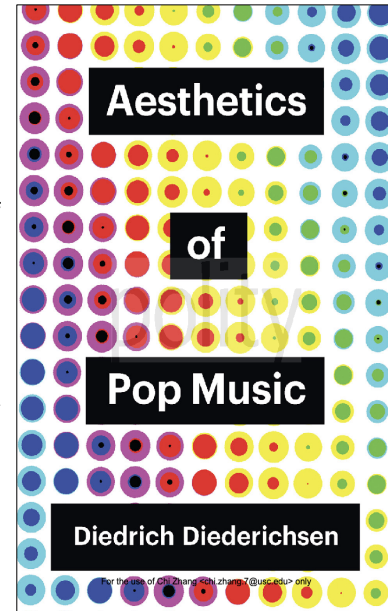


Diedrich Diederichsen, **Aesthetics of Pop Music**, Hoboken, NJ: Polity Press, 2023, 176 pp., \$45.00 (hardcover), \$12.95 (paperback), \$10.00 (ebook).

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Diedrich Diederichsen's ***Aesthetics of Pop Music*** attempts to identify a conception of pop music through a collection of theoretical explorations of its artifacts and practices toward the development of "contents to a theory rather than a theory in full" (p. vi). The aesthetics in question do not concern the musical or stylistic dimensions of pop music, strictly speaking, but rather seek an understanding of "pop music" apart from *music* as such. As Diederichsen makes explicit, "the chief mission of this book is to separate the concept of pop music from the concept of music . . . for the sake of cultural and historical interest" and to "aid in our later understanding of later, newer cultural complexes" (p. 83). In other words, Diederichsen is interested in pop music primarily as a particular social form for which he attempts to theorize a cultural aesthetic. Placing this mission statement earlier in the book would better prepare the reader for this text, particularly its abstract and densely theoretical content.



Indeed, Diederichsen presumes a specific type of reader, as evidenced by an apparent lack of interest in clarifying, situating, or grounding points of departure before elaborating on claims and observations for which the effect is contingent on a familiarity with theoretical frameworks and traditions, drawing most prominently from the Frankfurt school of German media theory (Medienwissenschaften), Niklas Luhmann's systems theory, and the Birmingham School. This work could also be situated in conversations with the sociomusicology and media studies approaches of Simon Frith, Keir Keightley, and David Hesmondhalgh. As such, despite Diederichsen's claim that this text is not "academic by nature" (p. vii), it nevertheless demands academic fluency. Additionally, the author does not historically, industrially, or stylistically delimit a field of pop music that would situate his reflections. Instead, he works inductively from specific examples of pop music ranging from Bo Diddley to Billie Eilish to Lee Perry, avoiding the trap of subgenre distractions but neglecting the historical situatedness of each artist. Structurally, this text comprises six chapters loosely organized into sections that read like nonlinear extended aphorisms. Diederichsen describes it as a "discursive text" and rightfully likens it to a manifesto. This arrangement provides him with the liberty to move quickly and traverse a wide expanse, challenging the reader to keep pace as he moves from target to target without looking back. Its manifesto style combined with its theoretical density might draw comparisons to Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer; however, Diederichsen's approach is less transparent in its critiques. Thus, he avoids any quick dismissal on the grounds of biased subjectivity. His own subjective positionality is obscured, but not to the point of being neutral or attempting an "objectivity." In this way, were it not for its highly abstract character, this book might also stand as a valuable contribution to pop music criticism that bridges the gap between academic

and popular audiences, such as Bloomsbury's 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ series of short books analyzing significant pop albums primarily through a historical and cultural lens.

The grounding theoretical claim he offers at the outset, that pop music is only "partly music," opens up a space through which Diederichsen "attempts to define pop music as an entity constituted by very specific particularities that . . . exhibit a certain consistency" (pp. 1–2). The other constitutive dimension of pop music that is *not music* is connected to its reliance, according to Diederichsen, on visual imagery, performances connected to the recording, a nonteleological "more African than European form" (p. 2) and a veneration of the body and physical presence of the human voice. These dimensions are transmitted via recognizable indexical signals, which constitute aesthetic qualities that demand an analytical or methodological approach that is distinct from other theories focused on sociology, history, or musicology. Emerging from a proliferation of affirmative claims that generate a complex map of the concept of pop music are those more central to Diederichsen's theorizations—pop music's indexicality, exploitation of the involuntary, social contingency, and relationship to technology, the combination of which informs its function as a medium that generates an indexical mode of relation to the real world for the recipient, rendered fetishizable and attractive through music.

