

## From oral tradition to commercial industry: the misunderstood path of popular song<sup>1</sup>

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### **Annotation:**

*Within the past thirty years, the fields of sociology, anthropology, musicology, literature and cultural studies, the study of popular culture has investigated various aspects of song culture understanding it in a larger field of study which is music and, more precisely, popular music. The beginning of the 1980's has showed in Anglo-Saxon culture a real desire to develop the serious study of music in the mass media. A few of them (D. Harker, P. Tagg, C. Cutler) have shown terminological problems in the field study of song culture.*

*Song denotes a large range of types of songs from medieval song to commercial modern songs. If we study the actual phenomenon of song culture, we can consider that the « prototype », the best image of a category, of the genre of the song is now popular song understood as « commercial song ». In this lecture, I will present a few aspects of what has been and what is meant by popular music, popular song, trying to show, by some examples given in French which ones may be applied as well to the English language, that the semantism of popular should be revisited and that some syntagms like *chanson de consommation* (used by Eco already in 1965), *chanson commerciale*, *mass song* should be largely preferred according to variables that take into account various aspects and mediators of the process of creation and the diffusion of the songs. We will try to clarify the meaning of popular according to its lexicographical description in contemporary dictionaries and throughout particular contexts of Anglo-Saxon and French culture.*

«So riddled with complexities has this question proved to be that one is tempted to follow the example of the legendary of folk song - 'all songs are folk songs ; I never heard horses sing 'em' - and suggest that all music is popular music: popular with *someone*. Unfortunately, this would be empty the term of most of the meanings which it carries in actual discourse. However, it does have the merit of beginning to touch upon the multiple sources of these meanings: what *I* think 'popular' *you* may not. And it follows from this that all such meanings are socially and historically grounded: they come bearing the marks of particular usages and contexts, and are never disinterested. »<sup>2</sup>

Richard Middleton

### **Discussion around popular music**

Over the past thirty years in the fields of sociology, anthropology, musicology, literature and cultural studies, the study of popular culture has investigated various aspects of *song culture* situating it within a larger field of study which is *music* and, more precisely, *popular music*. The beginning of the 1980's has showed a real desire within Anglo-Saxon culture to develop the serious study of music in the mass media. A few of these studies (D. Harker, P. Tagg, C. Cutler) have shown terminological problems in the field study of *song culture*.

*Song* denotes a large range of types of songs from medieval song to commercial modern songs. In studying the actual phenomenon of song culture, we can consider that the « prototype », the best image of a category, of the genre of the song is now *popular song* understood as « commercial song ». In this lecture, I will present a few aspects of what has been and what is meant by *popular music*, *popular song*, trying to show, by some examples given in French, which ones may be applied as well to the English language, that the semantism of *popular* should be

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<sup>1</sup> Best regards to Kates Higgins for its reading, corrections and rewriting.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Middleton, 1990: [3].

revisited and that some syntagms like *chanson de consommation* (used by Eco already in 1965), *chanson commerciale*, *mass song* should be largely preferred according to variables that take into account various aspects and *mediators* of the process of creation and the diffusion of the songs. We will try to clarify the meaning of popular according to its lexicographical description in contemporary dictionaries and throughout particular contexts of Anglo-Saxon and French culture.

Although *chanson populaire* (Fr.) is still being used in many essays, it is an unclear and heterogeneous concept where meanings coexist and intertwine. The quotation I give shows that it is generally grounded in culture and an intense semiotic of culture is needed to decode the meanings of *popular*. In some uses, it no longer fits in with the recent developments of our industrialized society. It is almost impossible to define *popular music* without looking at the mass media.<sup>3</sup> This ambiguity comes from the fact that there are many senses of the collocation *popular music* according to the subject field of use and also because even if the lyric form is the same, there are many syntagms to designate it when it is used to refer either to pre-industrial song or to mass song. One could not go so far as to the point of consider these as homonyms as if their tokens had nothing in common: Chris Cutler comments: "The ambiguity lies in the word *popular*. Does it mean numerically and statistically the most listened to, or bought? Does it mean 'of the people'? Or has it come to refer to a whole genus of music -a genus loosely bound by its particular means and relations of production, circulation and consumption; by its commitment to electric and electronic technology, to radio and the gramophone record; to what we might call a demotic musical use and language?"<sup>4</sup> Later in the text, Cutler rejects the numerical approach, which would only compound the confusion.

