An Intermediary Between Production and Consumption: The Producer of Popular Music

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Trying to reduce the divide between culture and science, this article follows the producer of popular records, as an interface between music and its market. Like the innovator when he does not obey scientific, technical, and commercial reasons in succession, but reshapes them all together through a double task of giving its form to the product and the interesting people within it, the producer represents the public to the artist and the music to the media. First in a local scale, then in larger and larger ones, alone with the singer, in the studio, and into the media, this sociology of the intermediary shows the producer experimentally organizing, as in a laboratory, a complete production-consumption cycle. Success is then not the mysterious leap to the public, but the last extension of an equation into which the public has been incorporated in many forms from the very beginning.

This article is transgressive, in the literal sense of the term: we will be going to and fro between the laboratory and the studio. I intend to apply a model borrowed from scientific and technical work to the work of cultural production so that in turn the function of the producer of popular music will help us to understand the innovator. The producers might feel their way between inventions and markets using their indicators, their blueprints, and their machines and the innovators between performers and public using their recorders, their instrument panels, and their conductors; but the difference between the two is not so great. Is it possible to use the same method, the same tools, to speak about culture and about science? I address that question here.

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The idea of presenting such an article on popular music production in a journal on science, technology, and society (STS) should be obvious, but it may nevertheless need some preliminary explanation. I am a sociologist of culture, but I work in the same center and draw on the same intellectual tradition as Callon (see, for example, Callon et al. 1984; Callon, Law, and Rip 1986) and Latour (see, for example, 1982, 1986), who are better known in the science studies community. Both sociology of science and technology and sociology of culture face the problem of “the” object, scientific or cultural: what can a sociologist do with it? Both sociologies have tried the same solutions, and both have found two contrasting approaches.

In one, the work is shared between disciplines, leaving to epistemology (or aesthetics) the care of treating scientific (or artistic) objectivity, and to sociology the study of milieux, professions, institutions, markets, policies—that is, everything “around” the object itself.¹ The other is “critical” and tries to disconstruct the “illusion” of the object’s objectivity, “revealing” under it actors’ interests or society’s power games. And of course, both have explored various antagonistic visions of these two main approaches.

The reason for transgressing the frontier between culture and science is clear, then; for, although these two worlds can easily be unified through observation, they have been placed at opposite ends of the disciplinary spectrum. The same chain, on which we will focus our attention, going from a product to a market through the mediating work of different producers, has been overlooked from exactly opposite points of view, depending upon the field it belonged to. In the case of science and technology, analyses start from a world of things that obey the laws of nature and “go down” toward the world of humans, to see how society produces, accepts, rejects, and is transformed by objects. In the case of culture, analyses start from society and its need to express itself and, focusing on the arbitrary nature of cultural constructions, “go up” from the world of humans to the artifacts they produce, consume, and transform. This division, by creating objects without a society and societies where objects are mere pretexts, prevents any consideration of the act of creation. A singer—a producer—a public, a product—an innovator—a market. How can “social interest,” whatever forms and contents are given to them, be “incorporated,” “represented,” into a technical asset? How can a public’s “identity” be represented through the cultural mediation of an artist? The question is the same: representation. Based on studies my colleagues and I have made of the production of popular music (Vignolle 1980; Hennion 1981, 1983a), I will argue that it can be addressed simply by paying systematic attention to the role of the intermediary, fulfilled in the music case.
by the producers. Their work of representing the public to the singer allows
us to break the ice: between production and consumption there is nothing
like the abyss separating the technical and the social. Instead there is a series
of iterations, the construction of models and experiments, progressive at-
ttempts to extend what has first been localized in the studio. There is a
continual process of simultaneous production/consumption in operation—by
means of interposed representatives—until the final success. There is at no
point a frontier, a moment when production and its techniques are abandoned
for the great unknown: the public and its tastes. There is a tempting analogy
here with technical or scientific innovation confronted with the market place.
We would like to bring out this continuity of the work of mediation, reducing
the gap between producer and consumer and hoping by the same movement
to reduce another artificial gap, between cultural and STS studies.

One artistic director described his work as follows:

We should have the first reaction, the first lightning bolt, before the public. We
are intermediaries. Because we like it, others might like it too. You see people
with varying degrees of talent... and then all of sudden there is someone
whose voice I find irresistible... what is the explanation of that? There is a
kind of vibration, it does something to you, a voice that gives you a feeling of
well-being. [unpublished interview]

The artistic director represents the public to the singer, he or she introduces
the listener into the heart of the production team. These formulations are not
explanations but that which needs to be explained: why does it work, how
does it happen that this person’s “vibrations” can influence those of others?
Intermediaries are not passive functionaries administering laws (musical,
economic, or cultural). They produce the worlds that they want to make work
for them. They force, tear out, knit together; they have tools and techniques
for isolating, measuring, testing. Nothing is given in advance for them. The
laws do not apply “themselves,” ideas do not spread “themselves”: there is
work to be done. Only magic deals in forces that act at a distance.

For our example of popular music, the cornerstone of the demonstration
is in fact the artistic directors—these “magicians” who turn up with their
hands in their pockets, without well-defined skills, but whose flair and
impressions are the key to success. It is a matter of showing that no one
operates within a more realistic network than theirs, that no one operates so
material a construction of the act of listening, that no one acts less at a
distance.
The Sociology of Art Is a Sociology of the Intermediary

We will take a detour via the sociology of art in order to show that the intermediary can be considered—if we are willing to do a slightly forced reading—as the central object of the sociology of creation. Aesthetics continually refines a definition of art. Sociology has shown that actors fight to impose their own definitions. A key moment was the recognition that art was no longer, by itself, either reflection or anticipation, expression of its time or aesthetic transcendent—that one had to find the actors, their institutions, the groups that worked to establish these relationships between art and the world (Becker 1982). The character of the intermediary has always attracted the attention of sociologists and historians of art (for example Antal 1948; Hauser 1951; Gombrich 1953; Haskell 1963; Schapiro 1964). There is nothing astonishing in this. All those who offer artists payment for their work—“patrons” or sponsors, traders or galleries, private or public commissions—by their very nature ask the most immediate question of the sociology of art: what relationship is there between art and society?

