounds which are conventionally thought of as being the stuff of musical meaning but also between the people who are taking part, in whatever capacity, in the performance; and they model, or stand as metaphor for, ideal relationships as the participants in the performance imagine them to be: relationships between person and person, between individual and society, between humanity and the natural world…The act of musicking, in its totality, itself provides us with a language by means of which we can come to understand and

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[110] Small, 9.

articulate those relationships and through them to understand the relationships of our lives. [111]

Thus we can see the connection popular music has with musicking: it functions with it as a prescription much of the time. Many forms of pop music place a significant value in interaction, interpretation, and accessibility, which keeps them as close to pure musicking as is possible in the modern climate. But what is the connection between pop and folk? It is, as was stated at the beginning of this section, that what we conceive as popular music today has grown directly out of folk traditions.

It is a crucial fact for our investigation that contemporary popular music is descended primarily from African folk traditions transplanted in America, which are traced from work and spiritual songs, to blues and early jazz, to rhythm and blues, to rock and roll and onward. By the 1930s, a new discourse was opened up by American popular music travelling around the world and encountering other musical customs, a process that intensified upon the arrival of both jazz and rock and roll. By the 1960s pop music had become an international art form, as cultural discourses came into play together all over the world, and these will be our next steps, as we move into the complicated global discourse of popular music.

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[111] Small, 13-14.

II– Global Pop Discourse

   As American popular music's travels around the globe in the first half of the

twentieth century increased – jazz during the World War 2 years, and rock and roll

in the later half of the 1950s – a new global music discourse, which brought

disparate cultures together like no other before it, was created. This intermingling

resulted in a remarkable flowering of pop music all over the world in the 1960s and

70s, but those were times when the Western music industry had much control over

musical experience, causing a one-way-street effect.

   The evidence of cultural contact during those years is remarkable when looked at

today, but, at the time, many had no idea it was happening. The aforementioned

one-way-street effect was a result of the Western music industry functioning as the

primary provider of musical experience for many people, and thus, while British

and American music found its way around the world, the effects of its influence

were largely ignored by its system. On the one hand, records were circulating the

globe, and wherever Western popular music went it met with and was mixed into

local music customs, creating a vast variety of new forms and sounds. In South

America, Africa, Europe, Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere, musical discourses

were meeting and fusing, resulting in the very type of cultural contact we spoke of

earlier. On the other hand, however, these international sounds were not what the

music industry in the West was interested in, and as important as they were in their

home contexts, they very seldom found any sort of reciprocity. This has led to

perceptions of international pop actually being a one-way street, and that international popular music was another sign of a larger cultural imperialism.

"In most places, the introduction of Western music goes back a few hundred years, but its imposition became vastly more intensive in the twentieth century," [112] says Bruno Nettl. "Virtually all of the world's people have been exposed to masses, hymns, marches, rock and roll, waltzes, and jazz…," he says, "...[but] it is the variety of responses and of ways in which the world's musics have managed to maintain themselves in the face of the onslaught that requires us to interpret this...as far more than a mere expansion of the history of Western music." [113] International popular music exists on account of globalisation, and, certainly in some cases, it represents the most ostentatious aspects of capitalism and consumerism. That is not a one-sided story, however, and there is much to be said about the intersection of cultures in this case, beyond the imposition of one on another. Music, being an expression of people in the world, has everything to do with the circumstance, place, and history of those who create it, and popular music throughout the twentieth century was a significant component of numerous events and movements in human society. Its general history, therefore, along with that of the world in general, is one of human expression in a climate of increasing industrialisation and consumerism. The emergence of a global popular music discourse, therefore, cannot

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[112] Bruno Nettl. *The Western Impact on World Music*. Schirmer; New York, 1985. 3.

[113] Ibid. 3-4.

be regarded as simply an effect of globalisation, or a re-culturing of the world. But, it cannot be completely disconnected from those, either, and thus: mass culture and mass media, the stigma attached to them, and the effects the music industry has had on music in the world.

In the internet age, we have at hand the history of recorded music as an archive, to be perused more or less as we desire. Before the internet enabled that, however, barriers were an important factor in musical experience. To see what those barriers were, and explore the topic of mass media, we need to focus on how technology, society, and music developed during the first half of the twentieth century. Garofalo introduces the topic in this manner:

> The invention of new mass communication technologies – records, radio, film, and eventually television – inserted…into the cultural lexicon…the concept of mass culture. The new term indicated cultural dissemination on a scale that increased by orders of magnitude. The question of scale had important implications for qualitative judgements about mass culture. Prior to its advent, it was possible to consider popular culture as historically continuous with folk culture, either slowly replacing folk cultures as the next stage of development following the Industrial Revolution or as coexisting with rural or industrial folk cultures in the modern era. When viewed in this way, popular culture, like folk culture, was a culture of the people. With the introduction of the mass media however, the idea of a continuing historical progression came to an abrupt halt. In the eyes of most observers, the emergence of mass culture was accompanied by a subtle but important shift in orientation from a culture of the people to a culture for the masses. In this deceptively simple change

there was a profound transformation of meaning. Mass culture was not seen as the lived culture of an identifiable group of people, which reflected their values and aspirations. It was instead a commodified culture produced by a centralized, corporate culture industry for privatized, passive consumption by an alienated, undifferentiated mass. Thus, although the terms mass culture and popular culture are often used interchangeably today, most observers tended to distinguish between the two in language that was pejorative and and/or politically charged until well into the 1960s. [114]

We see a cultural monopoly when we look back at popular music in the twentieth century. Large corporations controlling the wealth and means meant that the business of selling music came to govern the acts of making and sharing it, and along the way the business of music and the act itself became conflated. Let us return to Adorno now, as, by the end of the Second World War, he was warning of the increasing decultivation, material interests, and consumption of consumer audiences in relation to art; [115] and of worth being placed on culture in the absence of any life relationship therewith, leading, ultimately, to a disconnection from art, which becomes then simply a material thing with a value to be expected, like any other consumer product. [116] Adorno's observations of modern European society's interaction with art were based in large part on his experience of the National

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[114] Garofalo, *Rockin' Out…*. 2.

[115] Adorno. "What National Socialism has Done to the Arts." In *Essays on Music*. 373.

[116] Ibid. 377-78.

Socialist regime in Germany, and his ultimate concern was how they controlled

artistic discourse, using it for political ends. He warned that the same kind of

domination of the arts could easily happen under the consumer/commodity system.

The masses cannot really be blamed, however, he says, as

…the loss of knowledge and interest in the products of art which may ultimately lead

to a completely barbarian severance between serious artistic production and universal

tastes is not a matter of degeneration or bad will but is the almost unavoidable

consequence of the relegation of art into the realm of pure embellishment brought

about by…technological development itself." [117]

This effect which industrialised society has on art, relegating it to the role of

embellishment and amusement – the soothing of the tired businessman's nerves, as

Adorno puts it [118] – results in a worrying philistinism, the "line of least resistance to

big business," Adorno calls it,[119] which can easily lead to control of the arts by

those who neither know nor care about them. These points are all still valid

concerns to us today, as, indeed, this philistinism has long plagued Western society.

The entertainment industry, and the music industry as a vital component thereof,

pre-date the second world war, but, grew exponentially in its aftermath, when

American popular music travelled around the world during and after the war years,

ushering in a new global music consciousness. During the next decades, Adorno's

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[117] Adorno, *"What National Socialism… ."* 378.

