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EN390

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December 12, 2016

The Liquidation of the Individual
Adorno, the Carpenters, and Maroon 5

Theodor Adorno, a leading proponent of the Frankfurt School, focuses a large portion of his writing on critical theory, and in terms of aesthetics, Adorno searches for the “social significance,” the social effects and the social content, within the art form (Brown “Adorno’s Critique” 18). Adorno was able to look specifically at the popular culture of art in America, as he was forced to move there while in exile between 1935 and 1955. During these years, his work on aesthetics seemed to focus on three main concerns:

“a post-Hegelian philosophy of music, both serious and popular; a philosophical and methodological critique of the culture industry and its own commercial research practices as well as prevailing U.S. trends in social research; and a critical encounter with U.S. cultural life, first in New York City and then in Los Angeles, in which German fascism seemed recapitulated in laissez-faire leisure society.” (Lott 222)

These three concerns created a lens through which Adorno viewed popular culture in the United States. Adorno’s perspective also put him in a position of being able to analyze which art forms resisted and which art forms succumbed to the “wholly administered tendency of modern Western societies and the increasingly one-dimensional political economies that characterized them” (Lott 222).

Several aspects of the cultural situation in the United States, including the popular culture industries and specifically the radio, began to use music, and other aesthetic forms, to “sell products” and “thereby (also) turned those forms themselves into commodities” (Lott 222). Therefore music, which had been, according to Adorno, previously autonomous, free from marketing pressures and standardizing techniques, was now caught in a capitalist society, which canceled the music’s “aesthetic value,” in turn “binding” it and the listeners “ever more firmly to the everyday harmony of unfreedom” (222). Popular music, according to Adorno, is “heteronomous,” meaning that it is art that is intended to sell by simply “bait(ing) the customer with a variety of nonaesthetic psychological satisfactions” (Brown “Adorno’s Critique” 18). Popular art is not “capable of embodying currents of resistance to the very system it officially endorses,” as it tends instead to “lose its power to resist society,” and serves only to validate and justify the system that produces it (18). It is therefore “strictly subject to the pressures of fashion and conformism” (19). Adorno looks at how popular music has an effect on society and contains society within it, as a central task of critical theory is “the analysis of such networks of social significance” (18).

In this paper, I will outline Adorno’s ideas on how popular music, through standardization, arranging, and repetition, promotes the idea of individuality while simultaneously suppressing individuality, causing “the liquidation of the individual” (Adorno “On the Fetish-Character” 293). I will discuss Eric Lott’s application of Adorno’s theory to the music of the Carpenters, the commercially successful duo based in Los Angeles in the 70s, about two decades after Adorno had lived there. I will also apply Adorno’s theory to the hit song “Sugar,” recorded in 2014 (made successful in 2015) by Maroon 5, an American pop band that also found its roots in Los Angeles. Finally, I will conclude with a glance at how one must be

cautious when applying Adorno's theory of popular music, and here I will make mention of how some of his arguments have been viewed as inadequate, and how his arguments also have been seen as elitist and Eurocentric.

Popular music has a very specific, some would say limiting, form of arrangement. Music that does not conform to these principles of arrangement often does not get pushed, or "plugged" as Adorno would say, by the industries that promote popular music (i.e. the radio industry). "Plugging," in a narrow sense, is "simply the familiar process by which new recordings are marketed by being aired over and over again" (Brown "Adorno's Case" 324). According to Adorno, "the whole structure of popular music is standardized," making it easier to plug to a wide audience (Adorno "On Popular Music" 438). Adorno argues that standardization first occurred through competition in a capitalist system: once a song was well received by the public, and several imitations ensued, the scope of artistic possibility was narrowed. As Adorno points out, most of the pop voices have sounded and continue to "sound like imitations of those who have made it, even when they themselves have made it" (Adorno "On the Fetish-Character" 295). This continued, and the process "culminated in the crystallization of standards," standard forms of arrangement which are deemed to be the most successful (Adorno "On Popular Music" 443). According to Adorno, "under centralized conditions such as exist today these standards have become 'frozen'" (443). That is, the standard forms of arrangement have been grasped by certain agencies promoting the popular music, and are "rigidly enforced upon material to be promoted" (443).

This standard form of arranging is reflected mostly in the layout (so to speak) of the popular song: the chorus consisting of "thirty-two bars" with a range "limited to one octave and one note" (Adorno "On Popular Music" 438). Furthermore, the scheme, the arrangement of the

parts, emphasize “the most primitive harmonic facts no matter what has harmonically intervened. Complications have no consequences,” according to Adorno (“On Popular Music” 438).

