Is Not That We Don't Need Popular Music, but Rather How. Reflections on Disciplinary Spaces and Interstices, in Lieu of an Introduction

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This special issue is aimed at examining the sphere of meaning evoked by the expression "popular music" and unpacking its implications for current music studies. Such topic is particularly urgent now, a time in which the changes in music production and circulation caused by widespread digital technology have brought together cultural elements originally separated from each other. In order to introduce the approach and the contributions included in this volume, in this essay I would like to sketch out the general framework of the discussion by addressing two correlated questions. The first concerns the interdisciplinary nature of popular music studies, and the second the very possibility of defining the latter as a discipline, severed from other areas of music studies. If in fact the expression "popular music", understood as a «third kind of music» [Scott 2009, 4], is a historically determined discursive formation ensuing from changes in the conditions of production in the late nineteenth century, it is difficult to see why we should not try to define which musical practices are included within it, after the radical transformations witnessed between the late twentieth and the early twenty-first century, and what conceptual and methodological tools are the most appropriate in dealing with them.

The title of this introduction, seen in this light, is a bit less provocative than it might seem at first. It is not a matter of doubting as to whether popular music – understood as a set of repertoires – can be counted among the objects pertaining to music studies. Rather, it is much more interesting to consider how this expression, and the cultural practices connected to it, once it has become part of our vocabulary and included within the boundaries of musicology and ethnomusicology can help us rethink a few broader questions. An updated reflection on the use of a term such as popular music would lead our discussion to revolve once again around the patently academic nature of an expression seldom used in other contexts than academia, and whose conventional character defines it as a label covering a broad range of genres and styles. The existence of cultural hierarchies under constant negotiation, indeed, implies that the very definition of what is "popular" and what is not also depends on the context of its reception. For the same reason, the boundaries between what is included and what is excluded from this semantic field also tend to vary, and to put into question the distinctions between cultural practices, especially at a time when the traditional actors of the culture industry – from music publishers to record producers – seem to be progressively losing their ability to shape tastes and regulate access to a highly diverse spectrum of musics. Within this scenario, an analytical attitude towards these musics, focused above all on issues such as their specific styles and possibilities to trigger processes of meaning production, becomes the starting point for two different but correlated objectives. Firstly, the tools of music analysis can be placed once again at the centre of popular music studies, allowing interdisciplinarity to be gathered around musical structures and utterances; secondly, this stimulus can be used to integrate divergent approaches and renew music studies themselves from the inside. A preliminary answer to the question raised in the title of the volume, then, might be that we do need popular music because it offers a firm and critical outlook towards musical practices, bringing to the fore its nature as a product that is at once artistic, industrial, and technological. Introducing a separation between disciplines on the basis of

the repertoires they study, from this point of view, undermines any critical attempt to challenge the separation between musical practices on the basis of unquestioned assumptions, and thus any chance of being counted among the driving forces for renewal in academic disciplines linked to music.

Even without claiming to provide a complete or systematic discussion, which in any case is not the purpose of a publication such as a thematic issue of a journal, our aim is to bring together a series of critical stances, hoping to contribute to a debate that has actually never subsided. Particular attention has been given to scholars that can enrich the discussion with innovative or original points of view, rather than reiterating positions that have been repeatedly put forward, and representing the main geographical areas in which popular music studies have grounded themselves over the last few decades. Even while not closely focusing on music analysis, the topics dealt with in this special issue can be included within the broad field of music theory, since they discuss the categories and definitions used for the classification and categorization of musical practices. From this perspective, we do need popular music because it constantly reminds us of the plurality and variability of musical practices, and of how much sensitivity towards the relations between text, context, and the circumstances of production is required by any kind of research on cultural objects.

Interdisciplinarity as a methodological basis

An interdisciplinary appeal to different skills and bodies of knowledge – and a background most typically in the humanities, alongside technical and analytical training – has always been one of the most frequently highlighted aspects of popular music studies as a field in which diverse traditions and conceptual tools are brought together, allowing researchers to deal with the complexity of contemporary repertoires intended for mass reproduction.[1] Becoming an interdisciplinary scholar, however, and learning to move among the interstices between different specialisations and fields of study, only rarely leads one to acquire the competencies needed to deal with more general issues, whose impact on academic discourse and beyond has the potential – for example – to attract resources from national or international bodies that provide funding for research. On the other side, the advantages of creating research groups that include different specialisations may also clash with each discipline's willingness to partially relinquish its own primacy when coming into contact with others. This difficulty becomes all the more acute in the case of music, owing to the degree of specialisation necessary to deal with this subject in its specific technical and aural features, in addition to its value within social and cultural discourse. This would necessarily imply that a leading role ought to be given to music studies within such interdisciplinary undertakings, including tasks involving coordination and direction, that are often hard to achieve due to the general weak position music studies occupy within the humanities. Musicological disciplines, in particular, have progressively come to create a field marked by highly contrasting visions as to their own objectives, repertoires and methodological orientations.

The issue of interdisciplinarity is not only an aspect of the cultural discourse surrounding popular music studies, it also shapes the politics that allow access to academic positions and the way in which disciplines are organised within institutions. From this perspective, situating popular music studies within any number of different kinds of departments and research centres (with disciplines ranging from sociology to ethnomusicology, cultural and media studies) has not favoured a coherent reflection regarding the basic skills required to specifically approach popular music cultures and styles. This state of affairs was aptly described by Philip Tagg who acknowledged that an association such as the IASPM (International Association for the Study of

Popular Music), even though it has gained notable prominence and an extraordinarily wide recognition among scholars, has until present essentially failed to produce a radical change within academia and – to an even greater degree – within music studies [Tagg 2011, 7-11]. In the last decade above all, musicology and ethnomusicology have both witnessed the development of lines of research able to cut across different repertoires, especially in the area of studies dedicated to performance, audiovisual and recorded artefacts, sound studies, and the effects of digitalisation on music consumption and production. All of these trends could provide a positive contribution in overcoming the marginalisation of music studies in respect to other disciplines within the humanities, which has widely been acknowledged as one of the most obvious limits of musicological studies as they have been developed until now. Over these same recent decades, it must be said, we have also witnessed an inexorable process encouraging inclusion and exchanges between approaches and research agenda, foreshadowing a will to embrace a growing diversity of cultural phenomena [Born 2010; Tagg 2012, 83-131; Cook 2013b, 8-32].[2]