But the general uses show that the term *popular song* has been too strictly used without taking into account the constant relationships between classical and popular culture. Richard Middleton quotes the four main categories established by Frans Birrer which exist in combination as well as in pure form:

1. *Normative definitions*. Popular music is an inferior type.
2. *Negative definitions*. Popular music is music that is not something else (usually 'folk' or 'art' music).
3. *Sociological definitions*. Popular music is associated with (produced for or by) a particular social group.
4. *Technologico-economic definitions*. Popular music is disseminated by mass media and/or in a mass market.<sup>5</sup>

For many years the acceptance and the employment of the concept *popular music* has been troublesome especially, says Dave Russell, when applied to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Russell says: "it has been used in all manner of ways. It has been given a pejorative connotation by some writers and viewed as the highly commercial antithesis to some nobler 'art music' (referring to the *Kunstmusik*) or purer 'folk music'".<sup>6</sup>

During this whole period, which goes from the XIX<sup>e</sup> century until the middle of the XX<sup>e</sup> century, the adjective *popular* was used to form the syntagms *popular front*, *popular etymology*, *popular art*, *popular tradition*; *popular romance*, *popular press*, *popular newspaper* and more recently, *popular culture* also attested by the *Chambers Combined Dictionary thesaurus* (1995) under the shortened form *pop culture*. These motivated lexical combinations were used as if their meanings were generally accepted. The importance accorded to the discussion on the popular phenomenon as opposed to the *culture savante* shows thus a change in the notion of *popular* over the last few decades<sup>7</sup>. Strinati quotes the shift in perspective of *popular* noted by R. Williams:

Popular was being seen from the point of view of the people rather than from those seeking favour or power over them. Yet the earlier sense had not died. Popular culture was not identified by the

<sup>3</sup> See Donald Strinati, 1995: XV.

<sup>4</sup> Chris Cutler, 1985: 3.

<sup>5</sup> Frans Birrer (1985: 104) quoted by R. Middleton, 1990: 4.

<sup>6</sup> Dave Russell; 1987: [IX].

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Claude Margolin, 1981, 120.

people but by others, and it still carries two older senses: inferior kinds of work (*cf.* popular literature, popular press as distinguished from quality press) ; and work deliberately setting out to win favour (popular journalism as distinguished from democratic journalism, or popular entertainment) ; as well as the more modern sense of well-liked by many people, with which, of course, in many cases, the earlier senses overlap. The recent sense of popular culture as the culture actually made by the people for themselves is different from all these ; it is often displaced to the past as folk culture but it is also an important modern emphasis.<sup>8</sup>

### **Popular music and art music**

For many years there have been discussions within the academic community, especially the ethnologist and musicologists, on the different singularities that distinguish the couplets *art music* and *popular music* that we can translate into French by *chanson savante* et *chanson populaire*.

Many comparisons have recently been made to distinguish between *popular music* and *art music*: Gérald Côté says: "Within Occidental society, the concept of *art music* (which has been used in French as *art musical*) is organised around notions of learning and teaching, when the interpretation is effectuated by trained persons, while for *popular music*, the concept of *art musical* is built around the notion of authenticity cautioned by festivals and the record industry."<sup>9</sup>

Another distinction which could be made is that "popular audiences are said to display their pleasure to emotional excess, whereas the audiences for official or dominant culture are always able to maintain respectable aesthetic distance and control."<sup>10</sup>

Russell says: "popular music is seen to have a relatively simple verse/chorus structure whereas 'serious' music is more complex. Yet again, it has been seen as the music played by, produced by, or produced for the 'ordinary person'."<sup>11</sup> According to the *Collins English Dictionary* popular music is "music having appeal, especially characterised by lightly romantic or sentimental melodies."<sup>12</sup>

