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The Multidimensionality of Pop

The American Philosopher Alva Noë has written about the alleged unoriginality of pop music. In particular, they have written about the particularities of where the work of artwork is in pop music. Noë introduced this idea of work in art in their book *Strange Tools*. Work here refers to the part of the art which consumes the most effort and most expresses the artistic message. It is described as the what and where of artistic focus. In pop music, the work is not in the actual sound, which is often unoriginal, rather the work exists elsewhere. On page 172, Noë explained that “it’s not the what of sound, but the what of action and personality that interests us when we are engaged with pop music.” In this quote, Noë compared the potential “whats,” or locations of the work. They state that for pop music, it is either in the sound, or in the action and personality. This contributes to Noë’s larger thesis, which is dispelling the reputation that pop music is flatly unoriginal. The sound of pop music unabashedly is. However it is not where the work of pop music truly is. Rather the work of pop music is found in the performance of the idol’s personality.

When discussing the originality of pop music, or lack thereof, the question of authenticity is brought up. Is pop music really authentic or is it all a ploy for fame, money, or other ends? What is authenticity and how does it apply to pop music? Noë discussed and compares two pop idols as examples in addressing this question: Bob Dylan, and the Rolling

Stones. On page 176 they stated that “The Rolling Stones are not inauthentic, no more than Bob Dylan.” Dylan here plays the part of the “authentic” idol. Noë clearly asserted that the Rolling Stones are equally as authentic as Bob Dylan was. So how authentic was Bob Dylan? Robert Zimmerman was famous for changing their name to Bob Dylan, and artificially adopting an American Folk sound. However it is through this artistic vehicle that they drew attention to their own actions and performance. As established previously, the true work of pop is in action and performance. Bob Dylan designed their music to draw attention to where the true artistic work was. The Rolling Stones employ a similar tactic when they adopted blues, soul, R&B, disco, and other traditionally African American styles of music. This is another example of a pop artist adopting a musical style for its performative use, rather than artistic craft or merit. With this comparison, Noë is suggesting that Dylan and the Stones both expressed a similar kind of authentic message, through the performative art of pop. This comparison draws attention to the a-authentic nature of pop, in which neither authentic, nor inauthentic can plainly apply. Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones were both performers, and both played their parts articulately. Through this lens, it almost seems silly to question whether the role they played is “authentic.” Noë’s used juxtaposition to demonstrate how pop music can be multidimensional, and transcend simple binary labels. Pop music can use unoriginal music and inauthentic style, and the authors can still tell an original and authentic artistic message.