The first task that the history of art undertook was, in effect, the restitution of intermediaries. Trapped between the rules of art and global theories of society, historians did not at first dare to attack these two blocs head-on, protected as they are by solid constructions. They sketched out the links, reestablishing one by one the sequences by which art was effectively produced and consumed. This was tentative work, in the sense that it rarely examined the full extent of its theoretical implications—that is, when its results explicitly contradicted those of aesthetic discourse, which looked down on these venal tasks. However, it was also very radical work, which scratched through the mirror of the sublime to reveal the quicksilver behind it. The work behind the genius became apparent, the negotiation behind the beauty, the whole political game behind creation. Art is not beautiful without experts. There is no value without merchants. Art could not span centuries and continents without bridges being built.

Letting themselves be too easily satisfied with finding their object at the gates of the temple, without having to confront the temple guards, sociologists concentrated on diverse aspects of art, chosen because they could import tools forged elsewhere. Thus we have the treatments of organization (DiMaggio and Hirsch 1976; Ryan and Peterson 1982; Adler 1979), the market (Moulin 1967, 1978, 1986), the institution (Bourdieu 1971; Bourdieu and de Saint-Martin 1978), strategies (Bystryn 1978), professions (De Clercq 1970), the milieu (Becker 1974).
To differing degrees, these works more or less explicitly share a correct intuition—one which is potentially devastating to the myth of artistic sophistication—a refusal to let themselves be carried away by the seduction to which aesthetes succumb. Aesthetes get as much gratification from art as they give back to it. The new viewpoint meant not being an a priori accomplice of art in adopting the categories of judgment that it offers in order to be judged in its own terms. To speak of art as if it were not art was really to begin to speak of art. Bourdieu’s (1979) breakthrough consisted precisely in his taking up this challenge.

The path leading from Hauser’s Social History to Bourdieu’s Distinction transformed the landscape of writings about art. It permitted a departure from the formal analysis of works made by the traditional history of art. This sort of “internal” analysis carried with it—as did the sociology of science for a time—a series of global factors that could be called social. These were the only possible source of theoretical, general, large-scale (but unconvincing) generalizations. With the switch to true “social” analyses, however, we went from a landscape consisting of two monoliths—Art and the Social—to one in which there is a groundwork of partial, prosaic, but henceforth undeniable realities. There is still art and society, but there are also art schools that issue diplomas; critics and the periodicals they write for; dealers and their catalogues; patrons and their courts; the milieu and its norms; and the state with its subsidies, commissions, and positions.

Things could not stop there. Nothing would have proved more convincingly the hypothesis of absolute and self-sufficient art than the incapacity of the sociologist to go beyond the conditions of its production and its consumption to an “internal” understanding. (We will accept such a frontier precisely as long as it remains inviolate in the works treated.) By remaining outside the doors of Art one reinforces the closure which surrounds it. This may be accomplished by a complacent division of work: the sociologist guards the city gates, checking what comes in and what goes out; the aesthetician holds the city center. (This is the problematic of the “conditions” of creation and of artistic diffusion, best represented in France by the works of Raymonde Moulin.) Or it may be accomplished by the brutal annexation and reduction of artistic constructions to one arbitrary term among others, one more scene where we can represent the social theater under the direction of the sociologist. This is the limitation of Bourdieu’s masterstroke: having irreparably destroyed the objectivity of art, he substitutes the yet more rigid objectivity of the rules of the social game (Hennion 1985).³

Apart from this untimely incursion, sociologists have scarcely dared enter into Art. They have set limits on their action, obstinately giving back what
was hidden by theories of autonomous art. However, by maintaining the
divide between art and the social, they accept their defeat without ever going
into battle. If what they bring out does not succeed in putting a new light on
the content of an artistic production, it must be because art is indeed
elsewhere than in these details—preferably above them.

The military work of the ordinary sociologist went on. Leaving the
comfort of the siege, sociologists attempted infiltration of the enemy camp
through two convergent breaches in the wall: the one opened by the theme
of recognition, which went from Bourdieu to American sociology; and the
other, in England and France, by the theme of identity—in a sense close to
that of social movement in Touraine.

For Bourdieu the idea of recognition, by referring to a theoretical model
that regulates the interplay of social positions, empties the content of art of
all pertinence. It is not so much that he could not explain the content as that
this problem is disqualified, referred to another order of explanation. At-
tracted by his radicalism, several American sociologists interested in music
have taken this term up and have developed Bourdieu’s work (Shepherd et
al. 1977; DiMaggio and Useem 1978b, 1978c). But the work that followed
quickly changed direction, joining up with the problematic of identity. This
change was above all engendered by the displacement of the terrains of
analysis toward small groups and specialties, for example, the case study of
such and such a style of popular American music. Since in this case the
reciprocal exchanges between microaudiences and musicians very clearly
organize artistic production, it is no longer a question of reducing art to an
objective, totally predefined stratified social order. In these analyses of
production, instead of starting from society to see how it determines or relates
to art, the hall of mirrors linking the music and the public that wants to listen
to it creates simultaneously the product and the social groups who use it.
(British sociology of culture in particular has contributed to this viewpoint;
see, for example, Willis 1978; Brake 1980; Hebdige 1983.) Using a local
procedure of successive approximations, the characteristics of artistic pro-
duction and of the diverse groups being created are seen to be intertwined.
(For rock, see Frith 1978, Bennett 1980; for jazz, in the tradition of Becker,
see Stevens 1982; in France, Lagrée 1979, 1982.)