Sigurd Hustvedt went on to note, as remarks Dave Harker (1985: 128):

how popular and non-popular elements have been strangely intermingled during the whole period of ballad history', though there remained 'substantial agreement that popular ballads, taken in the mass without distinction of nationality, constitute a unified body of data. 'Harker, continues, Hustvedt conceded that 'folksong' and 'popularesque lyric' - a song by a 'relatively recent individual author which has been received by the people and thus has taken on a popular character which it did not originally possess'- and the whole range of 'non popular' pieces would be of the utmost consequence in determining the true metes and bounds of what we now designate by the somewhat fluid term popular'<sup>13</sup>

The few remarks on the semantic distinction between art music and popular music show us that within music, popular music must be understood as a morphologically diversified manifestation of sociability whose process fluctuated widely between oral song and classical tradition. As John Blacking says, the dichotomy of *art music* and *folk music* (or art poetry and folk poetry) exists more as commercial tags or archaic divisions than linguistic categories<sup>14</sup>. A. L. Li says that it is a domain with no clearly defined frontiers, and at one extreme it merges into folk music; at the other, into art music."<sup>15</sup>

This antonymy is only partial for various reasons:

- because, as Larry Portis says, the products of the popular musical industry are listened to by all sectors of society and in all social classes.

- according to Jacques Julien, who was influenced by Adorno's definition of *popular music*, even if *art music* and *popular music* are listened to by all sectors of society; in *popular music*, the

<sup>8</sup> R. Williams, 1976 quoted by Dominic Strinati, 1995: 2-3.

<sup>9</sup> My translation from Gérald Côté, 1998: 18.

<sup>10</sup> Storey, 1996: 125.

<sup>11</sup> Dave Russell, 1987: X.

<sup>12</sup> 1986: 1193.

<sup>13</sup> Dave Harker, 1985: 128.

<sup>14</sup> See John Blacking, 1980: 8, 12. See also recent works by Philip Tagg and R. Clarida (1999: 31).

<sup>15</sup> A. L. Li, 1990: 1026.

set of signs is understood globally while in the art reception it is more from the first contact that an inversed reading is effectuated which shines from the globality until the details ?.<sup>16</sup>

- as soon as we begin dealing with polysemous units, the antonymy cannot be anything other than partial because this is only one of the senses of the polysemous items that can be put in parallel with the acceptation of the other word. Moreover the fact of invoking not just meanings but also moral and monetary value-aesthetics makes it difficult to consider this opposition as an absolute.

### **Folk music**

Historically, the emergence of so-called *folk music* in the 1940s and 1950s corresponds with the disappearance of the first function of *traditional music*, but still used, like the terms *popular* and *folk*, which refer to music from old rural societies, interchangeably and with extreme vagueness. Cutler defines *folk music* as "any indigenous, collective, unalienated expressive cultural form -such forms being typical of pre-capitalist and peasant societies and hence never produced primarily as commodities."<sup>17</sup> Because there is no other body of music circulating in that same community which is unpopular " such a [denomination] is of very little value, he adds: "It is plainly tautological".<sup>18</sup> Finally he says, "To use the term *popular* for such a music would make folk music indistinguishable from commodity music, and such a conflation (all too often unjustifiably assumed) would only multiply and perpetuate analytical confusions when surely what we want is to minimise and obviate them"<sup>19</sup>

This vagueness is due to the persistence of reference to old denominations while subsequent changes appeared in popular culture, in the form of transmission of music, and because of the new broadcasting methods which characterize the growth of the industrial society and commercial mass media. In French, many adjectives have replaced the old-fashioned semantic neologism *popular*, which appeared in English around 1850 (according to our documentation<sup>20</sup>) and in French around 1830<sup>21</sup> by others such as *traditional*, or *folklorique* and sometimes the genus *folklore* is used to talk about traditional song. In the Anglophone culture, since modern song is intertwined with traditional music, this has affected the terminology. Of *folk music*, Mark Miller says:

The term 'folk' has been applied freely to music of the singer-song writer who emerged in the wake of the so-called folk music (or urban folk) revival of the 1940s and 1950s. Typically, artists who employed traditional song forms and performance styles (e.g., guitar accompaniment) but worked on a professional basis (in the commercial setting of the coffeehouse and later the nightclub and concert hall) and drew on repertoires of original (and often self-composed) material came to be described as 'folksingers.

