Talk about Pop Muzik: Discussion of Enrico Terrone, ‘Listening to Other Minds: A Phenomenology of Pop Songs’, *BJA* 60 (2020), 435–453

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In ‘Listening to Other Minds’, Enrico Terrone provides an account of the mental activity in which we ought to engage to appreciate pop music. He argues that we should ‘play a game of make-believe’ (p. 452) in which we imagine that we can ‘hear … the mind’ of a fictional character (pp. 452, 440). We should use this ability to grasp the thoughts and feelings that the mind contains, and thus undertake ‘exploration’ of the character’s ‘inner life’ (p. 445). This article argues, first, that only a simplified version of the account is plausible; second, that its plausibility as a general account of pop music depends on a dubious conception of the ‘paradigm cases’ (p. 449); third, that its desirability as an account of a narrower range of cases is questionable; and, fourth, that it is motivated by unsuitable assumptions about representation in pop.

Pop music is endlessly protean, so Enrico Terrone’s attempt to prescribe an appreciative method applicable to all paradigmatic pop songs is a bold endeavour. It is also an unsuccessful one. The act of make-believe he recommends in ‘Listening to Other Minds’ (2020) is implausibly complicated, and even a simplified version is suitable only for appreciation of a small class of pop songs.1 Or so I say, anyway. To get the argument going, I’ll need to explain Terrone’s account, starting with the question of what he takes pop songs to be.

1. What’s the name of the game?

According to Terrone, songs are ‘those “thick” works of rock in which lyrics play a crucial role’ in establishing representational content.2 Despite this reference to rock, Terrone is really interested in pop songs: those songs, ‘whatever their musical style’, where ‘track construction’ via recording technology is one ‘primary object of [aesthetic] interest’, and representational content another (p. 436).

This characterization encompasses an enormous multitude of musical works. It isn’t completely trivial, since it doesn’t include all recorded songs: recordings of ‘classical

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1 All unkeyed citations are to Terrone’s paper.

2 Lyrics might play crucial roles unconnected to representation, but representation is Terrone’s focus (cf. p. 443). Interestingly, in the account of rock that Terrone uses to frame his characterizations, Gracyk emphasizes the relative unimportance of lyrics in rock (Gracyk 1996, 63–65, 104).
songs’ just relay a live performance, which remains the proper primary object of interest (pp. 443–444). All the same, the huge variety of the songs it does include seems bound to frustrate any attempt to prescribe a single way to listen to all of them. Indeed, Terrone’s presentation of his account is followed by acknowledgement that it only applies to ‘paradigm’ cases. We will come to that later, but let us first see the account.

Terrone argues that pop songs should be treated as fictions. Their fictional nature ‘first of all’, fundamentally, owes to the fact that they invite the listener to ‘imagine directly listening to the inner life of a fictional character’, using a ‘capacity to listen to other minds’; since nobody has this capacity ‘in the real world’, ‘the world that pop songs represent … [is] a fictional world’. (pp. 440–441). We should regard singers as ‘actor[s] playing a character’ in this world, and lyrics as representing ‘the thoughts and feelings that constitute the fictional character’s experience’ (p. 438). The things that are true in the fictional world—the fictional contents of the song—mostly comprise these facts about ‘the character’s inner life’, specifically its ‘affective and cognitive dimension’ (p. 444). By grasping them, listeners can access ‘a series of experiential perspectives’, with which they can play ‘the game of exploration of the inner life’ (p. 445). This game does not involve imagining yourself having the character’s thoughts and feelings. Instead, ‘one fictionally experiences’ the ‘affective states’ of a character, from within their perspective, ‘mediated by [their] subjectivity’ (pp. 445, fn. 33; 444).

That expository paragraph was heavy on quotation to show that Terrone really is proposing the account that I will now put in my own words. The mental activity involved in appreciating pop songs is one of imagining of yourself that you (are in a fictional world where you) can hear other minds. You then employ that fictional capacity to listen to a mind belonging to a (fictional) character in that world, specifically to their affective and cognitive states. You go on to adopt the character’s experiential perspective by imaginatively experiencing those affective and cognitive states, from that character’s point of view. You thus explore the inner life of that character.

