

# In Search of Pop: From Seductive Beat to Global Ecstasy

by Yann Chateigné Tytelman / Florent Mazzoleni

In this e-mail exchange, **Yann Chateigné Tytelman** and **Florent Mazzoleni** discuss what are the stakes of “pop culture” today, extending from art and music to criticism. They address the forms it takes, its economy, its geography and its politics right from the birth of worldwide pop, ranging from the USA to Africa and back again, not overlooking the “French situation.”

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A discussion between Yann Chateigné Tytelman and Florent Mazzoleni

**A question of definition: Let's start with the postulate that the term “pop” is now devoid of meaning, or rather that it is used any old way, describing realities so extremely different that it defies any attempt to delimit it. While art historians debate the birth of Pop Art—did it occur in England, with Eduardo Paolazzi's early collages in the late 1940s or Richard Hamilton's paintings of the mid 1950s? Or New York, with Warhol's repetitive series of the 1960s? Or even Europe, with the many experiments being done at that time by the likes of Gerhard Richter, Martial Raysse, Michelangelo Pistoletto and Wolf Vostell?—people continue to say, even today, that a work, a song, or cultural object of any kind, is “pop.” Like “classic” and “modern,” pop now covers every period. It does not solely invoke a style, but also an ideology—“pop” is a way of being. Which therefore also suggests lifestyle (I'm obviously not referring here to a style of clothing, even if “camp” moved that way). Pop represents an attitude, a specific way of being, which transcends the field of art history. Nowadays it's employed in an almost obsessive way (in France we even say “it's pop,” the way we'd say “it's totally pomo” or “completely trash”). The term seems to be magical, covering contradictory realities, not necessarily involving language, referring to a situation totally shaped by the culture industries. This is precisely the point at which the word “pop” interests me, as a layered term: it simultaneously covers an historical definition, a cultural phenomenon, and a philosophy.**

As you just described it so well, the word “pop” today is simultaneously “an historical definition, a cultural phenomenon, and a philosophy,” maybe even a lifestyle and a way of being. In all these cases, the term has been considerably “rounded out,” extended to cover the greatest number. This roundness is evident in the terminology itself. In “pop,” you hear the sound of a balloon or bubble that bursts, not to mention the “balloon” associated with the comic-book idiom, among others. But before becoming pop and going down in history, this balloon had to “pop up,” becoming rounder and more welcoming. Some people even ascribed organic qualities to it, given the resonances of the term pop. This popping up implied a certain inventiveness associated with its birth, conceptualization, and existence—its dynamic expansion. Yet in music, painting, and photography, before bursting and being showered as an artistic expression or idea over the greatest number, an idea or creative work exists solely through the will of the person who first came up with it.

**Doesn't what defines pop—beyond all the simple, colorful, repetitive forms, the collage/montage techniques, the ubiquity of everyday items, the industrial-design**

**approach, and the play of text-and-image associated with the media, advertising, and sundry other contexts—doesn't what defines pop reside in the way it stages things, its schematic use and subversion of dominant forms?**

True, we could view pop as something that begins as underground agitation, a boiling up, which steadily rises in the form of a bubble before reaching the surface. So even when pop has become

a mainstream balloon, it still feeds on the underground, where its roots lie. I don't think, though, that it seeks to subvert dominant forms, those consensual, conformist forms of control. Pop aims, in essence, to exist, to hover and spread like the freely floating pollen of cultural creation. It reflects a certain freedom.

Of course, pop can be caged and controlled, but it can also return, deliberately or not, to the underground or turbulence from which it arose. Don't forget that the very notion of pop remains volatile, fleeting. Don't forget that a band as important and unfortunately overlooked as the Fugs were in France in the late 1960s was considered to be "pop" group. Today they've sunk back to the underground and obscure anonymity. And they're just one example among many.

**So what, then, do you think of the issue of "popular," whether it's "highbrow" or "lowbrow" culture, indeed of how much more intertwined the issue has become compared to the political debate that began in the '30s between an absolutist avant-garde (Greenberg) and a "democratic" art (Alloway)? Everything today seems more shifting, complex, ambivalent—today pop cannot be viewed in a naïve manner, with the same faith in industrialization, with a belief in the possibility of "rivaling" a system that re-appropriates just about everything. Pop can no longer be conceptualized independently of its ambiguous relationship to "popular" and "populist," to the process of mainstreaming every independent or fringe movement to the extent where very notion of community is seriously threatened.**

Our global mercantile society tirelessly monitors the fringes, checking seminal sites such as Myspace and Youtube, where the least cultural bubble of interest—pop—is dissected and meticulously commented upon by experts on the global pop culture. The communities that result from these forums and other sites seem to me to be just one form of global monitoring of pop expression. Paradoxically, there have never been so many possibilities and ways to express a pop culture, and yet its very essence seems to have been bled dry, even if its outer shells and other containers are now more appealing than ever.