In a recent reflection on cinema studies, Kenyan Tomaselli has proposed to think about disciplines in the same way as language, provided with grammatical structures (*langue*) compared to which specific research topics are the *parole* that articulates its deep structure [Tomaselli 2015, 175]. The upshot of these considerations is the existence of "undisciplined" spaces [Thompson Klein 1990, 14] within the disciplines themselves, that should on the one hand be protected in order not to eliminate the complexity of cultural phenomena, but – on the other hand – should be referred to a solid context, to construct approaches and educational projects that can be included within a discourse beyond self-referentiality: «The point is that the whole concept of interdisciplinary knowledge is based on the need for people *in disciplines* to mesh research with that of others. They can take back the knowledge thus created between disciplines into their own fields and thereby enrich the material they present to the next generation of learners *entering disciplines*» [Tomaselli 2015, 177]. The situation is further complicated when dealing with popular music studies, because of the degree of technical competence required to engage with music, in general, and particularly with the multifaceted issues concerning the cultural objects produced for mass production and technological mediation. Music theory and analytical training, as well as acoustics and the study of sound as a result of technological and performative processes, are fundamental tools in dealing with sound phenomena in all their specific communicative features.

This raises two closely related issues, whose importance cannot be denied when discussing a possible disciplinary framework for popular music studies. First, an ongoing debate about the methodological centrality of musicology and ethnomusicology in the research on these repertoires; second, which musical aspects are the most relevant, whether their performative-aural dimensions or their social effects.[3] As a consequence of the lack of a clear definition of music's role as cause or effect of the social phenomena and circumstances in which it is involved, the scholarly community has only defined itself through its relation with a few specific cultural objects, setting itself apart by contrast with respect to what has been called "academic" or "traditional musicology". A particularly clear formulation of this situation can be found in a text by Roberto Agostini, who sets out a clear picture from the point of view of popular music scholars:

> da una parte troviamo la musicologia consolidata, che tende a escludere quanto non risulta allineato al paradigma disciplinare e al canone della musica d'arte, ovvero a legittimare quanto può rientrarvi; dall'altra parte troviamo invece una comunità di studiosi che mette in discussione tale paradigma disciplinare sostenendo che la musicologia, piuttosto che escludere o legittimare le musiche a seconda che queste rientrino o meno nel paradigma disciplinare, dovrebbe assumere la relatività di tale paradigma e riformularlo in relazione al mutato contesto socio-culturale con l'obiettivo di diventare lo studio di *tutta* la musica, non solo di *una musica* [Agostini 2006, 28]. [4]

I have included this quotation for the exemplary and concise way in which it clarifies the terms around which the discussion has been framed and discussed. Considering it within the context of the disciplines themselves, and of the social groups that are mirrored in the peculiar anthropological community that goes under the name of academia, it seems to me that this quotation contains a few significant oppositions: a polarity between an exclusive discipline (*consolidated musicology*) and an inclusive group (*a community of scholars*); the objective of reinforcing a canon rather than adopting a wider vision of the relations between cultural objects, societies and conditions of production; the crucial instance of value judgements or rather a critical approach that does not rely on aesthetic assessments. My personal impression is that these oppositions are currently losing ground and meaningfulness, at a speed that largely depends on the ability of national and international institutions to react incisively and rapidly to the changes in the cultural sphere as a whole. In the last decades, a tendency to rethink approaches and methodologies is quite noticeable, and the depth and plurality of its outcomes are not limited to popular music studies alone but music studies as a whole, after the initial impulse brought on by new musicology in the 1980s [Fink 2002].

The urgent desire to define approaches specifically tailored to studying popular music emerges in Franco Fabbri's and Goffredo Plastino's discussion of the state of the studies on these repertoires in Italy. At the end of a particularly polemic passage, the two authors write: «the main inconsistency still lies in the (partial) approach to popular music as an object to be studied, and not as a field of study» [Fabbri-Plastino 2014, 6], highlighting the need for a specific recognition for scholars who study popular music, and a special disciplinary positioning. In the same essay they highlight the "anomalous" situation in Italy, visible in a numerically limited but important tradition of studies largely focused on (verbal and musical) formal, rather than mediological or sociological, aspects; this situations is in stark opposition with the balance of the forces between culturalist and textualist approaches in the international context, especially in Anglo-American academia [*ivi*, 10]. The main idea underlying this special issue is to take this anomaly as a starting point, encouraging a reflection among researchers who, even while not defining themselves first and foremost as popular music scholars, dedicate a significant amount of their work and theoretical speculation to these repertoires. Our attempt is to resume the discussion concerning the need for a different and separate disciplinary definition for popular music, even though this has been widely indicated as a possible solution for the problem; it would be perhaps more productive to invert the question and set out a way to include these cultural practices within the broader context of music studies, in order to let popular music exert a driving and even more deeply transformative influence. As early as the mid-1990s, Anahid Kassabian stressed that it was becoming ever more ideologically suspect to define disciplines "wholly according to object of study» [1997, 8]; furthermore, an approach that explores the intersections between more traditionally oriented disciplines – taking into account the contributions coming from cultural studies, media studies and the specific features of aural and audiovisual artefacts – is surely better suited to current ways of studying musical practices in all their multifaceted complexity.

As regards the discipline's definition, it might be worthwhile to recall that the crucial and foundational period in the early 1980s, when the IASPM and the periodical *Popular Music* were established thanks to the work of scholars such as Richard Middleton, Phillip Tagg, Franco Fabbri, David Horn, Jan Fairley and Charles Hamm, had some peculiar and most likely unrepeatable features. In this initial phase of aggregation, the main aim was to provide the bases to foster an interest towards musics and practices that until then had not gained access to academic consideration. Discourses concerning the definition of the discipline's own sphere of interest initially proceeded via a critique of Adorno's thought, including the narrative he uses for presenting the birth of popular music as a consequence of the industrialisation of music production.[5] At that

time, most likely, the idea contrasting an academic "tradition", entrenched in defending both a canon and the cultural prestige it had acquired, created a need for an oppositional vision of the respective territories, animated by divergent cultural agendas.