No point prevaricating: I find this account obscure, in particular the prescription that you imagine employing a capacity to hear other minds. Terrone labels his account a phenomenology, which suggests that it is supposed to capture the conscious, deliberate acts and experiences in which listeners ought to engage—not just implicit imaginings in which we might be unknowingly engaged. Trading observations about what experiences are like is often futile; nonetheless, I can report that, in thirty-odd years of listening to pop, I have never ever consciously imagined that I am able to hear inside the mind of a character. But suppose that I have been doing it wrong all this time: the further problem is that I have very little idea what Terrone is telling me I ought to do. He says that I ought to imagine

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3 Though one might question this distinction; folk records and live albums will complicate it.

4 Terrone sometimes talks about ‘the exploration of fictional worlds’ rather than ‘inner life’ as the aim (e.g. p. 443). I take it that, since the fictional worlds mostly consist in the inner life of characters, to explore the latter is to explore the former.
deploying a capacity that I do not really have, but what grasp can I possibly have of this counterfactual capacity such that I can imagine deploying it? How can I imagine being able to ‘directly experience[e] events in the inner world’ of someone in the literal, telepathic manner he suggests? (p. 440). 5

By way of elucidation, Terrone offers a comparison with docudramas. Docudramas are ‘fiction films about real events’. They ‘supply perceptual standpoints on the events represented that were not available in the actual world’. ‘Likewise’, he says, ‘pop songs about real events … supply an auditory access to minds … that could not be available in the actual world’ (p. 441). But this is not much help. In engagements with docudramas, we imaginatively employ a capacity we actually have, visual perception, in a way that the real world did not happen to offer us. A parallel with pop songs would invoke our actual capacity to use auditory information to adopt perspectives, and treat songs as providing information and perspectives that the world did not happen to offer otherwise. This is very different from being asked to listen to other minds, given that ‘there is no such capacity in the actual world’ (p. 441). So the comparison does not clarify the obscurity.

The comparison with docudramas and the suggestion that you imagine deploying a counterfactual capacity both occur when Terrone considers how to accommodate songs about real events described from the perspectives of real people. Such songs are clear counterexamples to his initial claim that pop songs are opportunities to access the perspectives of fictional characters. The suggestion seems motivated by a wish to acknowledge that some songs are about real people, and yet maintain a unified conception of what makes pop songs fictions; all pop songs are fictions ‘in virtue of the fictional way in which they make us experience’ (p. 441). Besides the problematic obscurity, this account also implausibly implies that you should engage with pop songs by constructing a baroque structure of nested acts of imagination, incorporating layered fictions and the use of imagination within an imagined world to occupy the perspective of imagined minds. Terrone’s suggested procedure involves a slide from ‘listening to’ other minds to occupying the perspective of those minds, the world as essentially mediated through their subjectivity (p. 444). And this latter act seems, in his view, to be a matter of using one’s imagination. So you should imagine using both a counterfactual capacity and your imagination in an imagined world.

Given these issues of complexity and obscurity, it would be best to treat the suggestion about hearing other minds as a metaphor whose literal value is the imaginative adoption of others’ perspectives—an imaginative act of familiar character, which can be exercised with respect to both fictional and non-fictional perspectives. 6 This leaves two options for

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5 I can imagine that I am telepathic, perhaps, but not the experience of being telepathic. Compare the distinctions drawn by Nagel (1974) and Paul (2014) between imagining that you are a bat or vampire, and genuinely imagining being one.