Adorno’s upbringing causes him to look at this music “almost entirely in terms of tonality and harmony” (Brown “Adorno’s Critique” 24). Therefore, popular music uses aspects of tonality, the musical system of “major” and “minor” from which it finds its roots, in order to make the music familiar to the listener’s ear; simultaneously, however, popular music ignores several “rules” of voice leading and resolution that make tonality *tonality*. The harmonic aspects of a hit are guaranteed to conform to a “familiar experience, and nothing fundamentally novel will be introduced” (Adorno “On Popular Music” 438).

When someone turns on the radio in North America, she knows what to expect with each song: a very short introduction, followed by verse, chorus, verse, chorus, interlude (or bridge), chorus, and outro (if the radio station doesn’t cut it off). And even now, hit songs have become even more standardized, as radio stations are demanding shorter playing time, and therefore industries provide shorter songs (although this could be a question of which came first), hence often times they cut out the bridge or interlude completely. Not only is this a reflection of the industry giving in to the age of a shorter attention span and speedy consumption of ideas, feelings, and art forms (through technological innovations such as social media, which allows the “digestion” of idea after idea in mere seconds), but this is also a reflection of how standardization, presented under the guises of “accessibility” and “inclusivity,” really limits the options of artistic expression through popular culture.

Furthermore, according to Adorno, the “details” that are provided above the underlying standardized form, are themselves standardized (Adorno “On Popular Music” 438). For these details, “a whole terminology exists,” and their standardization is “hidden behind a veneer of

individual 'effects' whose prescriptions are handled as the experts' secret" (438). According to Adorno, the relationship between the framework (overall standardized form) and the detail causes the listener to "evinced stronger reactions to the part than to the whole," as the whole is "pre-given and pre-accepted, even before the actual experience of the music starts" (439).

Therefore, in popular music, the "detail has no bearing on the whole" – the relationship between the two is "fortuitous" (441). Adorno contrasts this with what he calls "serious music," in which Beethoven is used as an example, where the musical details contain the whole while at the same time are produced out of the whole (441).

According to Adorno, in popular music, "if any detail were taken out of the context (of the whole), the listener can supply the 'framework' automatically, since it is a mere musical automatism itself" ("On Popular Music" 439). This intense focus on the smaller, surface details in popular music is an example of how this music, which masquerades as liberating, freeing, and "for everybody," is increasingly limiting and restricted. Studio musicians are often stereotyped as perfectionists, and this is likely because they have to be in order to succeed in such a particular, stylistic musical world. The style has to be just right, because surface details are all that popular music has to offer, and surface details are what create any level of difference between works of popular music. So, a popular hit must be different on the surface, but the same in overall form and structure. For a consuming public, this standardization is the natural expression of how the listener listens – a song must be "'stimulatory' by deviating in some way from the established 'natural,'" and it must also "maintain the supremacy of the natural against such deviations" (444). Therefore, the only way a listener will recognize the slight deviance is through the surface, detail material, which somehow finds itself superimposed, so to speak, over an unrelated underlying form. These details are substitutable and "serve (their) function only as cog(s) in a

machine” (440), and musicians have to put a massive amount of effort to make these details perfect. The style of the details has to be “just right”, otherwise the song won’t succeed, and neither will the musicians.

Popular music’s job is not for listeners to actually listen to it. It becomes background music, something to hum along to, and something to buy into to promote a narrative of one’s own life. Popular music can achieve this through the standardization of the arrangements and forms; listeners can relax because to some extent, there is a security in knowing that they are going to be fed “what they want,” or at least, what they are used to. In this way, “the composition hears for the listener” (Adorno “On Popular Music” 442). Because the arrangement of the pop hit, the structure underlying, has no bearing on the specific details of the music, popular music “promotes conditioned reflexes” (442). In Adorno’s view, “structural standardization aims at standard reactions” (442). The “schematic build-up” of popular songs dictates how we listen, while it simultaneously “makes any effort in listening unnecessary” (442-443).

Popular music becomes background in the sense that we don’t actively have to listen to it for us to know that it conforms to our listening standards. But, when we do actively listen to it, we feel what the song dictates – we recognize certain types and “characters’ such as mother songs, home songs, nonsense or ‘novelty’ songs, pseudo-nursery rhymes, laments for a lost girl” (Adorno “On Popular Music” 438). Other types could now include the dance hit, the song that screams *Carpe Diem*, the empowerment tune, the drug-trance tune, and further surface laments of loss (mainly of a lover). As we listen, we recognize these popular archetypes, and we often respond to them by allowing ourselves to feel the standard reaction. This is again true even if the

harmonic progressions and overall structure are hardly even different from one song to the next. Certain keywords in the lyrics, tempos, and instrumentation all convey which type of song it is.