A position such as this has become increasingly difficult to maintain, given that the interdisciplinary paradigm is being replaced with a transdisciplinarity developed from a reflection on the isomorphisms between different domains of knowledge. In such a perspective the trans-disciplinary hypothesis – how it has been developed, for example, in the "moral project of CIRET (Centre International de Recherches et Études Transdisciplinaires) in 1987 – would suit the establishment of an inclusive field of studies where popular music is integrated, «permitting the emergence of unity amidst diversity and diversity through unity. Its objective is to lay bare the nature and characteristics of this flow of information and its principal task is the elaboration of a new language, a new logic, and new concepts to permit the emergence of a real dialogue between specialists in different domains of knowledge».[6] According to Serge Lacasse this shift has sparked off a series of centripetal movements whose final result is the definition of a field of studies based on new premises, closely connected with the needs and directions of current orientation in various disciplines [2015]. In searching for this trans- (or inter-)disciplinary framework, it is still important to insist on the need for technical and analytical knowledge (involving not only music theory, but also knowledge of sound production techniques and listening technologies, for example) as the cornerstone of a discourse that is at once epistemologically grounded and capable to have a truly critical function.

The mobility of the pop text and its transformations in the digital era

Among the various questions one must face when attempting to assign popular music studies a specific place among academic disciplines, one in particular derives from the multifaceted nature of the "text" in these musical practices, and the status given to the former according to the point of view from which we observe it. In his introduction to the edited collection of essays *Reading Pop*, Richard Middleton summarised the main issues surrounding the topic in the following terms: «pop's mode of existence (dizzying chains of replications and textual relations; ubiquitous dissemination; production processes and reception contexts characterised by multimedia messages) does indeed render the idea of the bounded, originary text and single *auteur* outmoded» [2000, 8]. The ensuing vision of cultural objects acknowledges their status as a catalyst for a multi-layered set of relations: within a reference community, inside the specific social context in which they are produced and received, and in the industrial system that transforms the material traces recorded by musicians into objects intended to be reproduced on a mass scale. Thanks to its performative origins and its particular "mode of existence", popular music shares with performance art an ontological status that one might describe as "viral", in which «a given performance […] splinters, mutates, and multiplies over time in the hands of various critical constituencies in a variety of media, to yield a body of critical work that extends the primary act of the performance in the indefinite future through reproduction» [Bedford 2012]. A context such as this, widening the concept and status of the text above and beyond the boundaries of a physical object and an authorship no more tied to a specific individual, calls for approaches that integrate text and context in a collective but unitary entity whose effect is to give origin, from a historiographic point of view, to «a synchronic text of a socio-cultural moment rather than to emphasize a diachronic unfolding of autonomous works» [Brackett 2000, 18].

Subjected to unending negotiation, the unstable status of the text in popular music studies is also a consequence of the introduction of digital technologies, which have permanently changed our way of conceiving the whole process of production and reception of music, as well as nourishing a many-sided exchange between styles, compositional methods and technologies.[7] As Thom Holmes has written, the first and most general effect of digital technology was to make technologies «once considered radical and experimental» [2002, 273] available to musicians in the popular field as well, above all by replicating analogue technologies or simulating them with dedicated interfaces or patches of modular programs such as Max MSP or Pure Data. The advent of digital technology without doubt made a series of new tools available for realizing recorded music, as regards both access to professional quality software and hardware [Prior 2010] and the possibility for researchers themselves to understand and replicate the processes of composition, modification and production of recorded artefacts. The birth of an association such as the ASARP (Association for the Study of the Art of Record Production),[8] whose aim is to establish contacts between sound technicians, performers and academics interested in the critical reflection on current developments in recording technologies and studio practices, seems a clear step pointing in this direction.[9] A similar convergence can also be seen in the growing interest towards the record as a part of the material culture of popular music, all too often considered as no more than the final result of a chain of the economic added value of music, rather than an object around which complex communicational and discursive negotiations arise. The concentration on tools and technologies is a further element that allows one to perfect integrated and transversal approaches to different repertoires, which refer to similar modes of production, as they delve with processes of creating sound artefacts and are part of the same industrial production chain.

In addition to these aspects related to music production, the widespread diffusion of digital technology in everyday life had profound effects on the way individual tastes and listening inclinations are shaped. In the first place, by tending to "flatten out" history, the availability of technology and cultural objects of the past has the effect of creating an ever wider and more layered *palette* in which highly diverse objects and ways of composing, conceiving, and consuming music potentially live side by side. This is reflected in the stance that Jean Hogarty has defined as "retro culture", in which references to the past are interpreted as part of an intergenerational field of the "popular", tied to niche audiences that are becoming increasingly slender and mobile [2015].[10] The definition of musical taste that begins to appear is ever more pliable and adapted to the personal preferences of single listeners:

> While the conditions of contemporary music diffusion certainly contribute to increasing forms of eclecticism to individuals' repertoires of preferences, they also require them to situate themselves in relation to the profusion of music that they come in contact with. In other words, music taste requires a proper definition that entangles its various dimensions, from the myriad of content that individuals listen to, to the technological components that enact their preferences and diffuse them within everyday contexts [Nowak 2016, cap. 4.3].

A general process in which consumption is being reconfigured along with the distinctions themselves between musical repertoires – first and foremost regarding value judgements – is an idea taken up by John Covach from Thomas Friedman's book *The World Is Flat*, where contemporary economic relations are portrayed as having a more rhizomatic than hierarchical organisation. From this it follows the possibility of reconsidering the role of an expression such as "popular music", estimating the degree to which it emerges as the consequence of specific cultural dynamics. For example, in reviewing the history of the term as opposed to its Other, i.e. the cultural politics involved in the definition of "art music" in the United States in the twentieth century, Covach underlines the need to conceive the field of the popular – and, consequently, of

popular music studies within academia – as the product of a unique cultural phase of intellectual life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, whose usefulness and extent are subject to geographical and chronological limitations.