He adds: "In French Canada their counterparts were the *chansonniers*"<sup>22</sup> In the same article, he says that the folksingers, like Leonard Cohen and Bob Dylan are distinct from the traditional singer or singer that has interpreted a traditional repertoire. *Folk music* is thus employed in English not so much to refer to traditional music as to refer to an instrumentally simplified style.

### **Folksong**

It is easy to observe that *Folk music* (folksong) has links to oral tradition and to a type of commercial, rock music influenced by traditional music patterns sometimes called *folk-rock*<sup>23</sup> but using electric guitar. The concept was developed in the British context during the period of the 1870s-1900s<sup>24</sup>.

The following context is a clear example of the ambiguity: "Le folklore, le *folksong* pour employer le langage de l'époque, devient une des principales sources d'inspiration. Des groupes

<sup>16</sup> My translation. See Julien 1984: 127.

<sup>17</sup> Cutler, 1985: 4.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> W. Chappell, *Popular music of the olden time* 1855 Source *OED Suppl.* 1982: p. 670.

<sup>21</sup> According to the electronic corpora *Frantext*, it appeared around 1830.

<sup>22</sup> Mark Miller, *EMC*, 1980: p. 476.

<sup>23</sup> We found a first attestation in Myrus, 1966: p. [124].

<sup>24</sup> Dave Harker, 1985: p. [140]

naissent, comme Malicorne et Mélusine, qui reprennent des chants anciens ou en composent sur le même modèle."<sup>25</sup> Under the influence of the English concept developed at the end of the XIX<sup>th</sup> century<sup>26</sup>. The French language sometimes uses *folk music* and the contraction *folk* (1866) in the sense of traditional music as we see in this quotation of Larry Portis: "Il faut cependant faire ici une distinction: l'expression "folk-music" est plus apte à décrire une expression musicale des sociétés préindustrielles alors que l'expression "musique populaire" qualifie un produit commercial de l'industrie musicale."<sup>27</sup> The understanding of the referential relation between traditional music and the folksong recent decades explains the different semantic trajectories of popular music and folksong. The distinction is made clear in the *Modern guide to synonyms and related works* [1968]: "a popular *song* recorded by the leading crooner of the day; folk *songs* performed by the three singers to guitar accompaniment."<sup>28</sup>

### **Popular Music for French or English**

According to the *Dictionnaire des anglicismes, les mots anglais et américain en Français* by Josette Rey-Debove and Gilberte Gagnon, the abbreviation *pop* in French was borrowed from the English *popular* in the middle of the XX<sup>th</sup> century. The *OEDsuppl* says that the colloquial word *pop* may have been in use since 1862 but as says the *DHLF*, it would have been an isolated occurrence. It was itself borrowed from French in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. According to Rey-Debove, the sense of the French loan word would be "destiné au peuple" (Rey-Debove- Gagnon and *DHLF*). On the other hand, according to the *Middle English Dictionary*<sup>29</sup> it has been borrowed in the sense of "commonly known". This is an etymological imbroglio because we cannot know with any certainty whether the French sense of "destiné au peuple" prevailed or the English modified the sense into "commonly known" which is not the exact translation of "destiné au peuple".

*Music* has the same trajectory. It was borrowed from French *musique* in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the music terminology developed, showing the rapid growth in the development of styles.

### **Pop-: a popular contraction**

The colloquial nominalisation of *popular* by contraction ("la pop") in French going back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century (in other expressions)<sup>30</sup> and English is surely a sign of its frequency. In industrial music terminology, the modifier *Pop* has served to create many syntagms in French: *pop*, *pop-rock*, *pop music* (or *pop-music*) and in English *pop musicians*, *pop record*, *pop group*, *song-and-dance pop* (1935 *OEDsuppl*), *pop song* (or *pop-songs*)(1945 *OED suppl*), *pop tunes* (1953 *OEDsuppl*), *popster* (1963 *OED suppl*) and in various special collocations covering lots of mediators in song-culture: *pop album*, *ballad*, *band*, *concert*, *disc*, *fan*, *festival*, *group*, *lyric*, *number*, *opera*, *record*, *single*, *star*, *world*.<sup>31</sup>