[118] Ibid, 386.

[119] Ibid.

warnings rang true, as the Western music industry dropped its products into every corner of the globe. Simon Frith explains that

[T]he emergence of the mass media involved an increasingly centralized and commercialized control of what could be heard: as fewer people made music for themselves, public taste was easier to control…Popular music emerged from the processes of commodity production; its cultural effect was as one of the new forms of mass consumption. [120]

Frith states that for some, Adorno included, "[t]he commercial basis of mass culture explains both its existence and its quality. Mass art is produced for profit and the pursuit of profit determines its form and content." [121] This is the point where we must break with Adorno, for, as Frith notes, [122] his denigration of popular music was based upon this notion, and there is more to the issue. Mass culture and popular culture are not always the same thing. Adorno errs, says Richard Leppert, "…insofar as he ascribes to popular music consumers listening habits that are not necessarily warranted." [123] Adorno's argument, Leppert continues, is "…compromised by the implication that mass-audience listeners are always and

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[120] Simon Frith. *Sound Effects.* Pantheon; New York, 1981. 40.

[121] Ibid, 43.

[122] Ibid, 44.

[123] Richard Leppert. Commentary on Chapter 3 – "Music and Mass Culture," in *Essays on Music.* 336.

everywhere the same." [124] To be fair, much of Adorno's mass culture criticism remains viable, but, things have developed in ways that he could never have imagined. And it is those developments that our investigation is concerned with.

By the 1950s, American music was reaching distant audiences, and, as a result, the musical world was changing. It is important to keep in mind though, as Frith states, that "…from a historical perspective, rock and roll was not a revolutionary form or moment, but an evolutionary one, the climax of (or possibly footnote to) a story that begins with Edison's phonograph." [125] It was in the early twentieth century that the possibility for music to be recorded and disseminated first arose. Until then musicking had been, by necessity, a more localised activity, and there was less awareness of what was happening outside of one's particular musical experience, as such. With the advent of records, radio, and television, the way music was experienced and understood changed. Commodification, as was mentioned earlier, came into play with music during the late nineteenth century and grew more prevalent throughout the twentieth. "The origins of…the recording industry lie in the nineteenth century," Frith points out, "but the emergence of the gramophone record as the predominant musical commodity took place after the 1914-1918 war. The history of the record industry is an aspect of the general history

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[124] Leppert, 336.

[125] Simon Frith, "The Industrialization of Popular Music." *Popular Music and Communication.* Ed. James Lull. Sage Publications; Newbury Park, 1987. 54.

of radio, the cinema, and television." [126] Frith refers to the emergence of recorded

music as the dawning of a new musical culture, and states that "[t]he development

of a large-scale record industry marked a profound transformation in musical

experience, a decline in amateur music making, the rise of a new sort of musical

consumption and use." What's more, he says: "Records and radio made possible

both new national (and international, American-based) musical tastes and new

social divisions between 'classical' and 'pop' audiences." Furthermore, these

technological developments "…marked the appearance of new music professionals:

pop singers, session musicians, record company A&R people, record producers,

disc jockeys, studio engineers, record critics, and so on. [127] As Frith points out, the

notion of folk-based music like rock and roll being vulgar in comparison to 'proper'

music was inculcated in professionals of the music industry from the very

beginning, and, in the American context, had much to do with racism. Even though

folk forms were often thought less of, they have nevertheless always been a

fundamental component in American popular music, and were an especially fertile

source of inspiration for early pop composers, who took elements from African-

American folk musics and re-appropriated them for upper-class audiences. As

Wilfrid Mellers explains, these social tensions have

…shaped the modern world. For music is not, whatever our Western attitudes may

have tried to make of it, and object 'out there' to be bought and sold; it is a

means…whereby people explore actual and potential relationships to one another. In

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[126] Frith, 55.

[127] Frith, 56.

the conditions of indigence and oppression in which New World blacks were obliged

to live, music became a technique for survival…The story is painful but triumphant,

as African work-and-play songs and dances merge into Afro-American gospel music

and blues, and so through the multifaceted strands of urban jazz to the no less various

and contrarious warp and woof of industrialized rock and tribal pop… [128]

When rock and roll arrived in the 1950s, it was at the core of a number of

significant changes in Western society. There came not only an exacerbation of the

aforementioned musical schism and division of audiences, but the first generational

and cultural schisms triggered by popular music. But the cultural furor that grew

around rock and roll reached the heights it did, in large part, because of new

technologies of the time. Affordable (and more portable) radios and record players,

along with 45 rpm records and jukeboxes, improved electric amplification, etc., all

significantly affected musicking in the 1950s. American music, then more

commodified, mobile, and controversial than ever before, travelled further than it

ever had, and despite the opposition it faced at home and abroad, it found new roots

and expressions as it did so.

By the end of the 1960s there were vibrant pop scenes coming into their own all

over the globe, from Turkey, to Nigeria, to Germany, to Brazil, and beyond, all of

which were incorporating their own musical experiences and customs into the

popular form based on African-American folk traditions. Roger Wallis & Krister

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[128] Wilfrid Mellers, "Music, the Modern World, and the Burden of History."
Companion to Contemporary Musical Thought, Volume 1. 1-21. 17.

Malm have called this process "transculturation," and say: "To explain the fundamental process [of international pop discourse], it is not enough to merely to refer to an established concept such as 'cultural imperialism'. We are witnessing a two-way process that both dilutes and streamlines culture, but also provides new opportunities for cultural enrichment." [129] Before speaking of cultural enrichment and musicking being a two-way process, though, we must be aware of just how dominant the music industry was for decades.

As we've shown, exposure to music forms our conceptions thereof, and since the music industry was the primary source for musical experience in the West during the twentieth century, media accounted for nearly all of the musical exposure people received. This changed in the internet age, of course, which we will address in the next chapter, but, even now, the effects of mass media have not disappeared. Writing of the pre-internet climate, though, Reitan states that "the mass media constitute the most important musical influence in Western culture. Now that music is used so frequently…on radio and – to an even greater extent – on television, music is no longer restricted to a range of designated music programmes." "Generally speaking," he continues, "music on radio and television is pop and entertainment, based on very simple codes with high redundancy, simple melody and motoric rhythm serving effectively as ear catchers. Taking their musical norms from the constant influence of this type of music, a large part of the public accept

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[129] Roger Wallis & Krister Malm, "The International Music Industry and Transcultural Communication." *Popular Music and Communication.* Ed. James Lull. Sage Publications; Newbury Park, 1987. 112-137. 131.

this *as* music, disregarding anything that does not conform to this pattern. In a market economy, producers play safe, since large investments demand quick profits, hence the lack of courage in commercial music." [130] This lack of courage is a significant part of the music industry's legacy. For over half a century it was tastemaker, informer, provider, and even something to be aspired to. The music industry was a business, though, one that had interests and preferences, and when such an entity controls a discourse to such a great extent, its interests determine the shape the discourse takes. This is to say that, yes, there was a remarkable amount of music happening during the 1960s and 70s, but that there was also significant restriction in terms of what was made available to audiences. There was wonderful music being made all over the world, but it was nearly impossible to hear it in many cases if one was not in the place it was being made.