In the second place, the introduction of digital technologies has also had consequences on modes of consumption and commodification of music, first and foremost in the connection between listening contexts and content: «By inducing particular modes of consumption through their affordances, music technologies complicate the definition process between music and everyday life because they delineate the material condition of its diffusion» [Nowak 2016, cap. 2]. In the overall complexity of cultural consumption, one encounters an ever greater permeability between musical genres from the listener's perspective; the way in which individual taste is formed today follows unforeseeable and eclectic paths, underlining the proactive role of technology in creating the conditions of reception:

> While it cannot be said that technology is fully accountable for musical taste or engagement, it does, however, exert its influence on how people listen to music, which ultimately affects their listening habits. […] The agency of users can only account for a portion of the way in which people engage with music and technology, and while devices can be used outside their original intent, there are limitations [Avdeeff 2012, 282-283].

The reversibility of past technologies such as record or audio cassette players cannot in fact be compared to that of current platforms for music consumption and production, which work in an increasingly intuitive way, but are also more difficult to be customized at will [Spaziante 2007, 131-162].[11] The flip side of this process is the possibility offered by technology of personally connecting listeners and musicians, laying the foundation for a new type of relationship between producers and consumers, and thus «dispelling the alienation that followed the industrialisation of pop music; highlighting the consumption of music as an active, incorporative practice; and solidifying the often illusory bonds between performers and consumers» [Kibby 2006, 302].

In the third place, the introduction of digital technology has irrevocably changed our very way of conceiving musical practices, the boundaries between performance and recording, the idea of the live concert and of audience participation. These changes concern the entire spectrum of musical practices, leading to the emergence of a common ground between cultural realms that were once sharply separated and a proliferation of potential research perspectives across once separated repertoires:

> The triangulation of different disciplinary approaches, in short, may create risks of misinterpretation, but it also create the potential for significant added value. And with as complex and indeed intractable a phenomenon such as performance, enacted under the exact constraints of real time and constantly poised on the brink of irrationality, we need every interpretive weapon in the armory - and then some [Cook 2013a, 84].

Along similar lines we could say that the need for interdisciplinary and integrated approaches that arises with popular music allows us to use a range of conceptual and theoretical tools originally perfected for other cultural practices. The latter are not to be seen as "Other" with respect to that which follows them chronologically, but are in turn stratified within more recent musical cultures, from which they do not necessarily stand apart in a binary opposition. Perhaps as the effect of an ever wider and more accessible "universal library", one cannot help imagining a future in which distinctions based on expressions such as "popular music", "art music", "traditional music" (and many more) will be seen as tags subject to negotiation, periodically worn out and/or reconsidered. The movement towards interdisciplinarity that emerges, in the work of many scholars, from a

close focus on a specific phenomenon corresponds in fact to a convergence between what have been traditionally understood as separated "musical cultures".[12] Lastly, new perspectives have been opened by digital musicology as a set of research tools based on synchronous reading and representation of historical data through the means of information technology; this makes it possible, as has also been the case in literary studies [Moretti 2013], to historicise the emergence of canons tied to prestige – that have begun to appear in popular music studies as well [Desler 2013] – compared to the entire spectrum of contemporary expressions that form their background and context.

How do we need popular music studies? Transformations and current perspectives

Moving away from an attempt to define the semantic field of the expression "popular music", and beginning to consider the studies of these repertoires, the overlapping of former separate areas and their boundaries only becomes more generalized. This is due above all to two related issues, well identified by Simon Frith in his introduction to the collection of essays entitled *Popular Music. Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*:

> Because popular music is not itself a discipline, it has not really developed linearly or in any specific theoretical direction, with an agreed set of conceptual issues to be clairified or hypotheses to be tested or methodological problems to be resolved. At the same time, as a research topic popular music has been liable to what one might call passing scholarly attention. Literary scholars, for example, take an occasional interest in lyrics as poetry, sociologists of youth an interest in musical taste groups as subcultures [Frith 2004, 4-5].

On the one hand, the marginal position of these studies within today's organisation of knowledge is a fact that logically follows a disciplinary definition based on the subject of research rather than on shared methods and conceptual tools; on the other hand, the question of which disciplinary tradition should have a central relevance becomes crucial when one attempts to define a balance between the different approaches that are needed to deal with these repertoires in the most appropriate way. Bringing musical disciplines to the fore - first and foremost analysis, as a way to focus on linguistic and aural aspects - encourages the methodological option by which music would become the nexus around which interdisciplinarity could be built: «dedicated analysis of popular music provides us with the opportunity of aligning ourselves with the interdisciplinary ambitions of cultural studies as one means through which we can enter into an engagement with popular music» (Anderson 2008, 287).

In the essay by Serge Lacasse quoted at the end of the first paragraph, the process by which popular music studies are currently being regenerated from a musicological point of view is headed towards two main directions. First, a deeper focus on the specific technical, linguistic and aural features of musical genres that have remained outside of academic discourse (heavy metal, for example, in all of its varieties). Second, the adoption of research perspectives informed by the recent trend of "posthuman humanism", an approach in which the distinction between what is human and what is technological is put within parentheses, promoting an integrated comprehension of cultural phenomena as combinations of material and immaterial elements. As regards popular music studies in particular, Lacasse sees the latter approach as a way to regain access to the specific qualities of the objects one is interested in, and to entirely dispense with comparisons with other practices, conceptual categories or value judgements:

this means to approach any musical phenomenon in its entirety without privileging any set of musical parameters (abstract, performatory or technological) and, more importantly, without assigning extra value to concepts such as "complexity" as compared with more body-oriented ones such as "groove": of course, popular musicology is giving more and more attention, as we have seen to phenomena such as "groove", but it seems to me that we are still approaching them as the new locus of the music's complexity, rather than appreciate them for what they are: expressions of physical pleasure [Lacasse 2015].

One possible consequence of this attitude might be a rediscovery of the relevance of listening, which would in turn become the centre of all research on musical repertoires: in this light, popular music studies would occupy an advanced area of an ecological approach to musical practices. Putting the body at the centre is an innovative enterprise in at least two complementary and overlapping senses: as regards the performer, it allows us to bring its role back to the fore, since he/she represents the starting point for all musical utterances; at the same time, reminds us that this first stage does not exist without the counterpart of listening, whose prevision is part of the project underlying any musical activity.