**Would it be possible to define the various forms taken by pop, by which I mean pop in the past and pop today?**

Today, pop has become more global than ever. Formerly, the realm of pop was limited to the field of contemporary art and popular music. Nowadays, pop is present at every level of society, from advertising on subway walls to food packaging, via the internet, the design of cars, public transportation, and furniture—the radio and TV airwaves are full of "mainstream" pop. Paradoxically, the concept of "pure pop for now people," as invented by British musician Nick Lowe in the late 1970s, is now hackneyed. It's no longer part of the scene, having been replaced by less melodic and incisive forms of music. Meanwhile, Pop Art is now part of history, basically seen in museums rather than on the walls of cities; it has been replaced by more specific art trends that have nevertheless descended from pop.

Today people talk about a veritable pop "bubble," like a financial or real-estate bubble, which is about to burst. Previously, from the 1950s to the years just after the rock-'n-roll revolution—one of the twentieth century's biggest upheavals—pop was more difficult to grasp, even if it seemed more naïve and approachable. Nowadays, pop is excessively appropriated and disseminated, exploited by every marketing and advertising campaign.

Robert Wyatt summed up the whole thing for me in a remarkable way. "People complain that marketing controls pop and fashion these days. While it's true that pop can become very boring and standardized with stupid dances and silly haircuts, I still think pop music is very important, because it remains the music of young guys and girls who are getting to know each other. It's part of the way guys and girls see themselves, the way they become romantic toward one another. It's very serious. This may sound 'socially correct,' but pop is the people's music, people who are too busy to be really concerned about music, or who aren't really interested in anything else. But they share the common language of pop tunes, which are easy to sing."

This idea of seduction, which Wyatt raises, is very interesting. In its global sense—music, art, television, movies—pop is a romantic rite of passage. It corresponds to something Canadian

sociologist Erving Goffman discussed in his seminal book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Pop henceforth constitutes our natural setting, the soundtrack to our everyday lives. It's so vast and enveloping that we hardly notice it. It participates, explicitly or privately, in our rituals of interaction, our games of seduction. I think the romantic idea it conveys is crucial.

Similarly, Wyatt mentions the fact that the lyrics are easy to sing and remember. Simplicity and accessibility are some of pop's greatest qualities. A pop tune or image must be accessible, concise, and instantly memorable, so it can participate in a modernism that is increasingly visual and cross-referenced, where pop is constantly being stimulated.

**When we think of pop, we often think of the *ligne claire* graphic style used in the Tintin comic book, of the Beatles, of Beck, and so on. We associate it with a white male of indeterminate age and sexuality, with a social milieu, or medium, which is neutral, onto which fans can project their own fantasies. Pop is based on a "standard," on what can be interpreted and appropriated, at the risk of standardization. And yet alternatives inevitably exist, perfect examples perhaps being the various Afro-American figures in pop music, or even African pop itself, on which you've worked.**

A pop outlook and pop stimuli are constant and universal. Congolese pop songs often sing the praises of such-and-such brand of soap or detergent. The openness with which music and marketing joined forces in Africa in the 1960s is unmatched anywhere else in the world. Similarly, the sincerity and belief in pop music as a vector of spiritual elevation—without even considering any commercial recognition—was one of the constants of the golden age of Afro-pop, from the period of independence to the 1980s, the end of the vinyl era.

Music from Guinea, Mali, Senegal, Benin, Angola and the Congo reached a peak during that period, precisely because it offered an alternative to Western pop music. Along the way, this terrific Afro-pop music made it possible to "re-Africanize" all the Cuban, rock, soul, and funk music then hitting Africa, by using amplified instruments and modern techniques. A kind of pure essence of pop was forged that way—everyday music for dancing, partying, sharing, meditating, traveling, making love, or conveying propaganda—because it spoke to authentic, sincere emotions.

The worldwide conquest of pop music in the 1960s had the same impact as the arrival of African drums in Andalusia and Europe in the eleventh century, brought by Amoravid armies and their Moorish soldiers. These new, very intense war drums employed new rhythmic patterns that initially caused fright among the white, Christian armies of Castille.

These drums and the revolution they triggered slowly changed the way popular music was heard and played. Down through the centuries, drumming evolved from a warrior rhythm to an authentically seductive rhythm. In the 1960s, it was pop music, under the cover of modernism, that transmitted this seductive beat, which had been refined between Havana and New Orleans before coming to dominate all of Anglo-American pop music. It changed people's way of conceiving things.