For our investigation, the effects of the music industry and the commodification of music in the twentieth century were twofold: music was commodified to such an extent that people's experiences of it were reduced to specific forms of interaction; and, (directly a result of the first), music became a specialised activity that had been removed, in many ways, from the musicking that it required. As we will see in the next chapter, however, certain changes came about in the later half of the twentieth century that altered popular music discourse indefinitely.

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[130] Reitan, 631.

III - The Modern Climate.

In order to reach the musical conditions of the present day and ultimately tie our topics together, we will have to rush through over three decades of development at this point. Needless to say the following is not an attempt at in-depth analysis of the currents of pop discourse since the late 1970s in any way. It is, rather, a look at selected events and effects that will open the way for our final topic.

We will begin in the mid 1970s, when frustration with the musical climate in the West had been building for some time and was set to boil over in one of the most significant shifts in contemporary music. Although dissatisfaction with the state of popular music was expressed in different ways during the early/mid 70s, many of these expressions have come to be associated in one way or another with the happening that most directly reacted against said dissatisfaction: punk. The tendency when contextualising and qualifying the punk happening has often been to state that it was a brief explosion that revolutionised pop music. Implicit in this point of view are that 1) other music being made around that time was less relevant, and 2) that punk suddenly just appeared, neither of which are accurate, and, furthermore, serve as a "…a skewed historicization of punk which…set[s] it apart from, rather than map[s], the continuities between punk and the musics that had preceded it earlier in the 1970s," [131] according to Andy Bennett. "In many ways," he goes on to say, "this is wholly illustrative of a historiographical trend in popular

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[131] Andy Bennett, "The Forgotten Decade: Rethinking the Popular Music of the 1970s." *Popular Music History* 2.1 (2007), 5-24. 12.

music studies that has tended to view popular music history as a series of revolutionary historical moments." [132] Punk's principal relevance for our topic is that music discourse was quite restricted by the mid-seventies, and the opportunities for people doing or looking for something that didn't fit into industry standards were sparse. Music had been taken away from the level of the participants in many ways and the punk happening brought about an all-important shift in perspective related thereto. The seventies were a time of superstars and extravagance which left many people frustrated and estranged, a time in which music had become too specialised, the realm of superstars and industry professionals, as Small encapsulates in the following:

[E]very normally endowed human being is born with the gift of music no less than with the gift of speech. If that is so, than our present-day concert life, whether "classical" or "popular," in which the talented few are empowered to produce music for the "untalented" majority, is based on falsehood. It means that our powers of making music for ourselves have been hijacked and the majority of people robbed of the musicality that is theirs by right of birth, while a few stars, and their handlers, grow rich and famous through selling us what we have been led to believe we lack. [133]

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[132] Bennett, 12.

[133] Small, 8.

Insofar as the fundamental edicts of the punk happening [134] have ever been formally stated, they have contained sentiments much like this. One does not have to be a superstar, professional, virtuoso, or any such thing to create and contribute to musicking. This is a sentiment that, in the present age, might be taken for granted, but it must be remembered that when punk came along (and to some extent still even today) many people were so accustomed to industry standard that anything outside it was simply not regarded as real music.

The punk happening, in its initial, most cohesive form, really existed only for a short time in 1976-77 and it presented in this moment a sort of "this-and-only-this" viewpoint, constituted by a radical negation of nearly everything outside of itself (even though it clearly had its roots in other musical statements – just one of its many contradictions). It presented a direct challenge to any who encountered it: accepting it meant revaluation, while not accepting it meant being passed by, as things would not be the same afterwards. The levelling effect of punk emerged quickly and the effects it had on the music industry were twofold: one was, as Simon Reynolds says, throwing "…[it] into confusion, making the major labels vulnerable to suggestion and fluxing up all the aesthetic rules so that anything abnormal or extreme suddenly had a chance;" [135] and, also, the emergence of independent resources out of rejection of the major industry. After the punk

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[134] For more in-depth studies thereupon, see: Craig O'Hara, *The Philosophy of Punk.* AK Press, 1999. And *Punk Rock: So What?: The Cultural Legacy of Punk.* Ed. Roger Sabin, Routledge, 1999.

[135] Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again.* Penguin; London, 2006. 4.

explosion, numerous non-corporate resources began springing up as people decided to take music production upon themselves, marking the beginning of the independent movement that burgeoned throughout the 1980s, which by the end of the 1990s had become an industry in its own right.

The punk happening, although it has always been identified primarily through a certain few artists and signifiers at a specific point in time, actually encompasses much more. In fact, as Reynolds says, "…in terms of its broader cultural influence, it is arguable that punk had its most provocative repercussions long after its supposed demise." [136] The long aftermath of punk, as he calls it, proved to be a time of immense creativity and exploration (much like its colourful prelude), but is a period that, until fairly recently, has received little study. Bill Martin illustrates this when he remarks that "[w]e might not forget about punk, because there was a social movement aspect to it (which was often more interesting than the actual music), but I could easily see new wave falling through the cracks." [137] New wave, of course, being one of the broad terms applied to music in this era after punk. But what Martin says is generally correct, as punk was much easier to identify than the varied currents it instigated. As Reynolds explains:

Punk's simple stance of negation, of being *against*, briefly created unity. But as soon as the question shifted to "What are we actually *for*?" the movement disintegrated and dispersed. Each strand nurtured its own creation myth of what punk meant and

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[136] Reynolds, xii.

[137] Bill Martin. *Avant Rock.* Open Court; Chicago, 2002. 99

pursued its own vision of the way forward. Yet underneath the fractious diaspora of

the postpunk years there still remained a common inheritance from the punk moment,

namely, a revived belief in the power of the music, along with the feeling of

responsibility that came with this conviction, which in turn made the question

"Where to now?" *worth* fighting over. The by-product of all this division and

disagreement was diversity, a fabulous wealth of sounds and ideas that rivals the

sixties as a golden age for music. [138]

In the climate of the post-punk era there came a restating of the participant's role in

music, accompanied by a renewed sense of importance therein, as Reynolds points

out. Furthermore, it was a time of significant exploration in music that incorporated

a willingness to look outside the standard sounds and methods of rock/pop. "In the

late seventies," Reynolds says, "while 'fusion' remained a discredited notion,

postpunk ushered in a new phase of looking outside rock's narrow parameters, to

black America and Jamaica, obviously, but also to Africa and other zones of what

would be called world music." [139] Furthermore, he points out that "[p]art of the

poignancy of this period…is its increasingly out-of-sync relationship with the

broader culture…postpunk tried to build an alternative culture with its own

independent infrastructure of labels, distribution, and record stores." [140] The sense

of urgency and the freedom that flowered from punk meant that there were channels

opened up for sounds that would otherwise have gone unheard, and it marks a

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[138] Reynolds, 11.

[139] Ibid, 4.

[140] Ibid, 7-8.

significant turning point in the modern pop climate. Currents have changed since then, of course, things have come and gone over the years, and the industry usually found a way to get back on top of it all. In the end, the fact that the music industry was still the primary supplier of musical experience for most people remained unchanged. What punk had opened up, however, was not closed off, and the independent cultural network that arose out of punk grew steadily throughout the late 1980s and 1990s. Incorporated in this subcultural network as it became incorporated into the larger music industry were the varied dicta of the ideal it grew out of, which complicated the old industry model. The emergence of subaltern voices in contemporary popular music, says Adam Krims, does much to disown the old model of popular culture as controlled consumerism. [141] "What Adorno could not have theorized in his own lifetime," says Krims, "is the advent of flexible accumulation, or so-called post-Fordism, a mutation in capitalist accumulation that has inflected cultural processes sufficiently deeply to call for new ways of theorizing music and its social effects." [142] What this amounts to, basically, is a decentralisation of perspective in the music industry and the media, which have in recent times become, as Krims points out, [143] a complicated system of conglomerate partnerships and subcontracting. And although the music industry is still a significant presence, its role has changed drastically in the twenty-first century.