6 The idea that we somehow use imagination to adopt others’ perspectives is explored thoroughly by e.g. Currie and Ravenscroft (2002); Goldman (2006). It is put to use by e.g. Nussbaum (1990); Chappell (2014); Johnson (2016); Bommarito (2017); Camp (2017).
explaining why songs about real minds are still fictions, both of which Terrone hints at. If he were inclined to ensure that the account remains unitary, he could insist that we do better to treat such songs as emanations from the minds of fictional personas closely associated with actual people, and thus that they are fictions because (despite appearances) they involve a fictional character. This is perhaps the most faithful simplification, since Terrone says that the ‘inner life of a fictional character’ is ‘the main object of experience’ when one is appreciating a pop song, and makes approving reference to persona theory (p. 439; fn. 19). Alternatively, if he were willing to accept disjunction, he could draw the right comparison with docudramas. What is counterfactual in docudramas is that one was or could ever have been in a position to deploy perceptual capacities just so. Similarly, Terrone could say that songs about real minds are fictional because they invite you to deploy your actual listening capacities in a counterfactual, hence fictional, scenario that the real world has not made available to you. The mind is not fictional, but the perspective is.

Whichever simplification is preferred, the important point is that some simpler version of the account is preferable to the baroque version. Importantly, both preserve the general fictional character of the account: proper appreciation of pop songs is a matter of exploring a subjective world, adopting a fictional perspective, belonging to a (fictional) character. The rest of my discussion is not about how we arrive at this endpoint, but about whether this is really the endpoint towards which we should be working.

Note the normative language in that previous paragraph and throughout the explication. Terrone’s account is explicitly normative. It is an account of ‘the proper aesthetic appreciation of songs’, what is involved in ‘properly playing the game’ (p. 443, original emphasis; p. 445). The account is the correct normative account because engaging in that game ‘would make the song most aesthetically rewarding’ (p. 445). I will later argue that this is not so even for songs where it might be plausible, but I first wish to argue that there is a huge number of songs for which it is not at all plausible.7

2. It’s not unusual

Terrone’s initial characterization of pop songs is very broad, and he concedes that his account is not applicable to all such songs. Besides songs involving real people, he addresses two other problematic categories: ‘narrative’ songs and ‘modernist’ songs. He also briefly considers songs sung by more than one voice. All these, he says, are ‘special cases’. Songs that his account covers are ‘paradigm cases’: as he puts it, ‘the representation of the inner life of fictional characters … is a “standard feature” of [pop songs], that is, a feature that they are expected to have … but some borderline cases might lack’ (p. 449).

So potential counterexamples are rhetorically presented as oddities, exceptions to the standard representational content of pop songs. However, taken as a descriptive claim

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7 Terrone assumes that the right way to engage with works is whatever way maximizes their aesthetic value. This view is controversial, and without it Terrone’s arguments look very shaky; but the account is dubious even if the assumption is granted. In favour of value-maximizing, see e.g. Davies (2006). For criticism, see Stock (2017, p. 96–101).
predicated on numbers, the idea that representation of the inner life of fictional characters is a ‘standard feature’ of pop songs is highly implausible. I do not have the willpower to show this by exhaustive analysis of every Billboard 100 song of the past seventy years, so I will instead employ Terrone’s own method of generating counterexamples: I will list and exemplify types of songs where such representation does not plausibly figure.

A preliminary question concerns which songs can count as counterexamples. Terrone’s characterization of pop encompasses a huge number of songs, but his range of examples does not extend far beyond the white rock ‘canon’, and temporally no further than 1995. Perhaps the account is really only meant to cover songs of this ‘canonical’ sort, and perhaps it is true that songs in that narrow canon are paradigmatically as Terrone says. But I am not convinced that even that is so. I will offer an example for each type of song drawn from the same narrow canon as Terrone’s examples.

Let us first return to songs involving real minds. Many songs refer directly and explicitly to the actual singers: for example, The Spice Girls’ ‘Wannabe’ (1996). The song includes a section which directly reports information about the preferences, predilections, and personalities of the band members themselves, sung by a band member who teasingly withholds such information about herself. We are not invited to treat all of this as the thoughts and feelings of a character: a real person, Mel B, directly and literally tells us what her friends actually like (A canonical example is Prince’s ‘My Name Is Prince’ (1992)).