Various lines of reasoning in the article by Stefano La Via published here goes in the same overall direction. Developing a theoretical and historical set of arguments preceded by an almost auto-ethnographic initial inspiration, La Via points at the experience of listening as a foundational moment for a conception of music as a transcultural practice, whose continuities are more important than fragmentation. The key here is a reflection on the way in which non-Anglophone scholars have taken up the expression "popular music" starting from the concept of "popular" as developed by Gramsci, understood as traditional modes of artistic and poetic expression whose function includes a critical stance towards the present. This is true, for example, in the realm of Italian *canzone d'autore*, as it is in other repertoires outside the Anglo-American mainstream, in which the range of meanings evoked by the term "popular" includes both that which is "liked by many" and that which is able to root its expressive means in styles and genres belonging to a national or local identity. The cultural objects produced thus demonstrate a strong link to the social context and are often used to back up a confrontational attitude with contemporary reality.

Bringing back to fore the two complementary factors of performance and listening, incidentally, could become part of an overall strategy aimed at giving to musical topics more relevance in terms of the support provided by national and international bodies for collaborative and cutting-edge research projects. In this direction, a search on the website of the European Research Council, currently the largest European body that allocates grants on the basis of competitive and open calls, shows that from 2009 to 2013 only ten projects in whose description the keyword "music" appears were approved within the sector SH5 (*Cultures and cultural production: literature, visual and performing arts, music, cultural and comparative studies*).[13] The larger part of these initiatives are characterised by a broad consideration of musical practices as all-round cultural manifestations, cutting across the categorizations imposed from above and addressing issues including the history of social groups, cultural consumption and migration, the relations between different media, and technology dedicated to production and reception. Repeating the search including all disciplinary sectors with the keyword "music" produces similar results, while the expression "popular music" appears only once,[14] in the project entitled CAMUT (Culture Aware MUsic Technologies), aimed at perfecting innovative technologies for distributing digital music for the Indian market. A search for "song", lastly, leads to a total of eight results.[15] In the only project fully dedicated to music, however, the term song is used with illustrative purposes, in the presentation of the project *Con Espressione* promoted by the University of Linz (Austria), immediately clarifying however that the research will focus entirely on art music.

Alongside changes involving generations of scholars and historical phases, new directions in popular music studies also involve recognising the presence of repertoires that have been more frequently associated with this expression, overshadowing the inclusive nature of this general definition. As Franco Fabbri and Goffredo Plastino have pointed out in their introduction of the series *Global Popular Music*, entirely devoted to the promotion of researchers and musical repertoires from areas outside the Anglo-American production:

> British and North-American music have been privileged and studied first, not only for their geographic and generational proximity to scholars, but also for their tremendous impact. Everything else has been often relegated to the dubious "world music" category, with a "folk" (or "roots", or "authentic") label attached. However, world popular music is no less popular than rock 'n' roll, r&b, disco, rap, singer-songwriters, punk, grunge, brit-pop, or nu-gaze. It is no less full of history and passion, no less danceable, socially relevant and commercialized.[16]

This kind of approach, while on the one hand bears the mark of a positive aspiration in setting out a field of research that should not operate under commercial or industrial constraints, on the other also presents the potential risk of entrenching the discussion within another oppositional paradigm, which gives due consideration to the current fragmentation of styles and genres but frames it within a binary scheme. In today's scenario, instead, such oppositions are already close to being overcome by transcultural processes, certainly not with only positive outcomes, but underlining the presence of a truly globalised language. The latter is characterised by standardising linguistic elements that – while finding their roots in Anglo-American popular music – cannot be considered any more part of a specific originating culture:

> While the global popular music industry continues to be dominated by Anglo-American product, the balance is slowly beginning to shift with the introduction of increasing amounts of non-Anglo-American popular music into the global flow. This reflects a growing demand at the local level for local artists, their work being recognised as an important dimension of local culture and cultural identity. This, in turn, has had an impact on the ways in which popular music is packaged and presented by the music media in different parts of the world [Bennett-Shank-Toynbee 2006, 306].[17]

One might add that the process sketched out here is not at all new, but has now reached a maturity that makes it quite evident. This is demonstrated, for example, by a pair of recent publications dedicated to singer-songwriters and the various forms these peculiar characters have taken in different local contexts and historical periods [Haworth 2015; Marc-Green 2016]. As mentioned above introducing the article by Stefano La Via, it is the consideration of the connections and continuities between different experiences and practices that allows us to make progress in our historical and cultural understanding of the cultural phenomena, which otherwise would be reduced to a linear sequence overshadowing their inner complexity.

The presence of cultural hierarchies within popular music, often reproduced by homology from other eras or cultural practices, is the main topic of Timothy Taylor's contribution published here. Focusing on musical cultures defined by an opposition to the idea of a mainstream, understood as a dominating or standardising force, the American scholar underlines the presence of a series of cultural invariants that can be grouped around terms such as "hip", "cool" or "edgy". The very fact of aligning popular music with younger audiences' tastes, as regards public discourse and marketing, is a choice involving relative positioning and not substance, and whose roots can be found in the figure of the *bohémien* and later replicated without interruption in cultural mass production. This leads to an inverted significance given to what is "alternative" and what is part of the mainstream, with the former term representing a fixed element in organising knowledge in the popular field at least as much as the latter. If transferred to the field of popular music studies, one

could add as a corollary that this kind of dynamic shows how much more radical a disciplinary reflection would become when avoiding a merely oppositional way of reasoning and moves on to consider the complex negotiations concerning human communities and the formation of cultural hierarchies.

The reproduction of the "high-" versus "low-brow" dynamic as part of a fluid process, constantly subjected to redefinition, is the main issue discussed in the article by Philippe Gonin. The notions of experimental and psychedelic music, from this point of view, provide the author with the opportunity to narrate an environment, such as the British underground in the late 1960s, in which the crossover between popular music, visual art, and avant-garde musical research is particularly dense, so much so as to lead the author to propose, for certain artistic experiences, the label "popular art music". The example of the second LP of Pink Floyd's *Ummagumma* is focused on a recorded artefact that could not have been created without a considerable amount of elements drawn from radical experimentation and improvisational music on the one hand, and creative experiences involving the use of recording studios in popular music on the other. The late 1960s thus emerge as a magmatic moment, difficult to define according to any binary kind of logic (an aspect that the article underlines in the opening question of its title, *Popular or not?*), where stimuli coming from areas that are only apparently far removed were brought together in the cultural practices of the time.