These popular songs are immediate – the listener can “get what they paid for” because they know what they are going to get from the very beginning. Because each underlying formula is the same, there is security in the music, and a sort of “remembering” of a song; a recognition of a hit song based on the tradition of pop songs that came before it. When songs are (or seem) familiar, the listener has to do very little work to enjoy it. These pop hits “(offer) little challenge to the mind” (Brown “Adorno’s Case” 323), and the details that make the song “different” from the rest are so emphasized that the listener can allow themselves to really only listen to a surface level, noticing what makes each song distinct from the other. Even in live performances, style and performance of the surface details are crucial to performers, as they know that listeners often respond positively to hearing the performance as they are expecting it. In this way, the listeners are uninterested in having their expectations unsatisfied. When performers change how they play a musical line, for example, the listener does not know whether what the performer did was “good” or not – it simply did not match the recording. And when this happens, the listener questions his consumption of the live performance, and likely will ask themselves why they would pay for tickets if the performer cannot play it like he does on the recording. Similarly, as we are “programmed to expect the standardized food at McDonald’s, we are programmed to *expect* the music we get” (Brown “Adorno’s Case” 324). In this way, the performer plays the music as the audience expects it, and the “performance sounds like its own phonograph record” (Adorno “On the Fetish-Character” 301).

This “perfect, immaculate performance in the latest style” of the arrangements of the pop hits “preserves the work at the price of its definitive reification,” according to Adorno (“On the

Fetish-Character 301). In other words, the things that humans actively produce “have lost touch with their original value for the sake of a secondary value,” which is its exchange-value (Brown “Adorno’s Case” 321). This fetish-character of a commodity, defined by Marx as “the veneration of the thing made by oneself which, as exchange-value, simultaneously alienates itself from producer to consumer,” is the “real secret of success,” according to Adorno (“On the Fetish-Character” 296). Success, therefore, is

“the mere reflection of what one pays in the market for the product. The consumer is really worshipping the money that he himself has paid for the ticket to the... concert. He has literally ‘made’ the success which he reifies and accepts as an objective criterion, without recognizing himself in it. But he has not ‘made’ it by liking the concert, but rather by buying the ticket.” (296).

And this fetish-character, coupled with the reification, when taken further, “produces its own pretence of immediacy and intimacy” (299) within the commodity. However, this pretence, recognized in feelings such as enjoyment, relaxation, and longing, which provide the exchange-value “create the appearance of immediacy at the same time as the absence of a relation to the object belies it” (296). Exchange-value, therefore, disguises itself as the object of enjoyment (296).

Popular music is enjoyable to listeners because it is consumable – it is an object that has a use, a value, a function that the listener can buy into without being an expert. The listener has reified it, and has made the object successful through his buying in. And, those who disagree with him, the consumer, threaten his knowledge of buying into the right thing, and this provides discomfort and insecurity. To some extent, the consumer must know that he does not have enough knowledge to know what he is buying into – but popularity makes his buying in right,

because everyone agrees. According to Adorno, “to dislike a song is no longer an expression of subjective taste but rather a rebellion against the wisdom of a public utility and a disagreement with the millions of people who are assumed to support what the agencies are giving them” (“On Popular Music” 464). Therefore, “every pleasure which emancipates itself from exchange-value takes on subversive features” (“On the Fetish-Character” 297). Those who enjoy things that do not bring people immediate enjoyment are somewhat frightening to those who take in popular music as food for the ears. For this reason, “innovations by rugged individualists have been outlawed” (“On Popular Music” 443). Those who record innovative, artistic music will not be promoted by the agencies, as they do not fit the standardized structure that is expected of popular music.

This limiting of artistic expression is to the listener’s detriment, because through the “plugging” of popular music on such a high level, the listener will not perceive other levels of expression, and therefore their own vocabulary, their own level of expression, will be limited, unless they actively seek out other art forms that reject the standardization of mass, popular culture. According to Adorno, “Before the theological caprices of commodities, the consumers become temple slaves. Those who sacrifice themselves nowhere else can do so here, and here they are fully betrayed” (“On the Fetish-Character” 297); in other words, those who have been unwilling or unable to listen to music that doesn’t bring immediate enjoyment (and therefore use-value) may willingly find enjoyment and satisfaction buying into the popular music. But, as the music is inherently irrelevant and detached from their personal lives, it masquerades as though it cares about them as they pretend to care about it. The works “become vulgarized. Irrelevant consumption destroys them... Just in this way (they become) ‘property’” (298).