The word *pop* in musical terminology could refer to two things. On one hand, *Pop* would be the colloquial contraction of *popular music* but distinguished from *pop-rock*. According to Rey-Debove and Gagnon, *pop-music*, preceding to *pop-rock*, (also written *pop' music* or *pop music*) is a movement of popular music originating from folksong, jazz and rock and roll represented by Bob Dylan and the Beatles. Tagg says: « Popular music should not be confused with the term 'pop music', which is taken to mean a whole complex of musical styles, mostly contained within the framework of popular music from the 1960s. »<sup>32</sup> *Pop-rock* (also written *pop'rock*) would represent

<sup>25</sup> Lucien Rioux, 1994: p. 243.

<sup>26</sup> See Harker, 1985: p. [140]. Harker says p. 153 that in 1891, the first song-book containing the term folk-song in its title is William Barrett's *English Folk-Songs* first published in 1891.

<sup>27</sup> Larry Portis, 1997: p. 70.

<sup>28</sup> S. I. Hayakawa, [1968]: p. 373.

<sup>29</sup> 1980: 1120.

<sup>30</sup> See *DHLF*, s.v. *popular*.

<sup>31</sup> See *A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary*, 1982 s.v. *pop sb.*<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>32</sup> 1979: 19.

the English movement of music pop, represented from the years 1967-1968 by the Rolling Stones and by the underground, and characterised by the importance accorded to the electric guitar.<sup>33</sup>

On the other hand, always used as a noun, *pop music*, according to the *Collins Dictionary of the English Language* entry, would have to be considered as a hyperonym for *pop-rock* and *pop-music* because no distinction is made between the two types of music. Under the headword *pop* we find: "music of general appeal, especially among young people, that originated as a distinctive genre in the 1950s. It is generally characterised by a heavy rhythmic element and the use of electrical amplification."<sup>34</sup> The *Cobuild* is roughly similar: "Modern music that is popular among young people and usually has a strong rhythm and uses electric or electronic equipment."<sup>35</sup> The *Chambers Combined Dictionary Thesaurus*, more recent, takes into account the recent developments in music and consider only electronic music as: "modern music popular especially among young people, usually with a strong beat, often played with electronic equipment (guitars, keyboards, etc.)." It also defines the adjective *pop*: "performing or featuring pop music."<sup>36</sup> The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* insists on the sememe known in English from the 18<sup>th</sup> century: /finding favour or approved by the people/: "those whose records sell in large numbers and who are most popular on radio."<sup>37</sup>

Clearly the information available is not always as precise as we hope, especially concerning the difference between *pop music* and *pop rock* that the *Dictionnaire des anglicismes* makes. French has borrowed the term to talk about English and American rock. Philippe Daufouy et Jean-Pierre Sarton describes *pop music* as: "Abréviation de *popular music*, généralement destinée à la jeunesse. Importé en France, le terme s'est précisé, en qualifiant plus que le rock américain et anglais."<sup>38</sup> In this particular case no distinction is made between *pop rock* and *pop music* and no equivalent for French song culture is made even if many French singers have copied this musical and textual aesthetic.

Eve Sweetser says "we model linguistic expression itself not only (a) as description (a model of the world), but also (b) as action (an act in the world being described), and even as an epistemic or logical entity (a premise or a conclusion in our world of reasoning)"<sup>39</sup> In this context, there is a 'pop level of discourse' "in this mass-consumed, pure-commodity form – which is precisely alienated but unconscious. "<sup>40</sup>

### About folklorisation

By *folklorisation* we mean, according to Paul Zumthor, «le mouvement historique par lequel une structure sociale ou une forme de discours perd progressivement sa fonction».<sup>41</sup> We can explain the use of the term by clearing up some of notions attached to the term. Firstly *folklorisation* does not mean necessarily that the discourse, the text and the music in this context, totally loses its function. It is more a change of function because songs belonging to oral tradition are not transmitted in the same way and are ritualised through shows and printed words. *Folklorisation* is also part of a process which can involve signed song, *e.g.* whose author is known, and sometimes performed by generations of musicians, and thus considered as a part of the oral tradition. We can distinguish between two types of folklorised songs: the fixed form and the altered form. One example is a fixed form like «Y mouillera pu pantoute» popularised by the French Canadian singer Oscar Thiffault, and *Le jour de l'an* by Madame Bolduc. The texts of these two songs have not been modified during their transmission but have been interpreted by the public as belonging to the oral tradition.