Musicologies and popular music studies: discursive characterisations and cultural hierarchies

The relation between different types of cultural production and the methods used to investigate them within the academia has been one of the main problems with which popular music studies have had to reckon since their inception. Right from the start, the field has been radically split in two, between scholars interested first and foremost in technical or formal issues and those who aim at reconstructing the contexts and conditions of reception. From this point of view, the stakes are not merely academic, nor do they concern the definition of a discipline; rather, two different conceptions come into play, concerning which aspects of musical experience is most relevant in providing an explanation of its effects in terms of communication [Tagg 2016]. One of this monographic issue's goals is to sketch out what upsides may have a renewed centrality of musical studies in contemporary approaches to popular music, that also – or above all – take into account the changes in the very way in which "music studies" have been developed in recent years, for example opening up to approaches inspired by performance studies or reconsidering their own complexity on the basis of the conceptual tools developed in cultural studies [Katz 2014].

From this point of view the polysemic nature of the expression "popular music", and the possible meanings it acquires when translated into other languages are revealing of the contrasting issues related to such a definition. This is the main topic of Dietrich Helms' article, in which he examines the scope of this expression and its possible associations with other terms used in German-speaking countries. The situation portrayed here presents some similarities with the Italian one, above all in recognising that the problems raised by uncritically accepting an English term cannot be considered only terminological, rather it delves with the core of problems such as musical categorization and the definition of genre boundaries. Beginning with a historical panorama that reviews the alternatives to the English expression that have appeared in musical and musicological literature of Germanophone countries, the essay then shifts to issues more closely tied to the discipline's definition and the operating practices for research into these musics, calling for an elaboration of more pragmatic approaches.

   The image of a field of study still in search of a definition becomes even clearer when using some sort of statistical approach to the academic literature on popular music, in order to gather elements for a broader reflection. This attempt has one direct precedent in an article by Eliot Bates [2013], in which the current state of popular music studies is outlined on the basis of the data gathered through a textual analysis of the articles that have appeared in the sector's three main journals (*Popular Music & Society*, *Popular Music* and *Journal of Popular Music Studies*). The article in question, while clarifying its qualitative approach, is however perhaps flawed by not clarifying its research method and the results obtained from a quantitative point of view. On account of this, I have attempted for the following paragraph to work on a more limited subset of data (only containing titles of the articles published on *Popular Music*), since 1981, and *IASPM@Journal*, since 2010), so as to understand whether it is possible to map out the field more systematically.[18] Table 1 presents a general overview of the words that prove to be most used in the articles' titles, in the first column related to the complete dataset, and for each decade in the following four columns. In the single decades, the list is limited to the word whose occurrence outnumber the total number of word in each occurrence class, while in the presentation of the result regarding the complete dataset the choice was to limit the amount of words to the first fifteen, an amount that allows a number of interesting recurrence to emerge within the table.[19]

Complete dataset	1981–1989	1990–1999	2000–2009	2010–2016
music, mus-, musical	music, mus-, musical	music, mus-	music, mus-, musical	music, mus-, musical
popular	popular	popular-	popular	popular
rock	rock	rock	rock	rock
pop	pop	pop	pop	pop
song, songs	song	song	song	song, songs
jazz		jazz	jazz	jazz
new		new	new	new
cultural			cultural	cultural
record	record		record	
identity		identity	identity	identity
politics			politics	
case				case
	dance		dance	
	Britain			
	industry			
	video			
		radio		
		analysis		

		early		
		local		
		world		
			blues	
			policy	
				studies
				culture
				gender
				history

Table 1. Terms most frequently used in the titles of the articles published on the journals *Popular Music* and *IASPM@Journal*, complete dataset and single decades
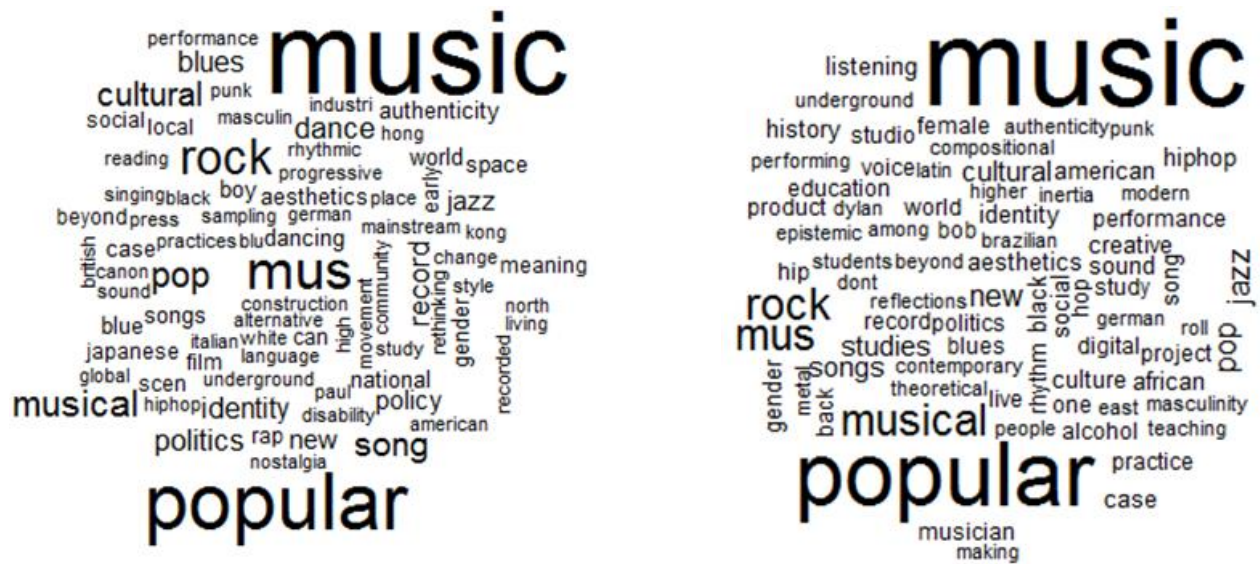
The word clouds in Figure 1 are the result of the representation of the 100 terms most frequently found in the titles of the articles included in the two journals for each decade; in the following images the graphic relevance of the single words is correlated to their frequency within the dataset.
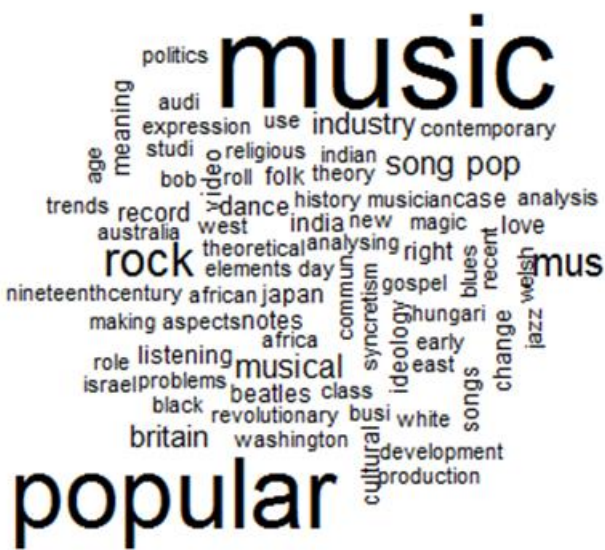
1981-1989
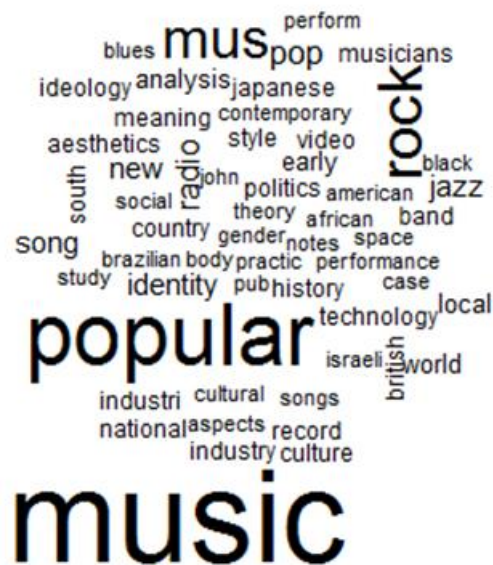
1990-1999