According to Adorno, this “stylization of the ever identical framework is only one aspect of standardization” (“On Popular Music” 444). There are other aspects that are a result of standardization in popular music: “concentration and control in our culture which hide themselves in their very manifestation” (444). Popular music allows people to experience personal, individual emotion, as they “feel the music” that they are listening to, and are personally choosing what music they support and purchase. But, Adorno argues that this individuality is really “pseudo-individualization;” the illusion of individual achievement and expression. Through pseudo-individualization, “the industry creates music that *sounds* like a genuine personal expression, even though it really isn’t” (Brown “Adorno’s Case” 324). This illusion is maintained “in the sphere of luxury production,” where individualism is most alive “in the form of ideological categories such as taste and free choice” (Adorno “On Popular Music” 445). However, it is important to have the results of standardization remain hidden, otherwise “they would provoke resistance” (435). One way pseudo-individualization manifests itself is through the choosing of different styles, such as dance-pop, rock, trance, fusion, rap, etc., and even smaller styles within these styles. The listener may choose which to listen to, and by choosing, she feels as though she has made a personal choice, and feels an individual sense of achievement through her own free choice. However, Adorno would argue that this “labelling technique” creates a false sense of free choice and individualization because “it provides trademarks of identification for differentiating between the actually undifferentiated” (446). Therefore, the listener presumes she is making a choice, while she really is limited in her choices to a certain sphere of music, which is pushed heavily onto the public through the industries that produce this music.

The way music is promoted by its industries, “plugging,” involves the “ceaseless repetition of one particular hit in order to make it ‘successful’” (Adorno “On Popular Music” 447), or memorable or merely recognizable, and eventually, boring, and finally, forgettable, so that new hits can take its place. Adorno argues that “if some song hit is played again and again on the air, the listener begins to think that it is already a success” (457). It tends to be the case as well, that very few would question how a pop song became a hit; we seem to assume that it has already become a hit, maybe in the city in which it was produced, and is brought to us, out of the goodness of the radio industry. This is, in a sense, another way for the industry to promote pseudo-individualization: people think that somewhere, other people are actually choosing the best pop songs to become hits, based on the songs’ individual innovativeness, style, merit, etc. There are people choosing, but they are choosing which song is “fundamentally the same as all the other current hits and simultaneously fundamentally different from them” (448). And, the public truly is “voting” (through their listening and purchasing of the music) for the songs to actually make them successful, even though the listeners are encouraged to think that the song was already successful before it has reached them. The songs are plugged, repeated so often, that they gain in the listeners a “psychological importance which (the songs) could otherwise never have” (447). Plugging comes mostly through the industries’ use of titles and labels, through journalism, and through the promotion of personalities of bands and band leaders (451).

Adorno outlines several components that are involved in the recognition of popular music through plugging, including “vague remembrance,” in which the listener feels as though she has heard this before; “actual identification,” where the listener becomes aware that she has heard it before; “the element of subsumption,” in which the listener remembers the title or some of the lyrics, and attributes them to the song; “the element of self-reflection on the act of

identification,” in which the listener is pleased with herself for remembering; and “the element of ‘psychological transfer,’” where the listener attributes the “enjoyment of ownership which (she) has attained” to the pop hit (“On Popular Music” 454-456). Upon recognizing a hit, the listener achieves a level of ownership over the song, achieving also “a delusion of grandeur comparable to a child’s daydream about owning the railroad” (456). Plugging allows the recognition of “individual” songs, which in turn allows for a feeling of personal achievement, of individual knowledge and understanding of not only the song and the music, but also an understanding of the industry that promoted it. This further creates a sense of community and relationship among the other people who also recognized and chose to listen to the song. Hits mainly demand one thing of its listeners: merely that they can recognize it, even though anybody could. But, listeners “enjoy” the fact that they can recognize it, “because they thus become identified with the powers that be,” or the industry that promotes it (457).

Furthermore, Adorno argues that people want “novelty” in their lives, and they find this in the ever-the-same pop music rather than seeking out, in their leisure time, “really new experience” (“On Popular Music” 459). Therefore, people actually want “standardized goods and pseudo-individualization, because their leisure is an escape from work” (458). But, “relief from both boredom and effort simultaneously” (458) comes only through the acceptance of the “pre-digested” popular music, rather than through the sometimes boring, tedious, and other times straining work of finding music and art that is truly novel to their own experience. Furthermore, it may be extremely difficult to do the actual emotional “digesting” of a truly novel experience when their leisure time is “molded after those psychological attitudes to which their workaday world exclusively habituates them” (459). Therefore, people crave “effortless sensation,” a stimulus which they may receive through their recognition of pop (459), which is handed to them

on a platter through standardized form and arrangement and the industries' plugging methods. Popular music supplies people with "simply the opportunity to feel something" (462) in a life where they work in a world completely detached from their own, where they are often encouraged day in and day out to detach themselves from their own emotions.