Diederichsen's emphasis on pop music's indexicality lies at the center of its aesthetic, providing the means by which the recipient (Diederichsen's term for the listener, a choice that is never explained) relates themselves to the "real world." In positioning pop music as a medium rather than an object for which there is no "pre-eminent authorial position" (p. 40), the determining influences are diffused across a nonstatic ephemeral assemblage of components (i.e., "linkages," put in play by the listener, given form by their social contingencies and the pop star). While these linkages might center on the pop star, the surface on which the recipient projects their desire, this desire, in turn, is conditioned in part by the pop star as a strategic construction. Diederichsen argues that pop music is performance art informed by deployments of authenticity (i.e., "actively trying to be genuine, wanting to be genuine"; p. 25) and pose (i.e., "the skills and techniques of offering oneself up for projection, for a punctum experience"; p. 113), borrowing from Barthes. As such, pop music's aesthetic amounts to the effects of a complex relationship of dynamic factors (subjective, technological, industrial, cultural, historical) intersecting at the level of the "believable" pop star and recipient mediated through the pop song. As he writes, "Pop music is entirely constituted by articles that are either open-ended or perceived as incomplete—each of which makes reference to others" (p. 37). Therefore, the most effective pop song is both contingent and strategic, and the potential for connection is determined by a finely balanced and ephemeral conduit from the appropriately tempered pop star to the recipient. Diederichsen writes:

This, like all the characteristics of pop music that I am assembling here, is not a ploy, nor a question of success; it is not an artistic goal of individual performers, but an unspoken rule of the game, without which what we call pop music does not work. Its rules mark pop music out from other cultural formats. (p. 114)

The value of Diederichsen's pop music manifesto lies in its provocations that demand his reader think critically on the subject of pop music itself and their own relationship to it, as he writes, "Pop music is as good as the question or questions that it enables us to ask" (p. 113). Its force lies not only in the

content of his observations and claims (e.g., his distinction between authenticity and "authenticism," or that the "constitutive aspect of all pop music is that it must not be obvious at any given moment in a performance whether a persona or a real person is speaking" [p. 112]), but the unquestioned presumption with which they are delivered. Combined with its pace, these claims effectively function as open ellipses to be revisited on subsequent occasions for reflection, be they self-motivated or triggered by the text itself, inviting the reader to critically self-reflect on their position within pop music's "dynamic virtual amalgamation of diverse media and sign systems from the real world" (p. 38). What are the implications of claiming that "pop music is entirely constituted by articles that are either open-ended or perceived as incomplete" (p. 37)? Or that "music listeners find themselves constantly in recognition mode anyway—because you always listen to music several times" (pp. 53–54)? Indeed, if this claim can be made without further qualification, then should we not interrogate his claim that the accidental and involuntary is the essence of pop music, and whether or not "pose" extends to the recording process as well? It is as if Diederichsen chose this form to draw us in through instigation. Because, dialectically speaking, it is this same provocative style that generates its vulnerabilities. If one does not agree to play along, to move at Diederichsen's pace and accept his presumptions, then the manifesto form runs the risk of becoming somewhat distracting. For example, why does he use the term "recipient" instead of fan? Why does he say the laboratory's reinvention of sound happens "seldom with a planned effect in mind" (p. 26)? Further, Diederichsen's inductive method begs for delimitation. As much as the effect and aesthetics of pop music may not be accessible within an object, the reception process, nevertheless, is contoured by an industrial and historical situatedness whose forms manifest in relation to distinct modes of production. To speak about Lee "Scratch" Perry evokes a meaningfully distinct articulation from that of The Fall or Bo Diddley. Thus, to claim, as Diederichsen does, that the pop music apparatus is the "shifting social world" (p. 37) fights against his tendency toward abstraction. Taken together, however, these dimensions ultimately function as a call to inquiry. The reader, after all, should not presume that Diederichsen expects them to agree, and its discursive character is not meant to lead us out of the critical field to then look on a wrapped cultural phenomenon from a privileged position. Instead, it is meant to lead us into the field of pop music's immediacy.