2000-2009	2010-2016

Figure 1. Word clouds of the 100 terms most frequently found in the article titles published on *Popular Music* and *IASPM@Journal*, for each decade

Disregarding the first few lines of the table, which obviously contain a series of general terms, spread out consistently across the last four decades, the chances for a reflection emerge when considering the data progressively signals the emergence of new research objectives in different time frames. Compared to the scenario previously discussed, and to the specific features of Italian academia as well, it is striking for example that the word "analysis" only occurs during the 1990s; this fact, along with the word clouds in which it is also found for the 1980s, indicates the general shift towards an increasingly imbalanced situation that favours culturalist approaches.[20] Moreover, the appearance of a term such as "policy" in the early 2000s, which until then had been absent from the group of the terms most frequently found, could be read alongside the presence in the most recent word cloud of terms such as "education" and "teaching" (in addition to the adjective "higher"), and indicates the growing relevance of popular music studies within institutional contexts. With respect to some issues mentioned above, one element that emerges in particular from a visual examination of the word clouds is a concentration on rather broad geographical areas, ever since the earliest periods covered in this dataset. This is somewhat surprising, compared to the image that has emerged until now in popular music studies about the presence of repertoires that seem to have (virtually) monopolised the field, and could indicate a different balance between what has actually been done and what is on the contrary more significant and visible in terms of power, opportunities to develop research endeavours and gaining academic prestige. One last aspect that can be underlined here concerns a series of terms in the last two word clouds – such as "canon", "rethinking", "epistemic", "reflections" – which bear witness to an effort in recent decades to develop meta-theoretical considerations that can lay some common foundation for a discipline.

One fundamental knot to be untied, when outlining the characteristics and boundaries of the musical practices labelled as "popular music", surely concerns the value judgements that lie at the root of both the marginal position given to these repertoires within musicological discourse, and – conversely – the cultural agenda pursued by those who would prefer to replace one canon with another. Following Carl Dahlhaus, if we define aesthetic judgements as a historically determined instance that can be demonstrated on the basis of specific features of the objects in relation to their context of reception, we soon realise how fragile both attitudes just mentioned actually are [1987, 13-38]. Aspects such as sound, technological mediation, bodily perception and relational elements building a sense of community between musicians and their audiences are typical

elements of popular music that fully qualify as part of its aesthetic characteristics [Gracyk 2007], and as such cannot be excluded from our analytical horizons. Our attention should thus be expanded well beyond the limits of notation and music theory as they have been traditionally conceived, and these elements can in turn become part of a wider set of tools for approaching all repertoires; this represent a further contribution that the growth of popular music studies can bring to music studies as a whole.

Value judgements (or prejudices) have been a central factor in the slow rate at which popular music is included within the horizon of musicological and ethnomusicological disciplines. The alleged linguistic simplicity of these repertoires is such only when they are observed and read with analytical tools developed for other musical practices. The opposition between mind's rationality and instinctive bodily reactions - at the basis of these assumptions - is evident, for example, in the pre-eminence given to structural analysis over other types of description and representation of musical phenomena:

> But if the relevance of structural analysis is now being revealed as distinctly partial, it is tempting to wonder if the last 200 years have been, in one sense, something of a diversion, the popular/classical split a side-effect of the gigantic, if glorious, failure of post-Enlightenment bourgeois thought. This would have implications not just for analytic methodology but for music historiography as well, for it raises the possibility that the differences setting apart twentieth-century popular songs from the lineages of European music are less than commonly thought [Middleton 1993, 187].

From this point of view, the stimulus provided by analytical questions focused on aspects that can only be transcribed into musical notation with considerable difficulty, or else that can be better addressed with other graphic form of visualization and representation, points towards another line of development that may prove fruitful in renewing the study of different types of cultural objects [Bratus-Lutzu 2016].