At its weakest, this idea reactivates at the local level the traditional thesis
that art is the expression of society. But, pushed to the limit, it leads to new
hypotheses that merit explanation and discussion:

(1) Art is not a result of global social distinctions; rather, it is a producer of local
distinctions.
(2) The social is not an a priori set of strata reflected by art. It is a group of forces, each unknown to the other, that strives to constitute fragile, variable regroupings. No one can give a picture of the whole without in fact doing what the actors do—imposing their own regroupings.

(3) The intermediary is not at the interface of two known worlds: he or she is the one who constructs these worlds by trying to bring them into relation.

(4) There is neither another place to know nor means of knowing these worlds except in the work of the intermediary, the reporter from the worlds: he or she deforms, selects, regroups. What he or she has to do is to displace forces so as to associate them, and any act of displacement is work. This analysis implies that sociologists must rethink the boundaries separating them from actors in order to ask of what they themselves are intermediaries. It throws into doubt the existence of a role for observer superfluous to the relationships that they observe.

Given this nontrivial—in fact, basic—reformulation, we can see that the intermediary is the special object of the sociology of art. Working from the case of the artistic director of popular music, this article proposes to continue this work of reformulation. If there is any particular advantage to taking popular music as a laboratory for the consideration of art—and science—it is not that we are benefiting from a (nonobvious) opposition with “serious” music, nor that the simplicity of the musical technique of the song helps us (this is yet more questionable), but that the transparence of the relations of production organized by recording professionals is on our side. Pop records need no legitimation other than their sales. There is no need for them to protect themselves from the public by forging historical or aesthetic justifications. They are willing to open the doors of their kitchen and are not at all ashamed that we find mass-produced ingredients and random mixtures there, as well as cooks who continually taste their own dishes, because this is the best way of knowing whether they are any good. Good reasons cannot save bad results. The culinary metaphor, which the professionals willingly endorse, needs development. For the present it gives us a model that is symmetrically opposed to that of the aesthetic elaboration of an obedient object (obedient to the rules of art, to the creative subject, to the infrastructure, to social stratification).

The Laboratory-Studio

In the popular music studio, we are in a room that merits the name laboratory both for producers and for sociologists. Producers work up their musical experiments there. It is a laboratory for sociologists, if they accept...
the idea that what happens there can help them measure the forces at play in music, whereas normally they are confronted only with objects already constructed, hermetically sealed in their own logic, leaving no sign of their dynamic. We would like to take this double laboratory, which at present has the status of a mere metaphor, seriously.

By entering such an area, sociologists can escape a sterile oscillation between theories of society and the strategies of actors. We must invert our relationship with the object. We should not suppose that it has its preexistent laws that are unknown to the actors and that our work will reveal piecemeal. On the contrary, it is an unknown collection of forces that can be uncovered only by looking at the work of the actors. Certitudes are displaced: we have aesthetic models of art, sociological theories of culture, and we see an impenetrable mystery between them. This mystery only exists because the clarity of our disjoint models exists, at the price of jumbling together all the questions that they cannot answer. Thus the interest of sociologists of art is naturally attracted to the problem of intermediaries.

One curious fruit of earlier theory is a reversal whereby realistic, directly observable, measurable activity appears to be mysterious, because it cannot be attached to unreal, unverifiable, and unfalsifiable theories of Art and Society. As in the studio-laboratory, we will rely on our experiments only to identify a new force when there is something that resists. When we know that it exists, we can name it, try to measure it, to integrate it partially into our world, to know it:

The studio is a room entirely isolated from the outside acoustically and whose interior has been transformed into a quasi deaf chamber. It has been lined with surfaces of polyhedra of various shapes and material that are meant to absorb from all angles the complete spectrum of frequencies, from wherever they are emitted in the studio. Most studios are set up in standard buildings, but veritable suspended shells or rooms on stilts separated from the outside world by a thin layer of vacuum have been conceived (Hennion 1981, 157-58).

This construction, which may be only simple acoustical and architectural technique, materializes in the most palpable sense of the term the key operation of music producers. In order to carry out tests, producers must construct a model. If a full-scale test is too expensive, they have to construct a world in miniature and try to create test conditions there that can be reproduced on the larger scale. The studio is a padded room cut off from the outside world by a heavy, soundproofed door, a room that warns off outsiders with its red light while singers, producers, musicians, and technicians are locked inside. It is a world made to the measure of people so that they can test their own creations. First, there must be isolation from the real world.
Modern technology can do this with vacuum and Isorel. It is no longer necessary to practice one’s alchemy in the underground vaults of a dark castle. However, after the success of the Hérouville studio, which was in fact a château hidden away in the countryside, this young sound engineer’s dream remains the same:

At present, here, we go to the limit of current state-of-the-art technology, from the point of view of the equipment itself, but we are by no means there with respect to the environment. My project now is to construct a gigantic recording complex. Away from Paris. A ranch with two studios . . . there’s quite a link between music and horses; they share the old dream of space. I want to create the conditions so that anyone can get away completely from a non-creative work environment punctuated by a million telephone calls. . . . Absolute calm, state-of-the-art technology, a framework that provides you with whatever you need to relax: horses, motorbikes, pinball machines and video games; with bungalows around each ranch to lodge you. [unpublished interview]

The isolation of people is as important as the physical isolation: in this vision we are not confronted with an acoustic problem but with the plans from an idealized microcosm of creation. “Laboratory” is no longer a mere image, it is at least an analogy. So that it can become a theoretical tool for the analysis of the production of popular music, we now need to answer several questions.