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[141] Krims, 131-2.

[142] Ibid, 133-4.

[143] Ibid, 144.

Nearing the end of the 1990s, the internet came into play as a new medium for music discourse, and, just as new technologies in the early part of the twentieth century accommodated great changes that shaped music discourse to follow, the internet has gone on to completely alter many aspects of musical experience in the twenty-first. There is much to be said about the internet and popular music, of course, but only those facets that immediately relate to our investigation will be addressed here. Namely: connectivity and industry de-centralisation. In regards to these issues we cannot overlook online developments. Like certain technological developments before it – the examples we've already used, but also cassettes and video tapes after those (both of which enabled increased interaction with music through re-recording and re-arranging according to personal preference) – the internet enables music to travel further than ever before in the hands of listeners, and even away from the industry itself. Whereas before music became readily available online there was a certain degree of dependence on the tastes and systems of the mass media – subsistence on what was given, essentially – now the role of the listener has expanded. We can no longer view popular music discourse as governed by mass media in terms of exposure to or distribution of recorded music, for the internet enables listeners to seek out and partake in whatever they choose, and, in many cases, pay nothing for it if they so choose. If, as Jean Baudrillard says, "[m]an's profound gestural relationship to objects, which epitomizes his integration into the world, into social structures…becomes subject to a social dialectic which is that of the forces of production," [144] then, in this case, for a person to have the

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[144] Baudrillard, *System of Objects*. 50.

choice on their own terms of what music they partake in, and what, if anything, they will pay for it, is an important, unprecedented development in the consumer system. This is not a topic we have time to explore in detail here, but, suffice it to say that when the forces of production can no longer control the things they produce (as the downloading/file-sharing phenomenon and the controversy surrounding it demonstrate), drastic changes have taken place.

If living objects, as Baudrillard calls them – "…those related to immediate life and necessity…" [145] as he says – are not consumable, then, we should count music, as a vital human expression, among such objects. It may still be subject to industrial commercial systems, but, music nevertheless remains something other than mere product. "*To become an object of consumption, an object must first become a sign*," Baudrillard says. "That is to say: it must become external, in a sense, to a relationship that it now merely signifies…[whereupon] it derives its consistency, and hence its meaning, from an abstract and systematic relationship to all other sign objects." [146] There is a fine line to manage here, as, undoubtedly, some products of popular music do indeed seem like nothing more than so-called sign objects to be consumed, but, not everything is done for profit. Presently, there is nowhere near the profit to be made by playing the music industry game anymore, and this fact is changing musicking. Again, there is a distinction to be made between mass culture and popular culture, and if we choose to view popular music as a sort of folk

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[145] Baudrillard, *System of Objects*. 218.

[146] Ibid.

discourse that has evolved with the industrial age, then, we must note that its purpose is one of basic necessity, arising, as we've shown, from the need to communicate and interact. It is, in that sense, a shared cultural space.

There exists now more than the illusion of choice for people who have internet access and an interest in music, as their roles have changed from simply consumers/absorbers to more active participants in music discourse. The climate at the current moment in time can be referred to as nothing short of hyperconnectivity, as music discourse is taking shape with staggering amounts of activity, thanks to a proliferation of home-recording software and online music-hosting. The musical world is now (for those who have internet access, at least), open like never before. This connectivity has made contact through music plentiful and simple. Perhaps too plentiful, even. It stuns to think of just how open the world of music is and where it may go, but, those are topics we must leave out of our investigation here. At this point, the future is still working itself out, [147] but, one thing is for certain: the fact that global musicking has been opened up like never before. What this means in relation to our topic should be clear at this point, as the boundaries between musical expressions have dissolved to an extent never before seen. Musical statements in the modern age are no longer vernacular-bound, for they arrive instantly at a global audience.

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[147] For two recent investigations into the topic of music discourse in the internet age, see: Greg Kot, *Ripped: How the Wired Generation Revolutionized Music.* Simon & Schuster, 2009, and Steve Knopper, *Appetite for Self-Destruction: The Spectacular Crash of the Record Industry in the Digital Age*. Free Press, 2009.

We have now looked at certain events and effects which shaped the particular conception of popular music our investigation adheres to. Various strands have been brought together here in order to reveal an general picture, but, how do these strands come together in our final topic? At this point we will move into said final topic, and look at the popular music experience in Iceland.

<u>Popular Music in Iceland:</u>

I – The Icelandic Pop Experience.

As we have shown, artistic statements can convey the cultural discourse that gives birth to them and can therefore stand as a sort of diagram, or perhaps more accurately a map, of their place of origin, the people therein, and the collective consciousness that bonds them. Art, therefore, has an amazing capability to bring about interest between people, at both the individual and cultural levels. It is thus not far-fetched to think that art can, indeed, bring about desires for new experiences and connections. The experience of art is, after all, one of sharing. As we have shown, music in particular is an undeniably powerful medium for contact, evidenced by the fact that so many and varied cultural groupings have at their core some bonding over music, and how various musical forms are able to travel and find audiences within so many and varied cultural groupings. But now, nearing the end of our investigation, how is it that we find this and other topics we have discussed so far connected together in Iceland?

Iceland is a part of the world that is often preceded by reputation. Set between North America and Europe (literally on the line between continental plates), the island's isolation and its interactions with both sides of the Atlantic have shaped its history. It is a nation at the fringe of human habitation and thus, for many, it remains an unknown, exotic space, defined in part by the mythologies and

assumptions of others, but also in large part by its own artistic statements, old and new. Our eventual focus here will be Icelandic popular music and the role it's played in modern Icelandic culture, but before approaching that we must look briefly at some important historical points. An example to establish the historical context: Halldór Guðmundsson points out [148] that the first known musical ensemble in Iceland, the Reykjavík Trumpet Orchestra, was formed in 1876. As a point of reference, he offers Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung,* which was performed for the first time in its entirety the same year in Germany. Noting this discrepancy, Guðmundsson points out that the only culture Iceland had for centuries was literature and storytelling, and that by the end of the nineteenth century there was no special procedure nor industry set up for the arts. Guðmundsson uses Halldór Laxness, one of Iceland's best-known figures, as an example of this, stating that when Laxness was a young man in the early twentieth century looking to become a professional writer in Iceland, there was no possibility for such a thing, pointing out that just a few years earlier, around the time of Laxness' youth, more books in Icelandic were being published in Winnipeg than in Reykjavík. A remarkable discrepancy, but when we look at Iceland's history, it makes sense. As Hannes Lárusson explains about Icelandic society: "In Iceland we have basically two phases of history: one could be categorised as medieval, [which] was about one thousand years; and then we have something we could call modern, [which] was introduced

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[148] All of Guðmundsson's points here are taken from a lecture entitled "Halldór Laxness: A Traveller in the Age of Extremes," given at the University of Manitoba in March 2008. A recording is available online at: umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/departments/icelandic/projects/radio_journal.html

with a lot of force and intensity in the thirties, forties, and fifties." [149] Throughout

much of the country's history, [150] its population was agrarian, comprised of farmers

and fishermen, and survival was often the main concern. Starvation was still very

real in nineteenth-century Iceland, and therefore the fact that there weren't, and had

never really been, any professional artists should come as little surprise. Neither

should the fact that by the onset of the twentieth century, Iceland was hardly in step.

