
Viol’s book is a timely and highly readable account of a successful strand of recent (popular) British narrative fiction. Novels from such diverse authors as Nick Hornby (High Fidelity), John King (Human Punk) and Salman Rushdie (The Ground Beneath Her Feet) continuously refer to songs, bands and events from the realm of popular music. Surprisingly, no comprehensive study has yet appeared to analyse this new trend. Viol’s study examines the relation between novels and popular music from two angles: On the one hand, he asks what popular music does for novels, and on the other, what novels have to say about popular music. The study, conceived as a doctoral thesis, understands itself as part of a “text-based cultural studies” (13) that aims at “sound interdisciplinarity” (13). Although literature remains central to the study, the author also shows a firm grasp of the ‘other’ discipline involved, thereby avoiding the imbalance of many similar studies.

The first two chapters give a somewhat lengthy discussion of existing studies on the relation between literature and music and on popular music as such, often rehearsing well-know arguments and counter-arguments. Discussing the studies of Werner Wolf, Steven Paul Scher and others – mostly concerned with classical, high-art music –, the author concludes that these are mainly restricted to structural relations between literature and music, whereas he wants to add “social and cultural concerns” (245) to the equation. The following discussion of popular music studies suffers from a will to engage with the object of study itself: ‘popular music’. While the author provides a good overview of the diverse theoretical positions developed in regard to ‘popular music’, it is not always discernible what the author’s own stance is. The central question about what makes popular music so ‘popular’ seems to be evaded: In what sense is Ebony and Ivory’s “Nuff Respect” more popular than Mozart’s “Requiem”?Is there a difference between ‘popular music’ (Viol’s general term) and ‘pop (music)’ (a term Viol sometimes uses synonymously)? Viol’s basic definition remains work oriented: ‘Popular music’ consists of electronically amplified or generated, short, rhythm oriented, vocal songs (87). Although Viol later acknowledges the importance of multimediality (122), these aspects remain “secondary” to “the thing itself” (123). However, this misses the point that pop – and this might mark the difference to ‘popular music’ – is intrinsically bound up with the emergence of specific media apparatus: the history of pop is inseparable from the development of amplifiers, 4-track recorders, TVs, transistor radios, vinyl records, CDs, the walkman, i-Pod, etc. It seems as if Viol’s concentration on Anglo-American cultural studies as his guide through the world of popular music has biased him towards semiotic, representational aspects of ‘popular music’. Although he mentions other aspects, these seem at odds with the general theoretical framework.

The second half of the book develops Viol’s own analysis of the relation between literature and popular music. In chapter three, he delineates intertextual, transmedial and intermedial aspects of the ‘musicalisation’ of contemporary fiction. The “intertextual use of pop [sic!] music” is analysed as “the most common one. It is usually based on short but meaningful references to songs, albums, concerts, genres, singers” etc. (151). Through these references pop music becomes “the conveyor of instantly recognisable, though complex, cultural meanings, [marking] out social distinction, attitudes, and identities” (151). Thus, ‘popular music’ is used to create a common code for author and reader, for characterising figures and settings in the novel, and even to structure plots and add symbolic meaning. The

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transmedial aspect seems to be the most interesting and innovative – unfortunately it is also the most undertheorised. “The fictional soundtrack”, the book argues, “is transmedial in that it seeks to transcend the confines of its medium towards the musical.” (161) By making the reader ‘hear’ a specific song, a text manages to inform the reception process in specific ways. It engages the reader, builds up a certain mood and creates immediacy and empathy through means that might even go beyond the semiotic (161–175). However, how this is supposed to be working on a phenomenological or cognitive level is not explained. Central claims, like the following, remain unsubstantiated: “The quotation of music is probably the most direct form of ‘showing’ in fiction (apart from visual representations; and hearing is much more immediate than seeing, which accounts for the fact that sound never leaves people indifferent).” (168) Finally, intermedial effects can be detected when prose echoes the form or structure of specific songs or genres, when musical forms are translated into literary structures (176).

The last chapter sets out to answer the second central question of the study: What do novels contribute to our knowledge of popular music? According to Viol, literature’s “(almost) exclusive” contribution is that “pop music [sic] is frequently represented in terms of moving, travelling or – more generally – traversing space [and] time” (193). Apart from the fact that studies like George Lipsitz’ Dangerous Crossroads (1994) and Diedrich Diederichsen’s Der Lange Weg nach Mitte (1999) explicitly link pop music to the phenomena of space and travel, there is another problem with this rather broad and unspecific category. Are there any novels that are not about movement, about traversing time and space in some way or another? Is it a surprise, then, that novels use popular music to engender these travels? Is there an essential difference between the analeptic use of a pop song and Proust’s use of the madeleine? The remainder of the chapter follows more traditional concepts of identity, subculture, fan- and stardom through a number of novels.

Overall, the book presents an accessible and knowledgeable taxonomy of the different uses of ‘popular music’ in contemporary narrative fiction as well as the diverse representations of ‘popular music’ in novels. While the broad spectrum of Viol’s study enables a good overview of and a helpful introduction to the various engagements of novels and ‘popular music’, a more thorough examination of those aspects that go beyond the common fare could have added that little bit extra which distinguishes a well-wrought song from a hit.

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