(1) Having thus separated off, isolated, and emptied of its natural content a volume whose boundaries become the limits of an artificial universe, what needs to be brought in so that our creatures have some chance of making their way, first here and then in the outside world?

(2) Once we have identified what has been forced into the studio, how can we account for the operations that go on there for the three hours the unions allow for a recording session?

(3) What relationship can be established (by the producers/by ourselves) between what happens in the studio and the ultimate trajectory of the final cut?

If we succeed in answering these questions, we will at the same time have transgressed, just as producers do, the opposition between music and public. We will have laid down the foundations of an analysis of creation without having committed any anachronisms, and we will have sensibly redefined the place of observers in the process, to the extent that we refuse them the right to establish in their thoughts a relationship that the actors have not in fact established before our eyes. I will come back to these points in the conclusion. In the meantime, I will answer the above questions in turn.
(1) Putting the World in a Box

It is not a question of gathering together outside objects that are already complete. Following many others (Hirsch 1972; Denisoff 1975; Ryan and Peterson 1982), I have elsewhere (Hennion 1981, 107-69) described the collective work of recording professionals: artists, lyricists, composers, arrangers, artistic directors, producers, sound engineers. Whether it is a matter of sound, of language, of music, or of the search for singing talent, the same operation takes place: the fragments need to be pried from their context so they can be inserted into the song. It is a forced loan, that is to say, one that cuts things off perpendicular to their lines of force. It brutalizes them: it transforms organic matter, stratified and with its own integrity, into raw material.

On the musical front, this is what we have called the “anti-musicology” of the song (Hennion 1983a). It is neither structure nor function, just collages. One does not construct an object, one superimposes and juxtaposes things: a rhythm, a sound, an introduction, a gimmick. Nothing is a priori indispensable or forbidden by a user’s manual. You need to try it out. One artistic director says, “The success of a song is an accumulation of little details.” Another points out, “Often the song almost succeeds on the introduction alone, which has nothing to do with the melody.” Further on, when he speaks of gimmicks, he adds, “[They] add them in during the song, they are nice surprises, just like you tie a packet up with a pretty ribbon: that has nothing to do with the melody, they are little effects that one comes across, that one is pleased to find.” Indeed, if nothing has to do with anything else, you just have to listen.

The same thing goes for the lyrics (key words and quotes, a vocabulary cut out of the newspaper and cut off from its meaning, rhymes without reason, words whose sound or whose mystery is the only thing that counts) and for the technology (of sound, of arrangement, of the instrumentals). For this they work from a catalog of odd fragments, according to need, without worrying about the objects’ attempts to be internally autonomous. A technical reason is a bad reason.

Finally and above all, the human material that makes up the song suffers the same treatment: a voice, a “look,” a face. Artistic directors do not willy-nilly accept the singer that they have discovered, with their dreams of glory, their style, their preferred songs, their ideal public. They choose one or two characteristics that they liked from the start and carry them into the studio in the same way as the arranger arrives with one or two ideas about harmonies and orchestration that he or she is ready to modify at the drop of
a hat. You do not rewrite singers: you dress them up, you try different styles of song on them, you put make-up on them, you search out faults, you simplify, you reduce the complex traits of a personality to a single dominant characteristic. This is not cynical manipulation or money-grubbing duplicity. There is nothing given in advance, but there are successive adjustments that, if they work, will have defined both the personality of the stars and the public that will be prepared to invest in them. It may perhaps be that the work of the person is longer, more violent, and impassioned than the work of refining the rhythm; but everyone knows what is at stake. If success comes along, it will confront the singers with this same violence, when they have to cohabit with this created other, to meet the wishes of the clamoring crowds that love them.

The first phase of production work makes the studio a sort of mechanical octopus that sends out its tentacles in all directions so as to gather up pieces of the world and incorporate them wholesale. Going beyond this animal metaphor, the characteristics of this capture begin to clarify themselves. They are taken from a mixed bag of sources: words, sounds, techniques, material, instruments, characteristics, people. They are all put on the same footing. No one can ask to have titles and baggage brought along: not music and its laws, nor marketing and its certainties, nor the singers and their humanity. To find out how they get treated, we have to look inside the studio. All you get coming in are the bare fragments of their social reason, amputated articulations, snatches of music. The studio is impermeable to systems; it dissolves obligatory associations; it undoes rationalizations. Inversely, all connections are permitted, whether or not they are specified in the user’s manuals. The studio is an apparatus for capturing raw material by extracting it from the structured networks along which it circulates in “normal” life.

(2) The Act of Equation

The door is closed. We are shut off from the organized world. In the studio there is no longer any music or public, no society or technology, no power or market, but inert objects that have been gathered in from everywhere. Not everything is there, but there is a bit of everything. We have fulfilled the first necessary condition for creating our creatures: the world is neither absent nor present, it is represented. Being cut up into isolated elements that we can recombine at our leisure, it is a partial, simplified sample that we are dealing with, but one we can work on. We have cut it off from the infinite series of external influences that no variable could measure since they all interact and are inextricably linked. The transgression of laws, the refusal of established order, the reconstruction of the world, no longer refer to an in-principle
demand made by artists or to a condition for creation affirmed by aesthetics. Rather, they are operations that are actually carried out by producers in the course of their experimental work.

Now they need to recompose what they have decomposed, to give a unity to this pile of inert pieces, at the same time giving the song its best chance for success when it is released and given up to currently unknown external forces. One important element of success is chance: we have been given a way of making up combinations of elements, but it is not possible either to check out all the combinations or to guarantee that they are representative. Setbacks and pleasant surprises have been so numerous in the series of hit parades that none of the professionals present can forget that they are participating in a collective gamble. But despite the opposition between the practical language of the actors, who flaunt their own flair, and the theoretical language of a sociology that would like to put them under the sway of the determinism of a predefined order, there are other ways of thinking about production than arbitrary chance or mechanical certainty. The problem is not one of giving oneself up to chance or of eliminating it totally, but of localizing it, so as not to gamble everything at once. You need to balance the probabilities.