A related, huge, problematic category is that of songs which are manifestly autobiographical. Consider, for example, almost the entire oeuvre of Taylor Swift. Swift explicitly presents her songs as inspired by, derived from her life; the various people they feature are actual people. ‘Bad Blood’ (2014) is about a grudge that she herself held towards Katy Perry (Carly Simon’s ‘You’re so Vain’ (1972) is a canonical example).

Such songs are highly troublesome for Terrone’s account. The account insists that we treat pop songs as having fictional content. As suggested above, there are plausibly two ways in which the content of autobiographical songs could be treated as fictional. One would be to treat them as expressions of the thoughts of fictional personas, who happen to be closely coincident with actual people. But, while you could do this, it really seems that you are missing the point of autobiographical and self-referential songs if you do so. It could well be that Em in the place does not in fact like it in your face, and that ‘Emma Bunton’ is a persona for Spice Girl purposes. But the point is that, to appreciate the song, we are meant to believe this of Emma Bunton herself.

Terrone could, of course, argue that intentions are irrelevant; you would find these songs most rewarding if you treated them as insights into the minds of fictional characters, rather than access to the thoughts of actual people. I disagree. First, it seems to me that these songs are more aesthetically satisfying, because more direct, when they are treated as personal communications. Of course it matters that ‘You’re So Vain’ is what Carly Simon actually thinks about someone real; that’s part of its enduring fascination. Second, there are some autobiographical songs that depend for their aesthetic effect on a complicated

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8 And innumerable rap songs, such as Snoop Doggy Dogg’s ‘Who Am I? (what’s My Name?)’ (1993).
and continuing dialogue across songs among artist, fans, and critics. Take, for example, Britney Spears’ ‘If You Seek Amy’ (2008). You will not get the aesthetic effect, you will not be aesthetically rewarded, if you do not interpret the song as an actual response to critics from the real person who is Britney Spears (canonical example: Wings’ ‘Silly Love Songs’ (1976)).

Alternatively, instead of appeal to personas, it could be said that autobiographical songs have fictional content because they give you counterfactual access to thoughts and perspectives that, in actual fact, you do not enjoy access to. But this is false. ‘Bad Blood’ does not provide counterfactual access to Swift’s thoughts about Perry; the song precisely is such access. What more direct access could there be? We are being given factual access to the actual thoughts of an actual person. There is nothing counterfactual about it.

It will not help to insist that this access is fictional because you have to imagine the thoughts and feelings the songs express in order to grasp them. In almost every human interaction, we have to make an inferential leap from what we see and hear to grasp of the other person’s thoughts. My point is that what we get from autobiographical songs is a basis for inference of the same quality and solidity as anything else we ever get.9 If we generally infer by imagining, as one popular perspective suggests, we do so with songs, too; if we don’t, we don’t. Either way, fictionality is usually characterized by reference to a different and specific kind of imagining, and so the involvement of this inferential kind of imagining would not secure the fictionality of autobiographical songs.10 All in all, autobiographical and self-referential songs comprise a huge category and do not ‘represent the inner life of fictional characters’.

Consider next songs with political, moral, inspirational, or minatory messages, such as Beyoncé’s ‘Formation’ (2016), TLC’s ‘Waterfalls’ (1994), or Dua Lipa’s ‘New Rules’ (2017). Their representational content consists primarily in a message that we are invited to understand and endorse. You could, if you wished, imagine that the message was the product of the mind of a fictional character whose thoughts you can explore. But why would you? What aesthetic value is gained or added by doing so, rather than treating the song as a straightforward representation of its message? The point, again, is not about whether you grasp the messages by imagining the contents; the point is about whether you engage properly with the song by imagining that the messages are the contents of the mind of a character, and treating the character’s perspective as the primary object of aesthetic interest. I claim that you don’t (canonical example: almost anything by Woody Guthrie, or Tracey Chapman’s ‘Talkin’ ’bout a Revolution’ (1988)).

9 There are obviously differences between listening to a Taylor Swift song and listening to your friend explain a professional grudge, and you do different things to grasp the message in each case. The point is that both are non-fictional.

