When Experience Becomes Form: On the Problem of Life and the Essay in Pop-Music of the Hamburger School

In a recent reflection on the origins of his career in music journalism, German public intellectual Diedrich Diederichsen recently framed his early affinity to pop music as largely contingent on surmounting the aporias of radical Marxism from the seventies.

Bei mir gab es nach einer Jugend in linken Organisationen eine Reihe von dramatischen Abgrenzungen. Ich wollte mit denen 1978 nichts mehr zu tun haben, ich habe die deutsche Linke gehasst. […] Doch das Gegenmodell einer radikal-populären Gegenwartsbezogenheit ohne irgendeine Normativität, dieser ganze Popgedanke, war nach 1982 ebenfalls an eine Grenze gestoßen, so dass sich die Frage stellte: Was kann man mit linken Diskussionen noch machen?

Under Diederichsen’s leadership from 1985 to 1990, the then still relatively obscure West German music magazine *Spex* sought to transcend this blockage through writing, and it was this concoction of poetics and post-Marxist thought firmly rooted in a political commitment to popular music where this struggle transpired. Taking its cue from Georg Lukács’s seminal Kantian reflections on the essay, the following essay considers affinities between the philosophical essay and what Diederichsen calls most recently “pop-music,” an expansive cultural constellation consisting of not just music journalism but also the actual music it venerates as well as its attendant images, performances, texts and narratives. The pop music of concern here is that of Diederichsen’s own habitus, namely Hamburg. Known not only for the music magazine *Sounds*, which later morphed into *Spex* but also a cadre of indie bands commonly lumped together as the *Hamburger Schule*, Hamburg’s music scene, in general, but its most successful acts, in particular, came to be known as the exceptional fount of “discourse-pop,” a sonic blend of North American alternative rock and, as I shall argue, the essay as Lukács had defined it: “The [essayist’s] moment of destiny…is the moment at which things become forms—the moment when all feelings and experiences…are melted down and condensed into form.” Looking specifically at Diederichsen’s writings from 1985 to 1993 in tandem with the early singles from what is arguably the Hamburg School’s most successful band, Blumfeld, this essay seeks to identify precisely how the aggregate “pop-music” struggled with distilling life within the framework of its “radikal-populären Gegenwartsbezogenheit” down to essayistic form. As shall be established in a series of border crossings from the pop essay to the pop song and back again, the failure of this essayistic pursuit of life in crystalline form—the soul—was not only ubiquitous, but also the very force that eventually drove its politics of everyday life into the ground.

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