The work of the producers locked away in the studio comes down to working out progressively an equation composed of the elements that have been assembled. This idea allows us to analyze concretely the abstract task of “making art a representation of the world.” In fact, in the studio, the next task after methodically rendering the world absent is that of re-presenting it. Once again, this is not a question of metaphysics or of the essence of art: it is a material construction of the actors.

In effect, the equation consists in placing known terms and unknown terms into a relationship so as to produce possibilities of a solution. Equations are only rarely elegant formulas that can be rigorously solved algebraically. More often they are underdetermined. Their coefficients are measured experimentally, according to a given approximation, and the numerical results are calculated by successive iterations. One sees what the preceding estimate for a value gave and changes it to get ever closer to the solution. These two features (combining the known and the unknown and getting successively closer to the solution by trial and error) give a very clear picture of the actual organization of the collective work of the studio. This work has been rendered possible by “putting everything into a box”: in these simplified surroundings you can try anything, since failures are not expensive.

The role of artistic directors is at once the most mysterious and the most characteristic. They claim to represent the public. “What about this represen-
tation? Do we have to accept their representivity?” replies the critical observer. This is a misconceived question—I will stress this for the last time—since it presupposes a public that is already known, one that can be compared with the image held by the artistic director, or at least one that is knowable outside the practice of production. But the public for a new record is by definition an unknown, something to be found, not something to recopy. The pieces of information that producers have at their disposal (marketing studies that they hold in contempt, analyses of recent hits, more intuitive ideas, surveys of public taste) always describe an old public, the result of preceding equations. The approximate coefficients that they furnish are no more reliable than other elements that also serve to introduce fragments of the public into the studio—such as references in the lyrics, perhaps to the young singers themselves if they are singer-songwriters. For the professionals, singers are more witnesses for their cohort than creators to be served; their songs offer fresh material, close to what the public has in their heads. The arrangement, the sound engineering, the fabrication of the personality are not a means of decorating the song. On the contrary, they are the means by which the song and its few ideas are incorporated, like a sample of the public, into the work of production.

Any local test of the public—surveys, witnesses, samples—merits integration. But the presence of the artistic director provides a supplementary and irreplaceable procedure, since it mobilizes in the experiment the work relations that are forged between the professionals. The artistic director has first of all fulfilled this role with respect to the future singer, in the course of the long preparatory work that precedes real studio tests. Take a young singer, full of hopes and doubts. The entire world is hostile: an infinite series of skills, relationships, networks need to be conquered. Doors are closed, encouragement leads nowhere, and satisfaction is quickly drowned in a flood of repetitive problems. Then, after being a supporting act, after a cabaret or a test somewhere, someone comes to see the singer, someone whose reputation he or she recognizes: it is the artistic director of some company, or an independent or free-lance producer. “Listen to me rather than the others.” The role of intermediary and the slow process of revelation that follows this substitution (if the singer accepts the scenario that the producer paints) are contained in the first meeting between the two. They now need to be realized.

By standing in the way, the intermediaries capture the attention of the singers. Producers put the obstacle of their bodies between the singers and the public’s desire, and this obstacle concentrates on them all the forces that were going in every direction, as long as they did not run up against the localized resistance of a flesh-and-blood listener. By their presence, the
producers distract the young candidates from their showdowns with fame. They take them away from their double-headed dreams: the public and I. Or rather, I and the publics, each in their turn, but publics that no one else has captured: the one that the singers imagined, clamoring for the performer in the packed room, or the frosty public sketched by the sales figures of the commercial director or, again, that of the media representative. For producers to be a screen they have substituted a daily, limited set of negotiations between themselves and the singers for this sterile artistic challenge to the public. “OK, you can conquer Olympus, but for the moment watch where you’re stepping. Yes, you are excellent, but those lyrics that you like so much, aren’t they just a little heavy?”

Just as later, in the studio, the world with its well-defined relations is held at arm’s length. There are only small, day-to-day transformations to make. A frowning brow, a doubtful moue, and the singers will look for what is not working, discard it, and develop something else. Although in fact absent, this is how the public acts on the singers. Even if the latter do not agree with the artistic director, even if they have other solutions to suggest, they are permanently obliged to anticipate the points of view of those who are looking at them so as to incorporate them into their own personalities. The relationship between the artistic director and the singers is a first studio: a two-person universe in which mini artist/public relationships are constructed.

Soon, the producer has nothing left to say. It is enough to show a bit of reserve here, to let enthusiasm flag there, for the singers to anticipate the reactions and to redouble their efforts to please. The mediation works. It has taken. We can see that at the price of transforming themselves, from the inside, they will one by one renounce any small protective measures and stand naked before the other’s desire. Dispossession, manipulation? On the contrary, the most intense interior work: the incorporation of the public—even if the public is only one person so far—realized by an interposed mediator. The young singers get to know intimately their own little quirks, fixations that they alone have and that are insignificant for others, and to know those impasses or resignations in the face of the “we will see” that conjures images of the chopping block. A psychological, moralizing vocabulary? Of course it is. It is not a question of changing the theory according to needs but of showing under what conditions the setting up of certain relationships renders active normally inert categories. What goes before this running up against the obstacle of the intermediary is a development, a more and more impassioned mobilization of the will to please, now entirely channeled into anticipating the reactions of the artistic director.
Here, of course, the producers play the role of the public. This is a paradoxical role, since it permits them reciprocally to transform the candidates into actors—that is, to make them enter into their own roles. But their relationship does not reduce to this role-playing psychology, which could never explain its own effectiveness. Now that things have started up, the singers begin circulating along a network whose resources they will integrate, mediation by mediation. The framework offered by the artistic director for the game of apprentice-star is not a closed universe, a stable world wherein each is the mirror of the other. It is a scene that develops by bringing within the reach of the actor a progressive series of means, techniques, relationships, experiences that can be incorporated one at a time. Only the audience and the singer, in their final meeting, read the scene as a mere isolated universe, cut off from reality by collective fusion. The mediators who keep things going know that the scene works only because there are a thousand adjustments that hold it in place. What the scene less clearly indicates—since its task is to stop them, to fix them in place—is the recurrence and the reciprocity of the relations of the intermediaries, reciprocity first of all. It is clear that if artistic directors place themselves between the artist and the public so that these two blind people can see through them to each other, the young singer is the obstacle the producer runs up against in the desire to attain the public. Success is realized by working on the resistance of the artist. Experience has proved over and over again that the producer can predict a potential public. However, the producer cannot really see it without going through the process of recomposing it in miniature, inside the artist.

