

/// MUSIC LISTENING VALUATIONS ///

BACKGROUND

Music listening is one of the most widespread cultural practices : worldwide, the average amount of music listening is estimated to be more than 18 hours per week, and is constantly increasing, particularly due to the development of digital technologies, reducing the consumption gaps between social classes, and diversifying the means and contexts of listening. In this apparent omnipresence of music, how do individuals value their listening practices? What are their main grammars of valuation? How do these valuations vary according to contexts, contents, and social trajectories?

METHODOLOGY

This case investigates valuations by “lambda” individuals whose practice is autonomous, neither professional nor part of structured frameworks, but whose levels of emotional and intellectual commitment are variable - ranging from a detachment and non-knowledge, to the “fan” or “lover” posture, understood as “attachment to objects that matter” and as a “posture of reflexivity” in cultural practice and taste.

The survey was carried out through long semi-structured interviews with individuals having various degrees of intellectual and emotional commitment, whose listening practices cover a wide range of musical aesthetics, and 4 main contexts of listening: in private settings with careful listening (alone, or with others); in private settings while doing an activity; in parties, bars or nightclubs; and in live concerts.

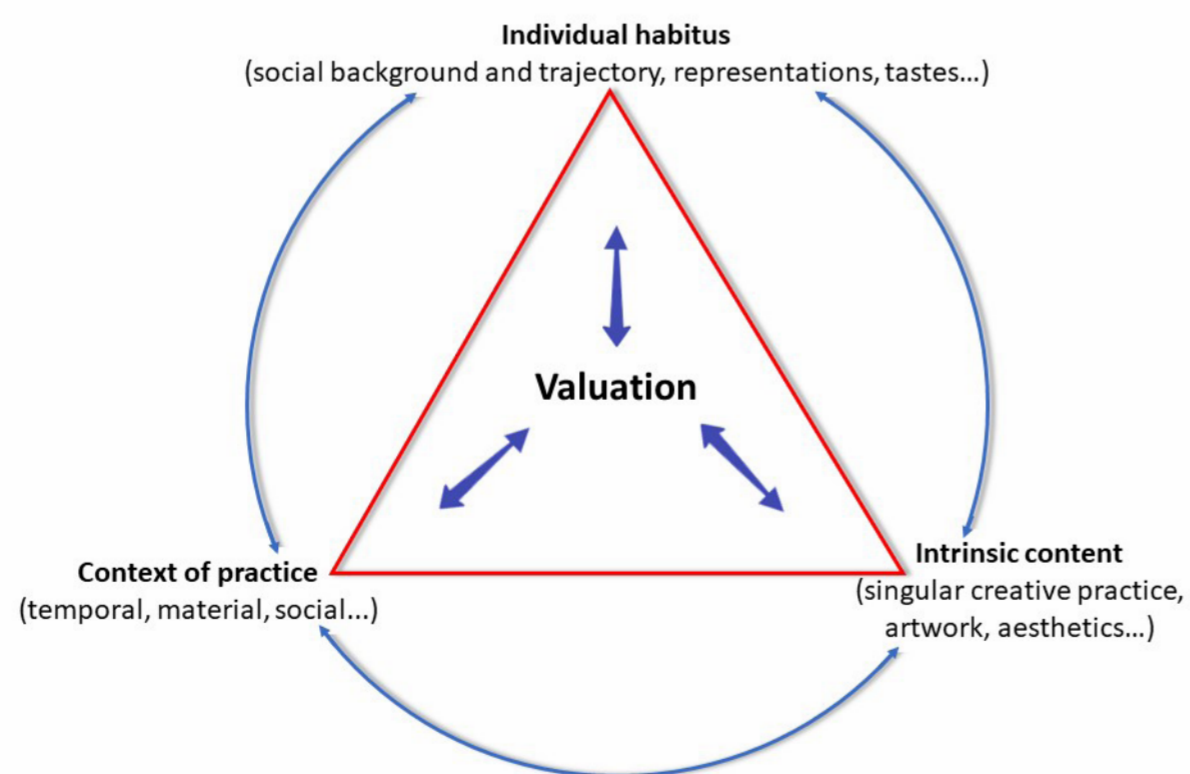
VALUATION GRAMMARS

Different grammars of valuation are associated to music listening, through “qualifications” (judgements, feelings, emotions, appreciations, assessments, virtues...), referring to implicit or explicit principles of values, that can be classified into 5 major categories : **aesthetic, functional, identification, relational and political.**

VALUATION VARIATIONS

Individuals mobilize a dynamic repertoire of values; their valuations, in practice, are the result of a meeting between three central variables :

- **Individual habitus and trajectories** : life histories, initial family socialisation and secondary socialisation ; determining changes or encounters; relational transmission; constitution of different level of emotional and intellectual commitment; exposure to the dynamics of music production, diffusion and mediation (music industry, media, programming venues, teaching and amateur practices...)
- **Contexts of practice** : solitary or collective, in concert, in private or public spaces ; attentive listening or background music; associated dance practice... atmosphere, spatial-temporal and social configuration are determining factors.
- **Intrinsic contents** : even if musical semiotic contents only have value in relation to contexts and individuals (a ‘conditional performativity of music’), these intrinsic contents are “acting technologies” and influence the valuation, according to lyrics; melodic structures and tones ; degrees of harmonic and structural complexity ; types of sound textures ; groove, rhythm and tempo... Criteria for judging aesthetic “intrinsic” values of each of these elements are variable: technicality, virtuosity, complexity, beauty, emotion, innovation, imagination, sensation, meaning, style... and within each of these value criteria, competing value scales exist.



VALUATION TENSIONS

Aesthetic values are sometimes opposed to functional values (e.g., music listening as an exclusive and committed practice, opposed to “background music”), or to political values (aesthetic rejection of ‘text songs’ in favour of melodic contents; contradiction between aesthetic taste and political positions of a musician or offences he has committed...)

Divergent interpretations of aesthetic values exist, through emotion, sensation and imagination on the one hand, and through virtuosity, technicality and complexity on the other.

Within political values, relativism and openness to cultural diversity are opposed to the defence of a “standard of cultural quality”, giving rise to conflicts (rejection or acceptance of aesthetics not corresponding to tastes; rejection of commercial music as a “mass product”, or conversely, appreciation of this same music by valuing its “popular” dimension, and by opposing its status of cultural illegitimacy).



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