The position of popular music within a larger set of cultural practices runs throughout Vincenzo Caporaletti's article, which has the calibre and the relevance of an epistemological discussion. Drawing on a reflections that he has amply developed in his writings over the last few decades, Caporaletti begins with the critical consideration of one of the central elements in the musical language of these repertoires, i.e. groove, demonstrating how the pervasiveness of this rhythmic conception allow the recognition of pragmatic continuities between rock and jazz (only to mention two macroscopic areas) that is based on the shared reference to a bodily, performative element. In this sense, the theoretical hypothesis underlying the Audiotactile Principle (ATP) encourages us to rethink the relationship between creative activity and written or recorded textualisation. It is important to note that this article once again adopts an approach in which a convergence between objects with shared pragmatic characteristics proves to be more important than any distinction founded on cultural bases, that are inevitably subjected to constant negotiation and transformation.

The volume closes with a contribution by Max Paddison, a scholar whose work has been focused on aesthetics and Adorno's thought in particular, whose writings are still today a compulsory reference for any critical discourse on musical practices. In reconsidering the implications and the reach of the expression "popular music", he firstly discusses its nature by turning to the notion of common stock (or basic material), originally elaborated by Tony Russell in his 1970 book about the blues. Within the multifaceted galaxy of musics included under the definition "popular music", the selection of certain features taken from a stock of common linguistic and formal elements is what defines the main genres, beginning with the widest subdivisions between rock, jazz and pop, and gradually penetrating into more restricted and

specific subsets. The emphasis Paddison gives to the basic conditions of the creative processes in music, considered as a translation of theoretical and terminological reflection into pragmatic investigation, could not have given this issue a more appropriate conclusion.

Indeed, it reminds the need to elaborate theoretical tools that cannot, without losing their effectiveness, disregard the objects themselves, as well as their intrinsic nature and complexity. The need of popular music for music studies is thus reinforced by raising these very issues, in which it acts as a constant encouragement to critique any dogmatism or disciplinary sclerosis, whether coming from its most uncompromising critics or from those who, while trying to defend it and recognise its full value, may wind up tracing out borders and setting up barriers - or, worse, constructing oppositions based on ideologies or strategic opportunism - that put it at a distance from other musical practices and wider perspectives of study and research.

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[1] For a reflection on the nature of, and the methodological options involved in interdisciplinarity in popular music studies, see Tagg [2011].

[2] On this matter, an updated overview of the developments currently under way can be observed through the table of contents of volumes such as the *Oxford Handbooks*, that were created with the precise aim of offering updates and definitions of the most recent and innovative fields of study.

[3] This attitude was defined by Philip Tagg and the scholars that created, along with him, the NIMiMS (Network for the Inclusion of Music in Music Studies) "everything but the music".

[4] «on the one hand we find traditional musicology, that tends to exclude anything that lies outside of its own disciplinary paradigm and the canons of art music, or tends to legitimate what can be included therein; on the other hand we find instead a community of scholars that puts this paradigm into question by maintaining that musicology, rather than excluding or legitimating various kinds of music according to whether or not they fall under a disciplinary paradigm, should accept that the paradigm itself is relative and reformulate it in relation to changing socio-cultural contexts, with the aim of becoming the study of *all* music, not only *one kind of music*». See also Agostini [2004] and Middleton [1993].

[5] This type of path animates for example the discussion found in the second chapter of Richard Middleton's volume *Studying Popular Music* [1994, 59-97]. From here, it has subsequently been taken up many times by scholars [cf. for example Kassabian 1999, Krims 2003, Bennett 2008, Driscoll 2010] that have progressively widened the scope of critical debate on these issues.

[6] http://ciret-transdisciplinarity.org/moral_project.php

[7] For an updated general overview of the effects of digital technology in this area of music production and consumption, cf. Hracs – Seman – Virani [2016].

[8] http://www.artofrecordproduction.com/. In this case as well, the proposal of an alternative point of view on musical practices has also been accompanied by an attempt to establish boundaries able to set out the limits of the discipline [cf. Frith-Zagorski-Thomas 2012; Zagorski-Thomas 2014].

[9] In addition to those by Simon Zagorski-Thomas, a particularly clear example of this tendency can be seen in a few research projects led by a scholar such as Anne Danielsen, who for years has been looking into the questions that the use of digital technologies allows researchers to deal with, such as micro-rhythm [2010] or the communicational effects of the sound resources that such technologies make available to musicians [Brøvig-Hanssen-Danielsen 2016].

[10] As regards marketing, this discussion is also intertwined with the theory of the so-called "long tail" [Anderson 2006].

[11] This does not mean that material objects entirely lose their significance, but that they become part of a different configuration of practice circuits in which the balance between material and immaterial cultural units is constantly changing [Magaudda 2011].

[12] Among the numerous recent examples of a work concentrated on problems that cut through different repertoires, we might recall, in addition to those by Nicholas Cook that later made up part of the monograph on "music as performance" [2013b], at least those by Simon Zagorski-Thomas [2014], dedicated to the role of the recording studio, or Paul Sanden's wide-ranging and detailed discussion of the concept of liveness [2013].

[13] https://erc.europa.eu/projects-and-results/erc-funded-projects/music?f[0]=sm_field_cordis_project_subpanel%3ASH5 (consultato il 4 ottobre 2016).

[14] https://erc.europa.eu/projects-and-results/erc-funded-projects/%22popular%20music%22?f=&retain-filters=1 (consultato il 4 ottobre 2016).

[15] https://erc.europa.eu/projects-and-results/erc-funded-projects/song?f=&retain-filters=1 (consultato il 4 ottobre 2016).

[16] http://www.globalpopularmusic.net/, presentation of the section "About GPM" (accessed 4 October 2016).

[17] Motti Regev has proposed "aesthetic cosmopolitanism" as an umbrella-definition for this situation [2013].

[18] The analysis was carried out with the help of text mining software R, with which the word clouds seen on the following pages were also generated.

[19] In preparing the statistics, the elimination of the most common suffixes to make the data more consistent and easy to compare led the root mus- to be included in this group, together with the related terms "music" and "musical".

[20] Compared to the table, which contains a comparative list of the words most commonly found, decade by decade, reaching a maximum of 15 words (the number varies according to the number of words in each class of frequency), the word clouds represent a wider set, even though it was compiled on the basis of the frequency with which the single terms appear, allowing a more pluralistic and at the same time precise graphic representation.