The same thing goes for the recurrence of the intermediaries. The intermediaries pull everything back to the relationship that they mediate between two elements. In effect, if we displace the focus of our attention from the intermediaries to one of the poles that they hold together, we can no longer see anything unless it is shown to us by new intermediaries. On the artist’s side there are lyricists, arrangers, sound engineers, a new person each time some new element needs to be dealt with: music, orchestra, sound or words, staging. On the public’s side, the recurrence of intermediaries is no less open—whether you are talking about the media or the stage itself. The knowledge that the producer provides is not some magical intuition of the public. It is the possibility of using, according to need, channels that already exist: techniques whose effects are known, professional guarantees, a network of relationships, a technical circuit, a mass of savoir-faire, publics already constructed. They string together concrete mediations. Wherever one is, as soon as it is a question of realizing the singer’s “public,” the interme-
This concept of public is a simple abstraction, which composes all the mediations once the singer and producer have assembled them.

This process is amplified in the studio. The principle of the equation is to render what is absent active, to use an unknown term as if it were known. Although no one yet knows what they will be, the public can enter into relationships; be added on; divided; combined with a singer, notes, and sounds. It has been assumed that “artistic director = x (public),” and the variable x is adjusted to the others in a trial-and-error sequence. Music, the Public, and the unthinkable relationship between the two has been left at the door. All that remains is an artistic director who has a disagreement with the arrangers and discusses it with them, while the musician or the sound engineer comes along and gives his or her opinion or proposes some other solution. So much the worse for treatises on harmonics, the logic of lyric writing, or the composer’s sensibilities. Outside of the studio-laboratory the entities were clear and strong (Art, the Public, the Market, Technology) and their relationships were incomprehensible; in the studio, the act of equation introduces variables everywhere but constructs the relationships between them very clearly. The world as a whole is excluded and then reconstructed locally, in a series of punctuated relationships between the actors. The double meaning of the word actor serves perfectly to designate these producers, whose action can be entirely characterized in terms of the representation they are able to create.

(3) Going Out into the World

After having served first as an isolation tank, then as a place for gathering bits and pieces in order to reconstruct relationships, the studio is transformed into a machine for dissolving its own walls so as to diffuse its experience along ever longer channels. In effect, the equation that served to introduce the public into the song must also be able to introduce the song to the public. If it renders the opposition between the music and the public inoperative, it also disqualifies the separation between production and diffusion. These two epochs must be analyzed in the same terms. The incorporation of heterogeneous elements into a musical object becomes a work of the same order as the incorporation of a musical object into heterogeneous social practices. In other words, the simultaneous operation of production/consumption must be analyzed as a whole, and not as two successive operations, which would prevent us from understanding either one. There is no difference between an “internal” analysis of the forces at work in the song — one that sees it as being
good or bad—and an “external” analysis of the forces brought into play by the producers so that a song climbs up the hit parade.

Let us come back to the procedure of localization/extension that the creation equation has managed to materialize. By simplifying the world, it also simplifies the task of those who seek to understand creativity. This latter is only radically unthinkable (and thus either denied and referred to reproduction or made transcendent and referred to something inexpressible and superior) when the analysis itself is caught between the worlds constructed by the actors. If analysts merely reinforce with intellectual constructions what the actors have assembled, then they are always behind them. The very logic of their perpetual rationalization makes creation, according to their tastes, either an awful spreader of disorder or a seductive anarchist. If one freezes order (into musical language, social determinism, reproduction) then one will always be faced with a dilemma of one’s own making: reduction or disorder. To create, one needs only a place (and a lot of work). Leaving Art and Culture to their painful divorce, the producers localize music, the public, technology. First of all, they have to follow step by step the process of trial and error that has already gone on in the studio. There is no mysterious great leap to the public except when one imagines that it is excluded a priori from production and is sufficiently explained by the rules of music, the laws of the marketplace, and the tricks of the trade. According to our analysis, the public is no longer external to music; it remains a variable throughout the equation, when the producers have pushed their trial-and-error method in the studio to its limit and when there is no way of proceeding any further therein. The real public takes the place of the remaining \(x\), when what all this amounts to can be seen. But this does not happen all of a sudden. The public is not an abstraction that comes along (or not) at the end of the route to sanction the work of production: it is a circle of actual auditors that is gradually widened. The groping forward continues, following the trial-and-error procedure that allows one to get closer to a good definition of the public for a given recording.