The country had endured long centuries of impoverishment by that point, with little

contact to the outside world. Looking at the historical record, however, it is plain to

see that this was not always the case, for, if we look at Iceland's longest-held

treasure, the thing for which it has been most esteemed throughout its history, its

medieval literature, we see a significant connection with the world of Viking-age

Europe. The Sagas of the Icelanders, along with the Eddas, account for a cultural

flourish that outshone any other Germanic culture at that particular time in history.

Not only that, but they point to Iceland being a place of much importance in that

era. But how and when did Icelandic culture stall? After the collapse of the Old

Icelandic Commonwealth in the thirteenth century, Norway stepped in to rule,

marking the beginning of a long period of colonisation that shaped Iceland over the

next seven centuries. Devastating volcanic eruptions, plague and famine, and

Denmark's eventual rule soon followed, pushing Iceland into a period of isolation

that would last, in a number of ways, until The Second World War.

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[149] Spoken in an interview, conducted fall 2008. A recording is available online at:
umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/departments/icelandic/projects/radio_journal.html

[150] Outlined in *Iceland: From Past to Present,* by Esbjörn Rosenblad and Rakel
Sigurdðardóttir. Trans. Alan Crozier. Mál og Menning; Reykjavík, 1993.

Throughout the long years of neglect at the hands of its colonisers, Iceland's cultural discourse was reduced, basically, to the level of personal interactions. Which is to say that language, spoken and written, became of the utmost importance. Conversation, storytelling, and poetry, were thus the primary Icelandic cultural discourse, and vernacular language is what kept Icelandic cultural identity alive through the centuries. Language serves, as we stated earlier, an important role for any cultural grouping, but in cases like Iceland's it becomes utterly vital. And such is the case with vernacular language in Iceland to this day, as it remains the strongest element of Icelandic cultural identity. This brings us to an important point: the relationship between language and music in Iceland provides an interesting case: due to the fact that there was such scant musical praxis for centuries in Iceland, language and music developed very closely, and we see unique fusions thereof in the traditions of choral singing and *rímur*, a venerable form of alliterative, chanted poetry that was still being practiced as the primary style of poetry well into the nineteenth century, serving, as such, as Iceland's folk music tradition. Let us resume our brief historical survey, though, and look at the World War Two years, as two significant events during this period brought about great change in Iceland. One was obtaining full independence from Denmark in 1944 and the other was the presence of foreign military personnel. These two contradictory situations helped propel Iceland into modernity, but it is the latter of these two that is of most relevance to our investigation because along with the foreign soldiers, first the English and then the Americans, came their respective popular cultures. There had

been music in Iceland other than wholly traditional sorts up to that point of course, [151] but it is with the arrival of American/British popular music that Icelandic popular music truly begins.

American-based popular music – jazz and early pop and then rock and roll – first started coming to Iceland in the 1940s. "Rock didn't just come to Iceland one day," though, says Gunnar Hjálmarsson. "[It] filtered and swarmed in gradually [giving] many young folks a new image of life and opening up new possibilities for which they were hungry." [152] By 1956-7, Icelanders were among the first international audiences enjoying rock and roll records, concerts, and films, [153] and while it may not have been quite as controversial a cultural phenomenon as in America, rock and roll's arrival in Iceland did coincide with and contribute to a changing social climate, as Hjálmarsson points out: "The Second World War had made (some of) us rich and the modern ways were slowly creeping in…Youngsters, being only used to old time psalmody and Icelandic country songs, got hip to listening to jazz and pop around the soldiers' barracks." [154] At that time, the national broadcasting service,

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[151] See: *100 Bestu Plötur Íslandssögunnar*, by Jónatan Garðarsson and Arnar Eggert Thoroddsen (Sena; Reykjavík 2009), for a survey of the recording industry in Iceland from its beginnings to today.

[152] Gunnar Hjálmarsson. *Eru ekki allir í stuði?* Trans. A.S. Kitchen. Forlagið; Reykjavík, 2001. 7.

[153] Ibid, 10.

[154] Hjálmarsson, "The History of Icelandic Rock, Part 1." Originally published in The Reykjavík Grapevine, 6.3.2009. Found online at: grapevine.is/Music/ReadArticle/the-history-of-icelandic-rock-part-1-the-foresighted-stewardedss-editorial

RÚV, "…was the only radio station and it was largely closed to music other than classical and Danish pop of the time." [155] But in Keflavík, where the military installations were, "one could pick up signals from the Navy radio and sometimes…[get] to know about rock n roll from young Americans," Hjálmarsson states, going on to say that "[t]he sprouting of rock in Iceland underwent a boom in those early days, out of which many trees grew in later years." [156] What followed, through the 1960s, was, to employ Hjálmarsson's metaphor, further sprouting:

Beatlemania [*Bítlaæðið*] quickly became a national phenomenon. Everywhere, sheds and cubbyholes were filled with shaggy kids…singing and playing Beatles songs or trying to cook up their own by copying the Beatle model. In the US, they spoke of it as the British Invasion, and in an instant, everything British became cool…There was no coverage of it in magazines or the papers, but Beatlemania stormed Iceland just as elsewhere. All over the country, boys were messing around in sheds, yelping "é é é [yeah yeah yeah]" into worn-out microphones, satisfied with just the light from blubs in floorlamps. The bands were multiplying, and getting better, with each year. [157]

As the years passed, Iceland's pop bands more or less played along to the styles of American and British artists, as Hjálmarsson points out. And although they went largely unnoticed by the rest of the world, [158] they followed the same routes their

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[155] Hjálmarsson, *Eru ekki…* 8.

[156] Ibid, 9.

[157] Ibid, 55.

counterparts elsewhere did: psychedelic rock in the late sixties followed by hard

rock in the seventies, and then punk. And it is in the last of these that we will start

in the next section, for it was there that Icelandic popular music stepped away from

derivation and sowed the seeds for its future.

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[158] A performance by the most popular Icelandic group of the 1960s, Hljómar, can
be seen at the link below. While in this performance (aired on Icelandic
television), the group performs songs in Icelandic, they used the name Thor's
Hammer, as well as English lyrics and text, for international audiences. They
were the premier Icelandic pop group to attempt a career in the music industry
of the time, and an Icelandic example of various points raised here about
industry standards:

www.youtube.com/user/saegrjot#g/c/6B45B963E0C6FF06

II – In the Post-Punk Period.

Since the later half of the 1980s, Iceland's presence on the international stage has increased remarkably as a result of its musical exports. It is likely the case, in fact, that if someone nowadays were asked what she or he knew about Iceland, the country's popular music could be among the first things mentioned in response. It is our aim in this section, now having established the historical context, to locate Icelandic pop within the aforementioned discourse of the post-punk climate, as this is where Icelandic popular music began to establish itself internationally.