<sup>33</sup> Translation from the *Dictionnaire des anglicismes*

<sup>34</sup> 1986: 1193.

<sup>35</sup> 1988: 1113.

<sup>36</sup> 1995: 957.

<sup>37</sup> A.S. Horby, 1974: *s.v. pop*<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>38</sup> Philippe Daufouy and Jean-Pierre Sarton, 1972 quoted by Anne Benetollo and Yann Le Goff, 1994: 23.

<sup>39</sup> Eve Sweetser, 1990: 21.

<sup>40</sup> Cutler, 1985: 9.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Zumthor, 1983: 22.

The other form of *folklorisation* consists in signed songs altered by oral transmission. A famous example in the French Canadian culture is «Un Canadien errant» by Antoine Gérin-Lajoie, which exists in many versions (maybe because the text was published two years after having been written). This phenomenon is according to the concept of *song families* which are "particular songs which are revived and reworked; the term has been developed primarily by Hatch and Millward (1987). Constructed out of existing lyrical, melodic, and rhythmic structures, they are adapted to new musical developments by successive generations of musicians, reshaping developments by successive generations of musicians, reshaping generic conventions in the process."<sup>42</sup>

We could also include in this form the *chansons sur des timbres*, that are, according to the Conrad Laforte's classification of<sup>43</sup>, songs in which new lexemes are adapted to pre-existing melodies.

This process is directly connected with the syntagm *popular music* in the sense that it had once the meaning of oral tradition but helps to prevent confusion between many senses of *popular* sometimes applied to literary song (whose the author is known) and oral tradition song. It also highlights the invalidity of the commercial tags and dichotomies that we talked about earlier.

### **Popular Music and chanson populaire: focus on different components**

Whilst Portis recommends the term *folk music* rather than *popular music* in French to designate traditional music, in either cases there is a clear priority given to the musical component (as we see in the title *Interpreting popular music* of David Bracket) rather than to the linguistic component because *musique populaire* or *musique pop* which restores the order in French, translated from the English *popular music* meant both *popular song* and *popular music*.

In the *Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music* (see also the article in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*), the adjective *popular* denotes all the types of commercial music of the 20<sup>th</sup> century like jazz, blues, pop, R&B, heavy metal, etc., and also includes George Gershwin and Leonard Bernstein because some of their compositions have been inspired by traditional music.<sup>44</sup> The *New Grove Encyclopaedia*, which is a reference work in the study of music in the West, uses the term in a somewhat broader sense "to embrace the music that, with the growth of industrialisation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, began to develop distinctive characteristics in line with the tastes and interests of the expanding urban middle classes. [...] Nor can they always be sharply differentiated from music to urban areas from oral folk-music traditions."<sup>45</sup>

Leon Rosselson (1979) argues that a difference can be established here between *folk music* and *pop music*. [He] contends that 'folk music' (both because of its origins in pre-capitalist societies and its 'anti-commercial' practices under capitalism) is an alternative music to the capitalist music of the music industry. Pop music 'is incapable of saying anything valuable about the world in which most people live, love and work'<sup>46</sup> John Storey, agreeing with this affirmation, mentions one fact which undeniably reflects this assumption:

When the *Sunday Times* ran a competition for the best song written about a sporting hero, not one of the thousand entries received used a rock idiom or even in the more middle-of-the-road ballad. Three-quarters of them used what could loosely be described as a folk or broadside ballad idiom...

Clearly, when people have a need to express themselves on any subject other than teenage love, they find no useful model in the rock or pop idiom. The folk tradition...is still found to be serviceable.<sup>47</sup>

Without a doubt, we can affirm that *folk music* and *popular music* also have some ambiguities due to the ahistorical dimension<sup>48</sup>. It does seem that the ambiguity in English leaves some traces in French, at least in recent sociological works such as Portis, 1997, and Grenier, 1996 whose readings

<sup>42</sup> Roy Shuker, 1998: 75.