10 Terrone rejects Walton’s conception of fictions as defined by make-believe; he prefers a view on which fiction is ‘an imagination-based social practice’, which he attributes to García-Carpintero (2019) and Abell (2020) (p. 442, fn. 25). Either way, a special kind of imagining defines fictions. On some views, fiction is not defined by imagination, e.g. Friend (2012); Matravers (2014). These views are not germane here, since Terrone clearly thinks fiction is related to imagination. For discussion of all these views and a case in favour of a view based on instructions to imagine, see Stock (2017, ch. 5).
And consider, also, songs that articulate straightforward descriptions or declarations about countries, cities, people, animals, or whatever (not ‘narratives’, not stories, just descriptions). Certainly there are songs in this vein that could plausibly be taken to express the perspective of a fictional character, but there are also many that are just directly about their object, and where nothing is added by treating the description as being from the perspective of a person; arguably, indeed, the declarative force of the description is lost if it is treated as perspectival. Katy Perry’s ‘California Gurls’ (2010) does not express the subjective perspective of a fictional character on women from California; it makes straightforward, purportedly objective declarative claims about them. A canonical example is The Beatles’ ‘Blackbird’ (1968).\footnote{McCartney has offered different accounts of ‘Blackbird’. In one telling, it is very straightforwardly about a blackbird he heard singing in India. In another, it is a metaphor concerning racial tensions in the USA. I don’t think the second interpretation would be any more favourable to Terrone’s cause, but metaphorical songs are too complicated to address here.}

We have thus far considered song-types with fairly thick representational content that could be taken to represent the inner life of a fictional character; the contention in each case has been that to do so would be to miss the point of the song, and thus to miss aesthetic rewards it affords, while adding no compensatory reward. But there is also a rather loose and rather large category of songs that have no real cohesive thread to them, but are lyrically composed of fragments, phrases, choruses, tics, chants, exhortations, instructions, and so forth. Examples include Beyoncé’s ‘Countdown’ (2011), Azealia Banks’ ‘212’ (2011), or Baha Men’s ‘Who Let the Dogs Out?’ (2000). These are pop songs by Terrone’s lights: the lyrics are crucial in establishing their representative content. But they do not do so by representing an inner life, and it is hard to see how you could even begin to take them as doing so, even if you were perversely minded to do so. They are too fragmentary, too incoherent, too impersonal. It could be that this is just what Terrone means by ‘modernist’ songs; if so, my point is that the category is huge and mainstream, not a small set of curious diversions from the pop norm.

Given the enormous combined size of the categories I have mentioned, it is clearly false that pop songs standardly represent the inner life of a fictional character. Arguably, it is actually songs that present a well-developed fictional character that are the exceptional outliers. More likely, though, there is just no fact about which of the many subject matters that pop songs can have is paradigmatic or standard; there are no core cases, outliers, exceptions on that score.

At least, all that is so if Terrone’s claim that character-content is ‘paradigmatic’ is taken as a descriptive numerical claim. It could be that the claim is implicitly normative. Perhaps Terrone thinks that character songs ought to be considered paradigmatic, because they embody the best that pop music can be. Now, first, if this is the idea, we need an extra argument. For if the idea is that such songs ought to be considered paradigmatic because they yield the most aesthetic reward when treated in the prescribed manner, the case for this treatment being the most aesthetically rewarding approach to take to pop cannot be that it is the approach most suited to paradigmatic songs. The circularity is
clear. A further argument would be required to show that this is the kind of pop song with the most potential aesthetic reward.

Second, it seems to me that the prospects of such an argument are dim. A great many of the cases mentioned above are just as rewarding and rich as any that Terrone adduces, and are only so if you do not treat them as expressive of a fictional inner life.

Third, it is at least arguable that the kind of song on which Terrone focuses is a poor candidate for being the most rewarding kind of pop song qua pop song. As his comparisons to film and poetry suggest, the songs that present replete inner lives tend to do so through via thickly representational, coherent lyrics that could stand alone on a page or voice-over. Representation of an inner life may well be an aesthetic good of such songs, but it is achieved through means independent of the song’s musical nature: the bit of the song that does the relevant representational work is detachable. So, arguably, if we want to explain what is special or distinctive about the aesthetic rewards offered by pop songs, such songs are exactly the wrong kind with which to start.