Dependence on popular music is strong, for it is an easy way for people to feel in their lives, to express in their lives, and to feel human: in Adorno's words, popular music, specifically emotional pop music, is "catharsis for the masses" ("On Popular Music" 462). Popular music provides an avenue for people to express and feel (away from the workplace), and in this way they can "escape" from the habituating powers in the workplace and in daily life. However, "the 'escape' provided by popular music actually subjects the individuals to the very same social powers from which they want to escape" (462). In a sense, the same political economy that has "beaten down" the working people actually "sponsors (in every sense) their leisure time" (Lott 223). There seems to be no real escape from the controls of these social powers, even (and especially) not in the popular music that provides an effortless release or relief. Adorno argues that this knowledge is felt by the pop-listening public, and they will strongly resist the acknowledgment of any dependence that they have on the industry that they know has betrayed them. They then "turn their hatred rather on those who point to their dependence than on those who tie their bonds" ("On Popular Music" 465).

This anger and hatred the listeners feel towards those who they have been deceived by, according to Adorno, is transferred to those who pose the threat of revealing the deception, and the listeners "passionately defend their own attitude since it allows them to be voluntarily cheated" (465), and in this way, they at least feel as though they are making a choice, and are comforted again through the pseudo-individualization that is promoted through the popular

music industry. In summary, by means of “cheap pleasures and escapist fantasies of freedom and individuality with which the system provides” its listeners, the commodity industry realizes its goals, one of which even includes, according to Adorno, the achievement of a “‘musical dictatorship’ over the masses” (Brown “Adorno’s Case” 324).

Eric Lott, in his essay “Perfect is Dead: Karen Carpenter, Theodor Adorno, and the Radio; or, if Hooks Could Kill,” discusses how the music and lives of the Carpenters, the famous pop duo based in Los Angeles throughout the 70s, seem “made to order” for Theodor Adorno’s theories about popular music (Lott 219). Lott argues that the “apparently unbroken surface of this industrially manufactured sound” suggests potential for actual expression or aesthetic experience, but “is in fact riven by longing, constriction, and discomfort” (219). Lott argues that the manufactured sound of the Carpenters is an example of the popular culture of “the L.A. that had so revolted Adorno during his exile there in the 1940s and early ‘50s” (219).

Lott’s argument mainly situates around how the music and lives of Karen and Richard Carpenter suggests a “willfully anti-liberatory ethos—political, personal, and musical” (Lott 220). In this way, not only do the listeners make a choice to give in to the plugging, standardization, and pseudo-individualization that come from the popular music industry and the radio, but the performers themselves are also subject to the need to give in to this approach to their own feeling and expression. For one, Karen and Richard “looked almost freakishly alike,” according to Lott, a level of sameness which resisted “the incursion of difference” (220). Furthermore, their songs follow in the style of the “pre-digested” songs that Adorno talks about: they are “overdetermined by repetition, calculation, sameness,” and by “all accounts, Richard Carpenter and his lyricist, John Bettis, not infrequently wrote to a precise formula” (220). Furthermore, not unlike the perfectionist attitude of several pop artists, the duo insisted their

stage show be perfectly replicated “without variation from show to show in a punishing touring schedule” (220). Lott points out several aspects of the “fetish-character” of the Carpenters, in the consistent promotion of the duo as “bland and square,” the standardization of most of their hits as “downers,” and the picture-perfect manufactured sound which in some cases sounds “like a perfectionist’s manifesto” (221).

Lott argues that Karen’s voice is “unmatched in its ability to summon a languid melancholy that is somehow at the same time evacuated of personality” (221). This voice is again, recognizable, without being too individual. It would be a bad idea for the industry to promote a voice that is too individual, for recognition of voices in popular music must cross between individual performers and bands. Karen’s voice, in this case, becomes one of those surface details which is distinguishable from the others, yet is not so individual that it rocks the fundamental formula and structure that lies beneath the surface. Karen’s voice also serves to promote a casual front – it is wispy, somewhat detached, and dejected, as though her singing is simply the natural expression of her feelings. However, the casual nature, or the “nonchalance of the Carpenters’ music is belied by a straightjacketed production ethic that undermines the desired effect” (229). All of these elements create a standardization of the duo’s music that the audience knows and expects, making the plugging process easier for the industries that promote the music. This in turn allows listeners to “recognize” the music more easily, and therefore feel a level of personal achievement in their understanding. Lott argues that the Carpenters conformed so wholly to the culture industry of their time that they may have even “produced the concept” of “turn-of-the-seventies Southern California unfreedom” (Lott 224). This “unfreedom” is reflected in the promotion of the standardization of popular music, listeners’ reactions, restriction and limitation of expression, and self-denial on the part of the listening public. Furthermore, this