**Therein lies the political ambiguity of pop, which exploits extremely codified forms, wears immediately recognizable masks, and speaks an apparently conservative language in order, obviously, to reflect them, to place them at a distance, and to make us aware of their reality. Where can we find alternatives to the dominant pop models, where should we look for artists who exploit other codes, other models, other commonplaces?**

Before you become "popular," you're usually unknown, independent, or underground. Even if the lines have become increasingly vague and shifting, today's major cultural corporations always manage to impose their products and their protégés. The choices they impose on the public, however, involve no concept of how long something will last. Yet one of the crucial criteria of pop culture remains, to my mind, a certain form of classicism, whether conscious or unconscious. This notion is linked to an authentic romanticism that stems directly from its seductive beat. And the rhythm of seduction—embodied by a drum, whether traditional, or a rhythm box, or sampler—is, in essence, "round," like a perfect pop balloon or bubble.

Paradoxically, a product that is imposed or forced on the public in order to set the fashion for a

season or a year rarely survives in the annals of pop. That kind of pop classicism has to be attained naturally. Paintings by Hockney and Basquiat, novels by Brett Easton Ellis, and tunes by Madonna and Prince were never imposed on people—they asserted themselves on their own, defining a certain form of pop classicism that is still totally relevant.

These alternatives call, I feel, for the rediscovery of certain roots, notably African. A self-reflexive look, and a greater awareness of modes of cultural circulation on both shores of what Paul Gilroy calls “the Black Atlantic,” are crucial for an understanding of our world, as well as the emergence and current dominance of pop.

**What operating modes are at work in the construction of pop? From a geopolitical and ethno-identity standpoint, could we envisage pop in the global era as a promise of transnational identity, a hyper-contemporary culture with a transformational potential, a set of industrial vectors that favor fundamentally modern forms and ideas?**

Starting in the 1950s and '60s, adopting pop—or becoming seduced by it—meant visiting exhibitions, hunting down interesting records, or keeping abreast of the cinematic “new wave,” to take pop’s three main channels of expression: pictorial, musical, and cinematic. In France, the covers of certain foreign singles even had a sticker labeling them as *Pop Music* in English, as though the English term was a vector of cultural legitimacy.

Although pop today is global, hyper-industrialized, mediatized, and sophisticated, it nevertheless remains open to creativity on the fringes, said fringes being ever less marginal and ever more mainstream these days, becoming a broad consensual movement with flabby underbelly and pathetic little convulsions. Around this main trend, obscure stuff can hit the spotlight more quickly these days, but sometimes falls back into obscurity even faster.

Fashion mags hungry for instant trivia are largely responsible for pop’s loss of identity as it becomes constantly more diluted and hackneyed. While there’s no doubt about its hegemony and universality, the romantic scope of pop’s message needs to be conceptualized, to see whether the seductive beat mentioned above—the rhythm of a song, movie, painting, book or photo—has withstood the effect of passing fashion and will become part of a pop culture that transcends borders and periods.

**So what should we think about the fact that pop culture is so heavily steeped in Anglo-American models? At a time of globalization, we are discovering various “marginal” models: Cambodian pop, Indian pop, Egyptian pop, and so on. We could also mention a few French pop figures. But aren’t they all based on other models? How can we explain this total domination—indeed, this fascination—this inability to define ourselves in any way other than a center/margin relationship?**

In France, the term *variété* —as in light music typical of a variety show—was long the label used for popular music, apart from a few performing artists of real international scope, such as Jacques Brel, Serge Gainsbourg, Françoise Hardy, Jean-Michel Jarre, Air and Daft Punk, not to mention the outlying phenomena of foreign pop as exemplified by Plastic Bertrand, the Variations, Johnny Hallyday, Nino Ferrer, the Teenagers and others. In terms of pop music, France has remained relatively isolated over the past half century.

As you’ve just pointed out, it’s true that fascination with, and domination by, the Anglo-American model still prevents French artists from clearly defining themselves in any way other than the center/margin model. Furthermore, those French artists who manage to make it in foreign markets always do so by using English, which is the absolute reference language, ever there were one, of the global model of pop.

In the United States, light music became known as “pop” in the hit parades. In the decades from the 1950s to the present, the term “pop” has evolved a great deal. Some underground artists now openly claim to be pop; they see themselves as being in the same category as performers like Madonna, Beyoncé, Jay-Z and Britney Spears. Even today, American charts are divided into white music (pop and country) and black music (rhythm-’n-blues). France, given its geographical position, notably vis-à-vis Europe and Africa, has always been at the center of a triangular relationship between a site of production and distribution basically concentrated in the U.S. and

Britain, with margins of acceptance reserved for “the rest of the world,” on the fringes of mainstream Anglo-American pop. This “rest of the world” remains global pop’s main market: the latest hip-hop releases from the southern U.S. are distributed in South Africa and Japan, just like the shirts of English soccer teams sold in the Far East and everywhere else in the world. By the 1960s, the Afro-pop music mentioned above, as well as pop from South America and Asia—and all forms of amplified, Westernized popular music—were already moving light years away from the massive standardization and homogenization of pop music that occurred follow the planetary success Anglo-American pop stars from the Beatles and Rolling Stones to Tom Jones and James Brown.