But, anyway, Terrone does not seem to make the paradigm claim on normative grounds. Explicitly, the case for the fictional treatment is that it suits paradigmatic songs, and these songs are paradigmatic because, numerically, they form the greatest part of the pop world. I have argued that they are absolutely not paradigmatic, normal, or standard. This calls into question the appeal of Terrone’s account. It is probably true, but pretty uninteresting, that the account tells us something about how best to extract aesthetic reward from the limited number of songs where the lyrics clearly, unambiguously, tell a story from a perspective, such that one is obviously meant to imagine the perspective of a fictional character. The account tells us nothing about songs that clearly do not have such content, and that is a great many songs. So is the account too narrowly applicable to be interesting? Well, it would still be interesting if, given cases where it is one among competing appreciative approaches, it plausibly yields more aesthetic reward than the competitors. I will now argue that it does not.

3. What difference does it make?

To argue that Terrone’s prescriptions do not yield the most aesthetic reward, I need test cases and a stalking horse. For test cases, I need songs that neither obviously resist nor clearly invite the engagement prescribed by his account. Happily, there are many such songs: songs with relatively thick representational content, invoking a first-person perspective, describing thoughts or feelings, none of which quite forces you to suppose that a fictional character’s point of view is being represented and offered as the chief object of interest. Examples include Carly Rae Jepsen’s ‘I Really Like You’ (2015) and Robyn’s ‘Dancing On My Own’ (2010). The first person is used; the lyrics plausibly describe thoughts and feelings, which you could attribute to a single person; they do so in sufficient detail that you could get a reasonable grasp of an inner life by treating them so. However, compared with the songs Terrone invokes, such as Pulp’s ‘Disco 2000’ (1995), there is no clear imperative to say that the songs represent the inner life of a person—it is not obvious that you miss the point of the song if you do not treat them so.
To test such cases, I also need an alternative account to compare with Terrone’s on the grounds of aesthetic reward. My stalking horse is the direct account. The direct account, like Terrone’s, treats pop songs as representations of thoughts and feelings. But it says that songs are best appreciated as direct, immediate expressions of them, rather than representations of an inner life of a person to whom the thoughts and feelings belong. To appreciate a song, you ought to grasp the thoughts and feelings that it expresses. Of course, on Terrone’s account, you should also grasp those feelings, but you are invited to grasp them qua elements of the inner life of a fictional character; it is that inner life that is the primary focus of attention. On the direct account, it is the thoughts and feelings themselves. The direct account does not deny that a fictional character is sometimes involved. If the thoughts and feelings expressed by a song are quite clearly the particular thoughts of a person(a), then grasping them properly involves grasping them as such. But the direct account does not demand that all thoughts and feelings must be treated so. It suggests that, in many cases, it is better to cut to the feeling.

The direct account has antecedents in Kendall Walton’s notion of ‘thoughtwriting’. He argues that much poetry and song is intended ‘to put words in readers’ mouths, rather than to have the reader observe a fictional speaker’ (Walton 2015, p. 66). Just as a speechwriter fashions words to be employed by others, poets and songwriters often intend ‘to put words into readers’ mouths or minds, to give them a text by means of which they can express, articulate sincerely held opinions. … [The poet] does not expect readers to recognize a fictional narrator … the reader genuinely expresses genuinely felt convictions’ by using the work in the intended manner (Walton 2015, p. 63). The direct account extends this notion from conviction and opinion to thought and feeling: it suggests that pop songs often offer the listener the chance to grasp, try on, and express a thought or feeling, without intervention by a fictional intermediary.