“unfreedom” is a result of what Adorno expressed concern about two to three decades before the Carpenters came around to embody his concern.

Although Eric Lott’s analysis of the Carpenters is insightful, Lott focuses only on how the Carpenters embodied and, to some extent, established the anti-liberatory nature of popular music in Los Angeles in the 70s. Even though this paper was published in 2008, Lott ignores where popular music in Los Angeles finds itself in the twenty-first century. Almost fifty years after Adorno’s death, we can see that his ideas were impressively prophetic, especially when it comes to the culture of pop centres in America. And, as Brown points out, “if Adorno were still alive, he would no doubt argue that in a hyper-mediatised twenty-first century environment, his position is even more relevant” (Brown “Adorno’s Case” 322). Technology has allowed for the plugging process to reach several more levels, rather than just radio. We have the internet, with YouTube, Facebook and other social media sites, and free music streaming websites such as Spotify. The access to music is simple, and even more immediate. Also, music videos now promote the lifestyles of distraction and inattention that Adorno was concerned the music itself promotes. Furthermore, with a recording tradition (video and audio) that only goes back about a century, people have been born into an age where this type of music is, to them, Western culture, and the norm. This has allowed the industries to plug aspects of escapism more overtly, such as sex, drinking, drugs, and living an inattentive life. People seem to accept this as “just the way it is.”

Because Lott does not discuss the twenty-first century popular music in his paper, I am going to discuss it here through the American pop band, Maroon 5, formed in Los Angeles. Although I would argue that Adorno’s theories of popular music could be applied to every single hit that Maroon 5 has produced, I will be mainly applying it to their 2015 hit “Sugar” (recorded

in 2014 for their album *V*) to argue that the arrangement (music and text) and the music video belong to the perpetual standardization of popular music that encourages pseudo-individualization and fights for a level of concentration and control over the mass of listeners.

To begin, the musical arrangement of “Sugar” is a perfect example of the standardized underlying form of all popular music. The form is as follows: intro, verse, pre-chorus, chorus, verse, pre-chorus, chorus, bridge, chorus (x2), outro. The song is almost exactly 4 minutes, and would be the same every time (as it will always be performed at the same tempo). Furthermore, the exact same progression of four chords repeat throughout the entire song, even in the bridge (which is somewhat surprising: often the bridge will feature a slightly different progression). This underlying arrangement has hardly changed since the Carpenters, yet, of course, this song masquerades as something completely new and innovative compared to the popular music of the 70s.

When it comes to musical surface detail, we can see differences from the Carpenters and other popular music styles in the 70s. In “Sugar,” one may find elements of disco, funk, and even soul – terms and labels that Adorno would say attempt to show differences among the popular music which is really all the same. The intro features a soft, mellow progression outlining the four chords that will be repeated throughout the whole song. These first four measures create an atmosphere of seriousness; the song already takes itself (too) seriously. But, the conditioned response is that we recognize the pseudo-seriousness and see the true longing behind those four chords; longing that will be acknowledged and dictated to us in the lyrics once the voice enters. The background music and instrumentation for “Sugar” is hardly differentiated throughout, even between verses and choruses. Sometimes there is more reverb in the voice part, sometimes the entrance and exit of one other comping rhythm will enhance the texture slightly, and several

sections feature overdubbing of the unison voice part. In the bridge however, the music pulls back, as if zooming in on the voice, allowing for the illusion of seriousness and intimacy with Adam Levine, the heartthrob lead vocalist of Maroon 5. This is an example of how the bridge, in many cases completely left out of pop hits, is heard now only through surface detail: it does not need to have a different chord progression, it just needs to have a different texture overtop the repeated progression. These are all surface details which do not change the underlying form of the arrangement – we know exactly what we are going to get when the song starts on the radio; it does the listening for us.