I remember the song “De toi” by Lenorman, one of his first hits. We had wrapped it up, and I had other people listen to it; I was really happy. Every time that I had someone listen it went over really badly! That amazed me, because I was sure that it was a good number. I remixed it ten times, but it was always the same story; I could not understand it. And then I changed the structure of the song: the chorus that came after ninety seconds went to the beginning. I had people listen to it again, and everyone thought that it was terrific! [Hennion, 1981, p. 81]

“I had people listen to it.” Here is the first circle of real listeners, a little larger than the artistic director alone. A bit more of the public is introduced
into the song, so as to determine a few coefficients in the equation (coefficient: elements that work together efficiently). There is no rupture here with the work that has gone on before, when the artistic director was the singer’s only public, then when the studio professionals occupied each, in turn, the place of the public with respect to their colleagues’ work. Now the circle includes a few friends, some other artistic directors, the house’s listening committee, trade people, or some account’s secretary who acts as a guinea pig; and then the promotion department, whose work consists precisely in prolonging the diffusion channels. It is necessary to underline that the analysis does not bifurcate here according to whether the song is successful or not. This is not the moment to leave the harassed producer to take up our position above the mêlée and to seek the determinants of success in grand theories.

This internal promotion of the record is really important. It serves at once to associate those who are going to have to promote it to the conception of the record (we want it to be a little bit theirs so that they want to fight for it), and it serves to test initial reactions, to see who is going to go for it. [Hennion, 1981, p. 81]

Things could not be clearer: the work of production continues, that is, the production of the record and its public, together. There comes a moment when it is no longer possible to go back into the studio to make corrections; all the sound elements of the recording, locked into place, become constants. But the song continues along the path of production/consumption. It cannot be reduced to a wavy line scratched into wax. You still need to try its effect, to see what it evokes, who likes it. The song itself becomes one of the bases of a wider series of trial-and-error sequences, for example, constructing the singer’s career:

Slowly and surely you make one single, then a second, then a third. . . . That really pisses them. Maxime (Le Forestier) might say to you: “They’re a bunch of bastards, they waited till I had eight records before they made my album! That’s incredible! And it’s the A side of my first single which made the album work . . . !” And he is completely wrong saying that. Because it is all those little singles that made the album a smash, they are what made it work. [unpublished interview]

The public, too, gets constructed little by little. The effect of the song, from the time of its first production/consumption by the professionals in the studio until the effect it has on radio and television producers and finally on the listening audience and buyers, each time is the measure that marks the end of a trial-and-error loop. It is one that works away at a calculation until it cannot offer anything more. Sometimes this happens very quickly. At the
time of the promotion, those who hear it think that the equation is indeterminate, the terms too vague; it would be easier to start over. Other times it converges, each new loop adds something, and the process goes ever faster. The record becomes an “objective” of commercials; it goes over well on the radio; the press likes it. Success comes along, not when producers finish what they intended to do, but when the product of their work escapes them. Ever more numerous and distant actors find it useful for their own work of production/consumption, thereby assuring the future of a record about which the producer soon has nothing further to say.

Thus success makes the record escape the bounds of this article, which is centered on the work of the artistic directors. I do not pretend to reduce what escapes them to what we have described after the song leaves the studio. Other actors construct new locales in other ways (the radio studio, the television set, the music-hall stage, the fashionable nightclub, the teenage disco), and one needs to study how they feel their own way forward to know what they do with a record. Here I will limit myself to suggesting that the idea of the localization/extension of a trial-and-error process is not restricted to the production of a record in the studio, but might be useful for describing the work of creation of any actor who is obliged to use objects that come from others and go back to others. This applies to the public itself: it is only called the public because it is an unknown. If we set out to observe its use of music, it is extremely likely that we will never find a public as such, but that we will find only producers: groups of “youths” (trendies, high school students, suburbanites) caught doing the active, collective work of localization/extension in order to construct for themselves their world on the basis of the world of others.

**Popular Music, Art, and Sociology**

The artistic director has been our operator. Artistic directors own the “knowing/acting” relations between music and the public. Their local procedures permit us to do away with overly ornate constructions (art, technology, the social, the economic, the cultural). For them, there are no more constructed orders, which can be placed in a learned hierarchy, which are autonomous or interdetermined. Instead, there is a punctuated succession of problems to solve.

I have deliberately refused to make any a priori distinction between art, popular music, and commerce. I have spoken only about popular music. It is
clear, however, that the equation I have constructed with respect to creation can easily be extended. It contradicts any theories that seek to reduce the objects produced to their generative principles, or to an autonomous structure, whether this be artistic, scientific, or technical. This could only be an infinite task, always pushed back by new productions. There is no need to conceive a whole genealogy for tracing the slightest variations of a tree of creation. There is only an infinite series of states of things, which are never entirely known, from which one extracts a set of elements to make some corrections and arrive at a new state of things. The boundaries are never filled in.

Faced with objects, a sociology that is either too timid or too brutal — still impregnated with essentialism or suffused with reductive fury — wastes its energy in indefinite oscillations, between globalization and localization of analysis, between social modes of production and consumption on the one hand and the punctuated strategies of the actors for getting themselves recognized on the other. On the one side and the other of what? Of objects. These formulations evacuate the fabrication of contents, leaving them as an immediate reflection or an arbitrary residue. The sociologist leaves the trouble of analyzing the mysterious autonomy of this arbitrary residue to others.

What goes on in the studio radically circumscribes academic pretensions to decide from an internal standpoint what must be separated, what must be linked, and what is equivalent. Such decisions are not the result of an intellectual choice. They are affectations, not affirmations. One needs operators to carry them out. Faced with this question, philosophers have displayed interest only in themselves: is it me, the knowing subject, who imposes my judgmental categories on the object, or do these objects have a being of their own that is imposed on me? The approach of the sociologist perhaps consists simply in introducing other actors between the observer and the observed. The “I say that A = B” of “idealist” thinkers is just as arbitrary as the “A = B” affirmed from outside themselves by “materialist” thinkers. A equals B only if the actor/operators produce this equality. The equality is the intermediary: the equal sign that must be placed between two different signs to give one the value of the other.