Either the direct or the fictional account could be adopted as a mode of engagement with songs such as ‘I Really Like You’, and it is not immediately clear which would be more aesthetically rewarding. On both approaches, you would have to grasp the thoughts and feelings being expressed. On the direct account, that grasp is the whole of engagement; on the fictional account, the point is to posit a fictional character whose thoughts they are, and treat the song as the expression of their inner life. The direct account is simpler, involves fewer steps, and is, I would suggest, more true to the phenomenology of listening to this song (again, I do not think I ever consciously posit a fictional character to whom the thoughts belong, and such conscious positing must be part of Terrone’s account if the word ‘phenomenology’ is being used to describe it in any substantive sense). But none of that is decisive. We need to look more closely at comparative aesthetic reward.

The first thing to note is that, given the similarities between the approaches, the fictional account would come out as the more rewarding if adding a fictional persona to the stock of things one grasps were always more rewarding. But there is no good reason to think that you derive any more aesthetic reward from imagining a person behind the feelings you grasp. If you can get the feeling of the Jepsen song—the sort of delicious anxiety of not wanting to rush but not wanting to wait—what is added to your appreciation by supposing that there is some fictional character feeling that feeling? Why would such attribution be more aesthetically rewarding? I do not see a general argument for this in the
case of works that represent feelings, and I do not see a specific argument in the case of pop. There is no reason to think exploring an inner life is more aesthetically pleasing than simply grasping some thoughts without ownership being implied.

That leaves the two accounts level: it is not clear that the fictional account is more rewarding owing to its extra posit. And, if we consider a little more what pop music is and what it can do, we will see that the engagement prescribed by the direct account is in fact more rewarding.

Terrone’s quick characterization of pop gets at least one thing right: pop is not a distinctive musical style. Rock, soul, hip hop, country—name a style, you can make pop music in it. But pop songs do have a distinctive form, which emerged from technical and commercial constraints: the demands of radio, the limitations of the 7-inch single, and the aspirations to massive profit of artists, producers, and label owners. These factors provide a framework for pop: archetypical pop songs are short, catchy, arresting, with pretensions to universality and wide appeal. This framework lends itself to valorization of concision, intensity, expressiveness, and particular ways of employing musical devices such as repetition. All this is apparent when you consider what pop music is not. The haughty 1970s rock bands who wished to distance themselves from pop did so by refusing to release short songs or singles, and by valorizing complexity. Funk groups and dance producers use repetition for aesthetic effect, but there the effect depends on repetition at length; it is not intensity, but rather something like groove, that is the aim. This sketch of what pop is and what it does suggests that the thing that the best pop songs do better than any other kind of song is to distil and express a feeling in the most focused, direct, exact way. The strictures of the form demand clarity and concision, yet the ineffable particularity of feelings requires complexity and precision. The best pop songs, such as ‘Dancing On My Own’, manage to communicate pellucidly a highly particular feeling that is also instantly recognizable, graspable. (We might add that the best pop songs also distil the musical resources of other styles—pop is not its own style because it is the distillation of other styles.)

But if this is what pop does best, it is perverse to shift the object of interest from the feelings themselves to a fictional character having them. Far from being more aesthetically rewarding, such a shift puts a distance between you and the real reward on offer: the direct, immediate grasp of what a certain feeling is, or is like. Personas are besides the point. The special intensity of pop is best appreciated by treating it as pure, direct expression, not as reportage at a distance—just as the direct account suggests.

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12 For a discussion of genres as emergent from technical constraints and modes of engagement, see Demers (2010, ch. 6).
13 For discussion of pop’s use of repetition, see Middleton (1990, pp. 267–293); Middleton (2006, pp. 137–197); Hesmondhalgh and Saha (2013, pp. 95–97).
14 It is also a familiar trope that scenes and styles lose their ‘authenticity’ once absorbed into the world of pop. See e.g. Frith (1996, ch. 2); Shapiro (2005, pt. 5).
15 On repetition in funk, see Danielsen (2006) (explicit comparison with Middleton at pp. 156–158). On repetition in dance music, see Butler (2014, ch. 7).
Further, if pop is to pack so much into so little, it needs to make use of all the resources available to it. And the best pop does: lyrics, instrumentation, dynamics, structure, together expressing the feeling at the heart of the song. The direct account encourages us to just grasp the feeling; it thereby encourages us to just get hold of what is on offer, using all the materials presented. The fictional account, by contrast, focuses attention on lyrical content. This is because, if we are trying to grasp what a person thinks and feels, we naturally concentrate on what they are saying about the matter. Musical cues are not among the auditory information that we tend to use in order to get inside someone’s head. So, when we’re tasked with grasping what a fictional pop persona feels, the musical elements of a pop song become secondary to the lyrical ones. We treat the song less as a piece of music and more as a verbal report. So, again, adopting the fictional approach offers less aesthetic reward than the direct account. The direct account comes closer to treating pop as its own thing, rather than a derivative or shadow of some other art form.