Adam Levine's voice centres in the female vocal range throughout, as do the voices of many (I would even argue most) of the men who sing lead on pop hits in the twenty-first century. I would suggest that this is a perpetuation of a popular culture which hypersexualizes and infantilizes their output in order to appeal psychologically to the listeners, allowing them to feel something fun(!), "relieving the strain of their adult responsibilities" (Adorno "On Popular Music" 450). Further aspects of Levine's singing imply a rhythmic breathlessness, and an even moaning, sighing nature. For those who do not have any source of sexual stimulation (and for those who feel the need for it), the soft-core pornographic qualities of popular music provide a steady supply.

Even more pornographic (and therefore appealing, distracting, and heavily hetero-standardized) are the lyrics. The lyrics of a pop hit ensure that the listeners' reactions conform to the conditioned responses that are encouraged through the structurally standardized form. The music itself stands for very little, and is hardly differentiated. The tiny details on the surface that create "difference" are legitimized and given meaning strictly through the lyrics. Clearly, "Sugar" is a song about sex. A closer look at the lyrics will make this evident. But, any other

lyrics could be attached to this song, just as any musical details could be substituted for one another and attached to the underlying form. The lyrics simply serve to define the details for us, so we know what to feel. This song, with a change of lyrics, could be simply about partying, living life to the fullest, or shopping. Even further, with a change of how some of the tiny details are presented, it could be a serious emotional piece about a lost loved one. There is very little of this song that makes it a song about sex, except for the highly sexualized lyrics. The interplay of “lyrics and music in popular music is similar to the interplay of picture and word in advertising. The picture provides the sensual stimulus, the words add slogans or jokes that tend to fix the commodity in the minds of the public and to ‘subsume’ it under definite, settled categories” (“On Popular Music” 454n). Again, this addition of lyric to instrumental music in pop also contributes to the standardized form (there are no pop hits without lyrics) and to the pseudo-individualization that listeners feel (one will recognize what a song is about through the lyrics and feel as though they personally understand it).

The lyrics for “Sugar” in some cases are, in my opinion, unspeakable. Verse one is tame, and is as follows:

I'm hurting, baby, I'm broken down
 I need your loving, loving
 I need it now
 When I'm without you
 I'm something weak
 You got me begging, begging
 I'm on my knees

This verse reflects the dependency that popular music promotes in so many areas: a dependency on sexual activity, and therefore distraction and pseudo-satisfaction; a dependency on other human beings, and therefore little individualization; and a dependency on the industry which provides you with such (false) knowledge of self-expression.

In the pre-chorus, Levine sings about wanting to be “deep in your love” and how he has “gotta get one little taste.” For a split second, a listener may cautiously ask, what does Levine want to taste? All the while, she may know and fear the answer which he soon calls out: “Your sugar! / Yes please! / Won’t you come and put it down on me?” We know officially what this song is about, and we feel all the more like individuals because of it. We can identify with Levine, and we can identify also with the general public who we believe have promoted this song to the Top 40. When in fact, as Adorno argues, we were limited in our choices in the first place, due to the excessive “plugging” from the media.

The last section of lyrics that I will look at are those of the bridge:

I want that red velvet
 I want that sugar sweet
 Don't let nobody touch it
 Unless that somebody's me

I gotta be your man
 There ain't no other way
 'Cause girl you're hotter than a southern California day

I don't wanna play no games
 You don't gotta be afraid
 Don't give me all that shy shit
 No make-up on

After which Levine calls out the chorus two more times. Reading these lyrics without the music (music which strangely seems to justify the words just as much as the words define the music) is comical. These are the words of a hypersexual controlling boyfriend. “Red velvet” and “sugar sweet” are depressingly sensual and crass. Only Adam Levine, the tall, dark, and handsome bad-boy, could get away with saying words like these. Furthermore, while reading the lyrics for this bridge, one who has studied English Literature may recall Andrew Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress,” in which the Courtier’s attempts to woo his mistress get more forceful (shall we say

desperate?) as the poem goes on. The answer, as we know, is in the title: His “Mistress” is his mistress, and will say yes. For Adam Levine, the controlling boyfriend character that he embodies in this song knows that his “Sugar” will say yes, and his demands get more forceful here as well. “I don’t wanna play no games / You don’t gotta be afraid / Don’t give me all that shy shit” – these are lines that have the potential to scare any “girl” half to death.