Simon Reynolds states that "[m]usic historians exalt in being in the right place at the right time, those critical moments and locations where revolutions and movements are spawned," but that "[t]his is tough for those of us stuck in suburbia or the provinces." [159] He contends that "…revolutionary movements in pop culture actually have their widest impact after the 'moment' has allegedly passed and the ideas spread from the metropolitan bohemian elites and hipster cliques that originally 'owned' them into the suburbs and outer regions," [160] something that Iceland's musical boom in the early 1980s certainly evidences. When the punk happening appeared in the late 1970s, it did so primarily in larger cities, gradually reaching outlying areas later. This discrepancy in encounters is something that largely characterised the post-punk period, insofar as by the time people in smaller

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[159] Reynolds, *Rip it Up…*, x.

[160] Ibid, xii.

places picked up on the current, the uniformity of punk had dissipated, leaving

everyone free to take it in whichever direction they chose. There was, therefore,

much diversity in approach during the early 1980s as people everywhere contended

with the changes punk brought about. What we see in Iceland during this time is a

unique flowering of domestic music. "The mood at the end of the seventies was one

of a new generation who'd had enough of stagnation…" says Hjálmarsson. "The

changes came fast and decisively, and this new rock explosion was short. It flew by

fast, but was captured on film, and rock bands and fans then understood, by way of

cultural text: they were from Iceland." [161] We will get to the film just mentioned

shortly, but first we need to set up the circumstance for its arrival and effects. "The

influx of international rock [at the time] was happening in conjunction with a

general growth of Icelandic music," Hjálmarsson says, "and many more

international artists than ever before came to play on the island. The biggest

concerts of the time were those of The Clash in 1980 and Crass in 1983. These

mark the beginning and the end of the new wave." [162] Iceland's relationship to punk

as experienced in urban Europe and America, was, naturally, tenuous, but the

sentiments that the punk happening was based around nonetheless resonated clearly

in early-eighties Iceland. In fact, "…the first music (or any other modern form of

creative expression) to which the Icelanders were able to attract any sustained

international attention was performed by her most enduring punk rockers," says

Darrell Jonsson. But how is it that punk was so effective in Iceland, how did it lead

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[161] Hjálmarsson, 199.

[162] Ibid, 249.

it to a new phase of cultural expression and a flowering of popular music in the years to follow? Jonsson points out that

> [d]uring the 1970's Iceland had a period of affluence that allowed them finally to have popularly available the instruments needed to make rock music…[and, thus] [t]he 1980s were an interesting time…[when] Icelanders…grappled with both the new technology and new forms of expression. They moved beyond imitation in many instances and began again to contribute original artistic statements to the sphere of world-class accomplishments…[T]he early 1970s with [their] emphasis…[on] the superstar heavily-studio-engineered sound, left the…tools for modern rock expression far from the hands and voices of most Icelanders. Those few who got their hands on instruments lamely tried to compete and mimic the high tech sounds of their slicker London-New York-L.A. counterparts. This music had no international appeal, and was also later mostly ignored by the young people of Iceland themselves. As the decade turned, the first industrial generation of Icelandic youth found they could borrow or buy instruments and create a more direct expression in punk rock. [163]

"One of the punk rock movement's major contributions to rock and roll," he continues, "and Western society in general, was a leap towards being an international democratic music…a rhythm everyone could participate in." [164] As we have covered, there were as many interpretations and applications of the punk current as there were places it ended up in, and Jonsson points out how remarkable

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[163] Darrell Jonsson, *A Complete History of Icelandic Music: Ancient and Punk.* Bob Wayman, Darrell Jonsson, Gunnar Hjálmarsson. Gardener Publications; Mill Valley, 1992. vii.

[164] Jonsson, viii.

an effect it had in Iceland: "Drawing their model from similar scenes in European and American suburbs Icelandic punk rockers created a neighborhood scene. The difference about this neighborhood was that it contained most of a small nation's people." [165] Musicking in the punk mode was, often by necessity, a more communal thing, taking place in smaller subcultural groups and distancing itself from the usual purveyors of musical experience, becoming a space for the reclamation of musicking by participants in the process. As Wayman and Jonsson point out, [166] however, there is very little room for subculture in Iceland, and the island's experience of punk was unique in the sense that it was not really an underground movement, but a cultural expression that transpired on a relatively large scale. "Scenes in other countries are more compartmentalised than ours," says Icelandic composer Jóhann Jóhansson. "In other places, people seem to join up with other people who are doing the same things…In Iceland, people are forced to be together." [167]

Whereas in most other places punk functioned as a subcultural statement, in Iceland it was the catalyst for the development of a home-grown music scene, which is unique among its encounters. In reality, however, not much of what was happening at the time was heard off the island. A film made about it was an all-

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[165] Jonsson, ix.

[166] Bob Wayman & Darrell Jonsson, "Iceland is Not a (Musical) Wasteland." *A Complete History… . 4-5.

[167] Spoken in an interview, found in: *Waking Up In Iceland*. Paul Sullivan. Sanctuary Publishing; London, 2003. 250.

important step, though: "When Friðrik Þór Friðriksson had the brilliant idea to make a documentary about rock in Reykjavík," Hjálmarsson says, "it was a big vitamin injection…[for] Icelandic rock. He showed much prescience when he said: 'Imagine if there was a film from '66. That would be an amazing document.' It was supposed to be a short film at the outset, but, the idea grew, and, in the end, *Rokk í Reykjavík* became a full-length film." [168] The final products (film and soundtrack album), document the new Icelandic groups as recorded in 1981-82, but by the time of the film's release later in 1982, most of the groups featured had stopped playing. The first years of the 1980s were a seminal time in Icelandic popular music, but they did not bring about any sort of immediate change of circumstance. The boom fizzled out, and apart from *Rokk í Reykjavík*, there were no other serious attempts to get the music off the island. Understandable, as many of the groups of the time were young and would have likely never even entertained such ideas. And while *Rokk í Reykjavík* was by no means an international phenomenon upon its release, it did find its way around the international underground, becoming a cult classic and serving its purpose well in the years following its release. In the meantime, however, back in Iceland, Hjálmarsson says, "…there was no drop in potential after the premiere, but what now? people asked, as the light of the truth gradually rose up on them: Iceland is small and sparsely populated. Only the most popular could make a living at rock music and many of them just got tired in the long run. Those who played shows did so always in the same spaces, to the same crowds." [169] To

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[168] Hjálmarsson, 254.