Finally, we might note in favour of the direct approach that it is much more likely to generalize beyond its central cases. Most of the song-types mentioned above as challenges to the fictional account could be interpreted as expressing a feeling or thought, and inviting you to grasp that feeling directly and immediately. Take, for example, songs lacking a cohesive thread. Their fragmentary elements cannot be interpreted as showing the inner life of a character, but they can be understood as showing a feeling unowned by a particular person, and inviting the listener to grasp that feeling. Message songs, meanwhile, offer thoughts for listeners to grasp and express in just the unmediated way that Walton suggests—the way from which the direct account generalizes.

All in all, when considering songs where either account could prima facie be applied, the engagement with pop songs suggested by the direct account is likely to deliver more aesthetic reward than that suggested by the fictional account. There is no reason to think that adding a fictional persona to the imaginative mix adds aesthetic value; there is reason to think that doing so in fact diverts attention from what ought to be the focus of aesthetic interest, and undersells the unique aesthetic appeal of pop. The direct account, by contrast, captures better the value that inheres in pop, treats pop songs as songs, and has more chance of generalizing. I conclude that the fictional account does not, in fact, deliver the most aesthetic reward, except with respect to the very limited class of songs to which it is clearly suited.

I have to say that, in writing much of the above, I have felt as if I am belabouring plainly obvious points. It is just manifestly not true that pop songs generally invite you to explore a fictional inner life; adopting that mode of engagement clearly vitiates their special and unique appeal. And so the real puzzle is this: why would a smart philosopher, with a real feeling for the music they like, be motivated to deny these things, and instead construct such a baroque account of engagement with pop songs? (Remember just how convoluted the original version of Terrone’s account is.) A brief examination of this question might deliver a salutary lesson.

4. Why baby why

The implicit reasoning lying behind Terrone’s arguments goes as so: pop songs are artworks in the business of representation. If we’re in that business, we’re trading in make-believe—and so we’re trading in prescriptions to imagine, and to thereby access
a fictional world, and some facts about that world. The questions to answer about pop songs, then, are what games of make-believe they prescribe, which fictional worlds they involve, and what fictional entities we might there encounter.

It is a sign of the hegemonic status of Walton’s approach to representation, as elaborated primarily in *Mimesis as Make Believe* (1990), that most of this reasoning can simply be assumed as background. And of course it is not just Terrone who does this. Substitute any kind of representative art you like for ‘pop songs’, and the same reasoning likely lies beneath a good deal of recent work on it. But it is important to note that the reasoning really is assumed, and really can be denied. It is not analytically true that artistic representation works through make-believe, nor that all representations concern fictional worlds. And, indeed, pop songs are one kind of work where the assumptions really ought to be denied. If we think within this framework, we are bound to end up with theories like Terrone’s, on which the phenomena are gerrymandered and an implausible mode of engagement with them is pronounced. But there is no need to go looking for fictions; pop songs don’t need personas.16,17

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In fairness to Walton, it should be noted (1) that the criticism here is of a certain use of his framework and approach, one which he might not himself favour; (2) that there is nothing in Walton’s framework that demands we give a unified account of engagement with pop songs—that is Terrone’s innovation. A Waltonian could prescribe different games of make-believe for different kinds of song. I would remain dubious, however, that make-believe is at all germane to many cases.

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