The video is much less sexual, and features the band hopping in their cars with their instruments to tour around California, surprising couples at their wedding by playing for their dances. This video represents the industry’s “plugging of personalities” of the fun and carefree band members, and especially in this video “the leader and his band are still largely regarded by the audience as bearers of improvisatory spontaneity” (Adorno “On Popular Music” 452). This caricature of spontaneity exists because “the more actual improvisation disappears in the process of standardization and the more it is superseded by elaborate schemes, the more must the idea of improvisation be maintained before the audience” (452). The video has very little to do with the lyrics, other than the way in which Levine is sexualized. The video has a strange element of seriousness in the bridge, in which Adam Levine’s clone overdubs drop out, along with several of the backup instruments, hearkening back to the seriousness of the intro. Here in the video, Levine is alone, singing straight to the camera (and therefore, the audience). This false intimacy, mixed with the video’s spontaneity and fun (and drinking) are all standardized elements of what popular culture prides itself on: the fun, free, relaxing, accessible, and liberating qualities. Meanwhile, these standardized elements make people feel something that is itself standardized and cause the listener to feel a level of personal achievement through the recognition of the musical qualities and the labels (band, style). The listeners grasp this sense of individuality and attribute that individuality on the musical property that they now “own”.

Finally, this song and Adam Levine were featured in a Nissan commercial. Similarly, the Carpenters “We’ve Only Just Begun” (1970) was featured as a jingle for a bank commercial, “at a single stroke fulfilling exponentially Adorno’s nightmare of culture industry and commodification” (Lott 220). In the Nissan commercial, Adam Levine is “challenged” to sing “Sugar” while being driven around a sort of inner-city race track by a professional driver. Through Adam Levine’s expression of a “cute” personality, this commercial represents the popular culture industry’s interdependence through advertising, different commodities, and the plugging of personalities. Furthermore, as the fast ride in the Nissan becomes more intense, Adam Levine fails the challenge, and stops singing. Of course, he doesn’t care, because this Nissan is *way* more fun than singing. But, while he drops out, one can hear the impressively manufactured sound of the background music that is completely independent from what he sings. It loops through the same chords, with nary a difference. The relentless beat continues on and on – a relentless beat which Adorno has often related to the regimenting beat of the military marching band, while also relating it to a drug-like, hypnotic quality (Brown “Adorno’s Case” 322). This commercial presents popular music as it truly is: a commodity, a consumer good that listeners digest in indulgent amounts. In the popular music world, it is quantity over quality, and as long as listeners can be convinced that what they are listening to is really the best, and promotes their individuality, they will cling to it and fight anything that tries to warn them that this may not be the case.

Adorno’s theories of pop music are convincing, and reflect the circumstances and cultural context that he found himself in for a large portion of his life. However, Lee B. Brown mentions several aspects of Adorno’s theories that may be inadequate, such as the fact that “Adorno throws all popular music into one bag” (Brown “Adorno’s Case” 326). Adorno denies the

possibility that pop music in any way could reach above the commoditization industry. He denies this possibility because, according to Brown, he is unwilling—or “unable—to hear forms of nonclassical music in their own terms” (326). He applies his main method of listening to all genres. Classical music (not all, but the autonomous type) is the lens with which he views all other types of music, and for this reason he has been charged in many cases of being Eurocentrist. Specifically, Adorno puts jazz in the same stream as pop music – commoditized and standardized by the industry which promotes it. In jazz and pop, Adorno believes that when we hear “bent” notes (or pitches that one would not typically find within the Classical tradition), “our ear struggles to correct them back to their ‘correct’ pitch” (326). To some extent, Adorno’s theory suggests the elitist idea that the Classical tradition is the correct, (mainly) autonomous, true genre, and the other genres are just failing to reach that same level of autonomy. When it comes to jazz and pop, Adorno “couldn’t imagine how such music could ever be true. This reinforces the conclusion that Adorno’s conceptualization of his subject matter is guided by rather conventional Eurocentric norms” (Brown “Adorno’s Critique” 26).

One should be cautious and aware of the possible Eurocentric tendencies in Adorno’s arguments when applying his theories to popular music. In some cases, certain pop hits may seem to resist the commoditization industry, at least on some level. Adorno applies the “autonomy/heteronomy dualism rigidly,” using labels such as “commodity” vs. “art,” “popular” vs. “serious,” and “standardization” vs. “individualism” (Brown “Adorno’s Critique” 21). Certainly, the lines between genres could not be as clear cut as Adorno suggests. Perhaps he does tend to “(smooth) out and (ignore) features that differentiate the popular music landscape” (20). Nevertheless, his prophetic observations are certainly well founded, and we can continue to use his theory to analyze popular music throughout the twenty-first century. It is certainly true that

most examples of popular music lack “a hallmark of genuine art, which always speaks with an individualized voice” (Brown “Adorno’s Case” 323). Rather, I’m sure Adorno, if alive today, would still agree that popular music “does not speak with *anyone’s* voice, any more than a sewing machine does” (323).

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