English is still the language of pop. Bambara, Wolof, Malinké, Lingala, Fon, and Kriolu just don’t have the same universal scope. Yet the bands of Atlantic-coast Africa, by adopting names that prominently feature components such as “super,” “band,” “OK,” “KO,” and “jazz,” also participated in an illusory pop modernity. The use of onomatopoeia unconsciously strengthened the pop connections apparently linking a dance band in Kinshasa to a painting by Roy Lichtenstein. The same thing occurred in Ethiopia as well as Thailand and Cambodia, not to mention Iran, Argentina, and Yugoslavia, that is to say everywhere that westernized pop music managed to penetrate and influence local creativity.

**In music, how should we conceptualize the ambivalent status of a “pop star,” ranging from the Beatles’ revolutionary grandstanding to the pure and simple megalomania of the late Elvis Presley or the wildly sectarian excesses of Charles Manson? Ultimately, all this relates to the gnostic tone of pop. Because if the star–fan relationship is sometimes irrational, that’s because the idea of pop star itself is related to certain ideas not totally alien to mysticism, such as communion, illumination, ecstasy, and so on.**

**The Dutch graphic design team Experimental Jetset wrote, in a great article, that pop music’s roots go back to prehistoric sun-worshipping cults, an idea which helps to conceptualize the notion of belief outside a Christian context and which also often applies to pop. The relationship between religion (or religious feelings), culture, and politics is much tighter in the United States than in Europe. I’m thinking of Sister Corita Kent, an American artist who combined activism, religious commitment, and artistic practice in a project that was clearly part of the tradition of the connection between left-wing progressivism the grass-roots religion.**

Today pop is a heartening form of democratization. I think the notion of elitist pop versus vulgar pop is now outmoded. Pop now conveys the broader notion of culture, immaterial as well as material culture. The term is so ambiguous that pop idols such as the Beatles, Madonna, Salvador Dali and Andy Warhol can be found in millions of homes, available in a colossal number of forms. Yet at the start, their artistic pretensions didn’t involve seducing the greatest number. You don’t think “pop,” you become it, through a complex system of exchanges in which cultural pundits and the general public both play a part, in alternation. The notion of pure pop, like the “sunshine pop” that incarnated the eternal happiness of California—the final rampart of the modern Western world—is in fact a pagan rite of belief in pop music’s power to save, extend, indeed change lives. Pop was able to de-sanctify the concept of ecstasy by offering a model of ritual interactions between people close to everyday life. That’s why pictures of pop icons have replaced images of religious icons in people’s homes. By offering a transcendent visual or sound experience, pop icons exist here and now, in flesh and blood, in a more accessible fashion than the countless relics of a monotheistic past.

**That leads to another notion specific to pop culture—namely, fans. People often recount the anecdote of a man who, dying of AIDS, called out to the Beach Boys’s lead singer on his deathbed, mumbling “Brian Wilson is God.” There are several points here I’d like to raise with you. The first is the notion of personality cult or hero worship, the question of image and appearance that seems to have been with pop right from the start. The second is the political aspect of that cult, the master-slave relationship it induces between star and fan. This issue can also be addressed in the fine arts, thanks to**

**phenomena such Duchamp, Warhol, and Koons.**

Hero worship is inherent to pop. The transcendence of pop icons reinforces polytheistic pop music, in accordance with the polyrhythms of the African Atlantic that, via Cuba and New Orleans, now influence much of contemporary musical composition. We have thus gone from the various rhythms of seduction to a capacity for global, multidisciplinary enchantment: a very pop ecstasy. This ecstasy calls for a total mastery of image—from typography to marketing, from press to personal look and everything that follows. How could we ever have imagined that four young lads from Liverpool would still see their names and faces adorning tee-shirts sold to teenagers the world over—forty years later?

That demonstrates pop's hegemony over consumer habits, not only tee-shirts but especially attitudes and lifestyles. Above all, we buy an image, galvanized by pop polytheism. As a well known saying goes, people buy only what's for sale.

From this standpoint, the master-slave relationship you mention has now primarily shifted to the producer-consumer one. I think we've moved beyond the image of domination/slavery. Economic relations have now supplanted pop's political symbolism. Today the relationship between producers and consumers participates in the epiphany of pop ecstasy. Pop seduction has become full-fledged coitus.

Bordeaux, October 2008

*Translated from the French by Deke Dusinbere*