It is just here that popular music is exemplary. The equivalence between music and taste, between supply and demand, is what producers work together to achieve. Popular music has organized its production as the resolution of a multivariate equation: an equalization, not the discovery of a preestablished equality. In the studio, music is not on the one side with its
laws, with which one learns how to compose, and the public with its tastes, which can be measured, on the other. The task is not just to fiddle the controls correctly so that correspondence is assured. This kind of equality does not exist: it must be produced. This is how we would translate what the music industry professionals say with complacency but with common sense on their side: “If there were a rule for making records, everyone could do it.”

With their collaborators, a few tools, and their experience, the producers have access to an incoherent mass of known or controlled elements. None of these serves to guarantee the success of the new disc: neither the impact of the lyrics nor the rightness of the music, neither the producer’s intuition nor the results of surveys and hit parades, nor the network of good relations maintained with the media and sales outlets. The safest guarantee, and it is far from being sufficient, is the notoriety of the singer and of the professionals brought together. It is also what can most easily be interpreted as the best possible test, the full-scale test. The studio is an airlock between unknown and moving worlds, wherein one tries to deal on the same level with elements that have been brought in from the outside. Rather than seeing equality as the logical result of a parallelism between two known orders—such as music and taste—studio work proposes equivalences that are guesstimates, trials that work in the midst of many failures.

Any analysis of production that treats something as given that was not so for the producers is not pertinent to its object. It can only be enunciated because something has succeeded that could not succeed. Its very principle commits the anachronism of rationalization. It details in a learned way, as if known in advance, what the actor/operators had to fight long and hard for in their work, precisely because without this work, it could not be known. This is what so clearly demonstrates the failure of the thesis of arbitrary imposition (and its more brutal versions applied to popular music—browbeating, brutalization of the public, and so on) as well as the thesis of candid interpretation (popular music as a reflection of everyday desires, the eternal imagination, escape, and so on). In both cases, the relationship the producers have had to construct is given as an equality from the start. In the one case, music, record receipts, the tricks of the trade are reduced to a few known quantities, and the public follows on behind. In the other, it is the public with its demand for dreams that has no more secrets from producers—and the songs produced are simply props to hang the dreams on. Going beyond popular music, our analysis of studio work and of the role of the artistic director has tried to draw some consequences from the refusal to use these illegitimate anticipations of knowledge, in order to develop some tools more adopted to a “synchronous” observation of the work of creation.
And Sociology . . . ?

We have not avoided the reasoning of the actors like the plague. Rather, we have based our reasoning on theirs. They imagined, tested, and realized the relationships that we have tried to analyze. We have borrowed a correspondent from them, the artistic director. The director has worked for us. And what about the neutrality of knowledge, the blindness of the actors, the ideology that renders them biased?

It is a dubious neutrality indeed that immediately places sociology in the position of the supreme arbiter. By avoiding these troubled waters, theory can escape the incertitude of the elements. But it does so at the price of not knowing them, of having no effect on them with what it says, of not being part of the game. The concept of creation that we have defended has as a corollary the necessity of radically questioning another "natural" frontier, that which separates the sociologist from the actor. Far from being a blemish in our measurements, observers and their interaction with what they observe is the only way that we have of knowing—via feeling reactions to them. We ourselves create the barriers that prevent us from thinking about creation. If, in my example of the song, music is to one side, obedient to the laws of a rigidly hierarchical language (look in the musicology section of a bookstore) and if the lyrics are on the other, with their rhymes and reasons (see the semiology section), if we turn to yet another vocabulary (mythology, mass psychology, rites, the imagination) to describe the scene and its collective workings, while sociology takes on the strategy of the actors and the determination of tastes, then no concept we use has the slightest chance of being strong enough to encompass trees with such a huge trunk and such distant roots. Yet these distances do not exist when the actor/operators construct their own experiences of the real.

It conjures a fantasy of a microscope: I, sociologist, observe you. Whatever may be the sympathetic links that have allowed me to feel the forces that bear down on you, as soon as I turn my back, I reconstruct our relationship by crushing you between two slides. All you are now is microbes unaware of your own movements. Luckily, I am there to describe you to my colleagues. No, it is another ball game when the sociologist comes to share the daily work of the "professional." Ignorant sociologists have listened to knowledgeable actors speak of relationships known only to them—since they are the only ones who bring them into play. They are knowledgeable about their acts and are the actors of a form of knowledge. We should not take revenge for our initial ignorance by transforming those who know more than
we do into guinea pigs. The distribution of forces between observer and observed changes continually according to where we are. If we multiply our visits, we become knowledgeable with respect to others. We knit our own written network, we cut off, we approach, we regroup. We produce text; others produce music, science, or innovations. That gives us no right to create an impassable barrier along a road we have traveled a thousand times, in both directions if we have done our work well—the road between the place of the learned and that of the ignorant.

Notes

1. The STS bibliography is enormous; see below for a quick survey of the same orientation in cultural studies.
2. This is the tack that Gombrich (1963) takes when he criticizes Hauser.
3. Callon et al. (1984) later formulated this critique in analogous terms when Bourdieu applied his analyses to science.
4. See the theoretical frame proposed by R. Peterson and others (Peterson, 1976), in particular their studies on country music at Nashville. For painting, see, for example, Zolberg (1982).
5. The sociology of science has led the way here, by going into laboratories to capture “science as she is done” (Pandore 1983). Pasteur’s laboratory was also a machine for reconstructing the world (Latour 1982).
6. On these ideas of “intéressement,” see Callon et al. (1984).
7. A detailed analysis of this relationship can be found in Hennion (1981).

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