[169] Ibid, 255.

say the boom ended is not to say that music stopped, though, as throughout the rest of the eighties, two Icelandic groups that grew from this initial crop went further than any of their peers before them. Formed in 1983 by members of then-defunct bands (all featured in *Rokk í Reykjavík*), Kukl were a forward-looking outfit who exemplified the kind of contact we have discussed, combining various sounds and imagery in a unique aesthetic that spoke of their desire to go beyond Iceland, yet show something of it to others. Though sometimes overlooked and left out of Icelandic music commentary, Kukl were an important group in the European underground between 1983 and 1986, after which time they split up and reformed (in a slightly different arrangement) as The Sugarcubes. Through the late 1980s and into the early 1990s, The Sugarcubes (*Sykurmolarnir*, to Icelandic audiences) became the best-known Icelandic band there had ever been up to that point in time, releasing albums, videos, and touring internationally, all to significant acclaim. Although these two bands are now often viewed by many as merely the jumping-off point of Iceland's biggest contemporary celebrity (vocalist Björk Guðmundsdóttir), they were much more. Both had something of Icelandic cultural discourse to offer the times they were in, and both were acclaimed and considered exciting by international audiences for that very reason. They were also largely self-made acts, insofar as they were doing things outside of the usual modes, infusing Icelandic popular music discourse with a healthy sense of independent rhetoric by establishing their own record label/distributor Smekkleysa (Bad Taste), which has played an important role in Icelandic music ever since. The fact that the country's emergence on the international music scene occurred as a result of the punk

happening is an important fact to keep in mind, as Icelandic popular music discourse was thereafter able to forge its own way and be accepted, in turn, as a participant among others. And not just as one more participant trying to fit in with industry standards, as Jonsson and Bob Wayman point out:

> Among the international array of punks…[Icelanders] alone in their statements have aligned themselves with their native culture…ventur[ing] into the realms of an art form that at once has the significant properties of all that is folk and modern. [170]

We will not go as far as to say that the Icelandic punk groups were alone in making a connection to their native culture, as this was simply not the case, but Icelandic culture was, undeniably, an important part of the music created in the country during that time. One need only watch the first scene in *Rokk í Reykjavík* to see this evidenced, as the film is opened with a *rímur* performance by Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson, the then-chieftain of *Ásatrúarfélagið* (the neo-pagan Norse religion formed in Iceland during the early 1970s).

The conditions were right in Iceland for the punk happening it by the time it arrived. Participating in global popular music discourse was simply a matter of people picking up the instruments and doing it for themselves. The fundamental point is this: there was, at that time, little room in Iceland for celebrity worship or media monopoly on culture. It should come as little surprise, then, that the country's

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[170] Bob Wayman & Darrell Jonsson, "Iceland is Not a (Musical) Wasteland." *A Complete History…*, 4-5.

emergence on the international popular music stage occurred in an era when doing-it-for-oneself was highly prized.

III – The Present Day.

Nearing the end of our investigation now, we need to illustrate where Icelandic popular music is situated at the current point in time and what impacts it's had on contemporary Icelandic society. And in order to understand Icelandic popular music in its current global context, we will begin with its first international ambassador.

Björk Guðmundsdóttir is by no means the most important name associated with Icelandic popular music, but she is of much importance to our topic because of the crucial part she has played in establishing Icelandic music in an international context. Something that must be kept in mind about the arrival of Björk as an international pop figure in the early 1990s is that she was the first Icelander that many people in the world had ever encountered. There had been no Icelandic popular culture figures at that level before and her fame brought about new attention to Iceland from abroad. Before The Sugarcubes, Icelandic pop music was largely unrecognised off the island. Anything released before the 1980-83 boom was (and still is) quite obscure to anyone who did not have some significant connection to Icelandic culture. The 1990s and 2000s were times of growth for Iceland in many ways, and exposure received through popular music was a significant part of that. These two decades saw some of the country's pioneering pop musicians deal with unawareness of Iceland abroad, and, in turn, create impressions of it for the world at large.

Throughout the 1990s, Björk stood basically on her own as Icelandic musical ambassador to the world. She was, as such, an ambassador for Icelandic culture on the whole in many ways. Many people at that time simply had no concept of Iceland and thus made general assumptions about it based on their experience of Björk. "I think I'm a much better Icelander abroad than I am in Iceland," she said in a 1996 interview. "In Iceland, everyone thinks I'm really foreign and eccentric and really strange and they don't understand me and my music sounds very awkward and foreign. And then I go abroad and they say, 'Oh, you are so strange and awkward. That must be because you are from Iceland'." [171] The point being, of course, as Mark Pytlik points out, [172] that she was considered exotic in Iceland, just as she was elsewhere. Assumptions might be understandable in this situation, however, as Björk was the first world-renowned popular culture figure from a place that many people knew hardly anything about, something she herself explained in the following manner:

Iceland was isolated for 600 years from the rest of the world, and when we got our independence we were sort of still in the middle ages, it was like we hadn't really had any progress…[A]nd there was a lot of fear, kind of "foreigners are evil and then they corrupt you and destroy you and they are like the Danish, and they just want to abuse you and everything abroad is horrible and we should just stick together and wear woolly sweaters and read the sagas out loud to each other and be isolated for ever and ever." So my generation was very much about breaking that up and saying: listen, I

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[171] Interview for Bust magazine, October 1996. Found online at www.bjork.com

[172] In: *Björk: Wow and Flutter*. ECW Press; Toronto, 2003.

could go and play Mexico and I could play New Zealand and I will be as Icelandic as

any of you guys. I'm not going to get corrupted and I'm not going to get abused; it's

okay to mingle…you won't get destroyed. And that's part of Iceland's pride – it's to

be a country in the world and be able to communicate with other countries. [173]

Björk acted as a lone representative of Iceland on the pop culture stage for a time,

and, in some ways, like Laxness did a generation before, she faced the weight of

misunderstanding both at home and abroad. In relation to art, national image, and

Laxness' journey off the island, Halldór Guðmundsson says that the role of the

national writer is, largely, a thing of the past, something which "…belongs to the

nineteenth century, with societies and historical situations in which sociology,

psychology, and the mass media were at a primitive and tentative stage…," but that

"[i]n Iceland it was possible to uphold this position for longer because the country

was so behind in its development… ." [174] Laxness was able, therefore, says

Ástráður Eysteinsson, to act as a cultural agent (as a cultural hero, even) and shape

the cultural landscape of his time through literary discourse. [175] If we look at the

1990s and 2000s, and at Iceland's two most internationally-renowned popular music

acts, we see a similar climate, wherein particular individuals arrive at a level of

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[173] Interview for New Zealand Herald (Online), November 19 2007. Found online at www.bjork.com

[174] Halldór Guðmundsson, "Hamsun, Laxness, and Icelandic Literature." *Knut Hamsun Abroad: International Reception.* Ed. Peter Fjågesund. Norvik Press; London, 2009. 19-36. 28.

[175] Ástráður Eysteinsson. "Halldór Laxness and the Narrative of the Icelandic Novel." *Scandinavica* Vol. 42, No. 1. May 2003. 47-66. 50.

fame that is entirely new for their particular place and time, allowing them to have great influence on how their culture is perceived from within and without.

It happened with Björk in the 1990s, and again during the early 2000s, when Sigur Rós arrived on the international music scene, quickly reaching a level of fame that placed them, too, into the role of cultural representatives. The effect of this group is interesting, though, for, like Björk, Sigur Rós have always been quite direct with their Icelandic-ness, but they took it much further by using almost exclusively Icelandic text on their albums; the lyrics in the songs as well, though often non-standard Icelandic or simply gibberish, were nonetheless closely related to Icelandic vernacular. Whereas for Björk Icelandic-ness was something she had to often explain and handle, for Sigur Rós it was always incorporated into their overall aesthetic, creating a singular profile for themselves and, ultimately for international audiences, impressions of Iceland that owed more to imagination than to any actual knowledge of the country. "Never has an album made me fall in love with a country before even setting eyes on it," a North American reviewer wrote recently [176] of their album *Ágætis Byrjun*, placing it (just passed half way) in a survey of the top one hundred records of the last decade. This reaction to the group is not uncommon outside of Iceland, but in their homeland they are similarly esteemed. In a 2009 survey [177] of the best Icelandic albums of all time, as voted by listeners and the

[176] Found online at: tinymixtapes.com/features/favorite-100-albums-2000-2009-60-41.

[177] Garðarsson and Thoroddsen. *100 Bestu Plötur…*

Icelandic media, this same record occupies the top spot. In the years since their international debut, Sigur Rós have used their Icelandic-ness to establish a new sense of Icelandic culture in the worldwide context. The band's website, for example, has an Icelandic pronunciation guide, [178] while their 2007 film *Heima* – a concert film that easily doubles as a tourism advert – was released to a large audience worldwide, and is now screened on Icelandair flights. Björk may well have been the first Icelandic pop star, but Sigur Rós were the first to employ their Icelandic-ness as a defining characteristic. Here, again, we return to Eysteinsson's notion of cultural engineering. Being that Icelandic popular music discourse is still relatively new – the same is true for Icelandic musicians having an international presence – Sigur Rós were able to create impressions of Icelandic-ness to such extents for audiences both at home and abroad because nobody had done it in popular music before them. Sigur Rós and Björk, have, in their own ways, much like Laxness did in Eysteinsson's explanation, sought an aesthetic foothold in Icelandic tradition, [179] whereby bringing the nation's history into contact with contemporary artistic discourse. They have both had an influence on Icelandic society as a result, evidenced, for example, by the *Náttúra* concert in June 2008 and its ongoing political discourse. "Contemporary Icelandic constructions of identity…strive for a balance between the idea of Iceland as land, language and literature, and its modernising trajectory," says Nicola Dibben, explaining that "[m]usic video and documentary manifest a variety of responses to this situation."

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[178] sigur-ros.co.uk/band/pronunci.php

[179] Eysteinsson, 58.

[180] One of the most important themes in this respect, she points out, is, of course, nature and the Icelandic landscape: "Central to the ideas of nature articulated in Icelandic popular music video and music documentary," she says, "is a contrast between country and city, which can be understood as a response to the sudden shift from rural to urban life that occurred in Iceland during the twentieth century." [181] The tension of this shift is visible in various forms throughout Icelandic popular music, says Dibben, [182] but, works like Sigur Rós' *Heima* film, she says, offer a clear "…connection with [the country's] history, and therefore a shared identity for those participating in it." [183] Once again, in the case of Laxness, Eysteinsson explains:

> Iceland modernized rapidly, both in industrial and economic terms, but at the same time there was a great concern with traditions that were seen as sanctifying and providing the cultural 'content' of the independence. In his writings, his cultural involvements, and his socialist political stance, Laxness assumed a position vis-à-vis tradition, an attitude at once radical and conservative. [184]

One could state that a similar stance has been adopted by artists such as Björk and

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[180] Nicola Dibben. "Nature and Nation: National Identity and Environmentalism in Icelandic Popular Music Video and Music Documentary." *Ethnomusicology Forum*, Vol. 18, No. 1. 131-151. 145.

[181] Ibid, 140.

[182] Ibid, 140-142.

[183] Dibben, 140-142.

[184] Eysteinsson, 55.

Sigur Rós, who bring aspects of Icelandic tradition to modern global audiences. Despite the fact that this contact is taking place within a consumer discourse, it is nonetheless part of a vital process, for, as Benedikt Gröndal says: "nothing can be understood without someone who can do the understanding; and a being cannot be praised without there being a praising person." [185] As we've seen in this investigation, the process of cultural communication requires both sender and audience, but, as cultural identity is transmitted to others, it is also reinforced in the sender in the process of reality reflecting itself in itself, as Gröndal puts it. [186]

Many people are familiar at least to some extent with Björk and Sigur Rós, but Icelandic pop music does not begin nor end with them, so what of the state of current musical discourse in Iceland? It must be stated that the country enjoys a reputation for its unique and vibrant music scene, as the annual Iceland Airwaves festival proves each year, with the artists, crowds, and revenue from all over the world it brings to the island. But there is more to this topic than tourist money, and, furthermore, it is not our aim here to focus merely on the most popular Icelandic artists nor to dive down into the minutiae of the current music scene, so the best way to proceed at this point is to look at how Iceland has adapted to the climate of internet era. As we have covered already, the internet has completely changed the way music is handled and experienced. We established previously how connectivity has reached incredible levels in the modern era, and how music is now so without

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[185] Benedikt Gröndal. "Some Fragments Concerning the Poetic." *The Golden Plover Has Arrived*. Ed. Steingrímur Eyfjörð. CIS; Reykjavík, 2007. 59-72. 63.

[186] Ibid. 64.

restraint that it instantly arrives at a global audience. So how has Iceland adapted to

these developments? The potential of its popular music to generate interest (and

revenue) was recognised early on, and the country has, in fact, been at the vanguard

of new methods of handling music online. As early as 2003, a significant amount of

Icelandic music was made officially available online in one collection: "The

Tonlist.is website began," note Jónatan Garðarsson and Arnar Eggert Thoroddsen,

"[with] 20, 000 Icelandic songs accessible for users to download for a small fee.

Soon after it increased to 50, 000." [187] That database is complimented by the Iceland

Music Export, a government-sponsored entity that serves to promote and support

Icelandic artists abroad, whose website [188] contains internet listings and contact

information for nearly every active musical artist in the country, along with news,

videos and audio material as well. It may also come as no surprise that

developments in the independent circle online have a good home in Iceland, as

well: Grapewire.com, established by influential Icelandic music figure Einar Örn

Benediktsson, a man who since the early 1980s has been behind many of the

biggest musical happenings in the country, offers a space for artists and artisans to

set themselves up online and manage the sale of their products themselves.

Benediktsson explains it thus:

We started at the beginning of the year 2006 and the original gameplan was to

provide services that could be utilized by the international digital market…Early on

we realized that providing tools to present and digitally distribute music was just one

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[187] Garðarsson and Thoroddsen, 14.

[188] www.icelandmusic.is

part of what artists needed. We now have tools to sell everything, not only digital downloads…We consider ourselves a one-stop shop for artists looking to establish and maintain a direct-to-fan relationship. [189]

He continues by pointing out that "…the territorial borders are blurred and at least for Grapewire the world is one market when it comes to the arts so an artist connects the same way to a fan in Iceland as he or she would in China or the Czech Republic." [190] In the case of Gogoyoko.com, another site created in Iceland and now operated jointly between Iceland, Norway and Germany, the concept is similar: to offer a direct artist-to-client connection. [191] Innovations like these have sprung up all around the world, functioning as new methods of distributing music, enabling artists to be heard by international audiences that, up until a few years ago, would have been impossible to reach.

At this point there is no clear end result visible to us in terms of the possibilities for music discourse online, and thus we cannot even speculate here where it is headed, nor what the effects, positive and negative, of such connectivity could eventually be for musical experience. The fact of the matter at this point is, though, that music is moving about like never before, and industry models that once inhibited the flow of music from one part of the world to another have changed, as

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[189] Taken from an interview, found online at: icelandmusic.is/In-the-spotlight/1156/Grapewire---Delivering-Like-Pros/default.aspx

[190] Ibid.

[191] www.gogoyoko.com

evidenced by both the international acclaim that a number of Iceland's popular

musicians have received, and the country's continuing reputation as a hotbed of

unique musical activity. In this modern climate, a place like Iceland, where, for

hundreds of years, musical instruments were scarcely even available, is able to state

and define itself among countless other cultures in the realm of global musical

discourse, now unrestricted in their potential to be heard.

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