<sup>43</sup> See Conrad Laforte, 1980: 479.

<sup>44</sup> Colin Larkin, 1995: 19-25.

<sup>45</sup> 1981: 87.

<sup>46</sup> 1979: 47 quoted by John Storey, 1996: 96.

<sup>47</sup> Rosselson, 1979: 50 quoted by Storey, 1996: 97. See also Donald Myrus, 1966: 4.

<sup>48</sup> We can mention the use of *mainstream* for music with a high level of commercial popularity (See L. Grenier et Morrison, 1995: 85).

are largely influenced by Anglo-Saxon literature on popular music (which corresponds within to a different epistemology). This ambiguity does not lie in the notion of /popular/, from which we can observe the generic character of the genres it represents, but rather in the fact that by *musique populaire* we mean both *musique populaire* and *chanson populaire* (including the second into the first) in French and both *popular music* and *popular song* in English, prioritising the musical component as a genus, testifying to the opinion of some essayists like Bruno Roy that the "préférence française [at least until the francophone rock singer Robert Charlebois] va au texte" and the "tendance américaine ou anglaise va à la musique"<sup>49</sup>. [the French tendency favours the text whilst the American or English tendency favours the music."].

But the duality between /traditional folk performers/ and /folksinger/ seems to express the same ambiguity we had in French with the epithet *popular*, once /traditional/, and now /a song whose author is known/. It is worth highlighting a few important points. Firstly, *folk music* does not express exactly what is known in French as *chanson populaire* for several reasons. In English there is a tendency to focus on the musical component of the song by saying *popular music* or *folk music* perhaps because in those new types of songs the language serves only the rhythm. In French, however, there is a tendency to use *chanson populaire* rather than *musique populaire* to signify the poetic compositions of singers. On the other side, the lexical item that would fit better to express the so-called *folkmusic* becomes in French the homograph (*folkmusic*) or simply *folk* (1966) used in French about ten years after it became commonly used in English (1954). This cultural influence from Anglo-Saxon culture unfortunately appeared unfortunately at the same time as pejorative connotations began to be associated with *folklore* (1962) and *folklorique* (1963)<sup>50</sup>.

On the other hand *folk music* corresponds to a certain type of music of an accompanying text which, it could be argued, makes it less /commercial/ than Michael Jackson is. According to the *DHLF*<sup>51</sup> it would be an English word for "a chanson populaire traditionnelle". This French explanation of the English meaning refers to the "modernised traditional music". This presumably refers to the modern arrangements but not the fact that it generally very popular among the public at large (successful). Moreover *folkmusic* does not refer to traditional musical components in the full sense of the term. Whilst it may borrow some patterns from traditional music, this is not the case for a number of songs performed by American singers in the 1950's like Joan Baez and Bob Dylan.

In French, *popular* should correspond more to /commercial/ than to music and texts like those of the *chansonnier* which is, as Mark Miller (see above) says, the French-Canadian equivalent of the folk singer. Is the English *folk* more precise than *popular* which could mean, as suggests Desdémone Bardin, "éclater" rather than popular<sup>52</sup> referring to the first sememe of the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary of old Current English*: "short, sharp, explosive sound".<sup>53</sup> If both *folk* and *popular* mean the same thing, does the preference for a kind of music interfere with a preference for a certain denomination? We leave the question open. Mark Slobin mentions this problem: "In addressing the long and complex interaction of ethnomusicology and popular music studies, the word 'popular' needs careful consideration in approaches to the methodologies and results of research. One perspective that might facilitate an understanding of ethnomusicological inquiry would distinguish the study of the 'popular' understood as the creation and reception of the most broadly accepted musical forms from the study of the 'popular' viewed as a technologically produced and managed commodity, although the two overlap in many respects." He adds that the "gradual widespread adoption in English of the German-derived terms based on 'folk' supplanted this notion of 'popular', but ethnomusicologists have continued to study 'what's popular'- meaning not only what's currently fashionable, or produces by the recording industry cartel, but also what people most commonly or passionately choose as a basis for dancing, listening, identifying with and remembering"<sup>54</sup>.

<sup>49</sup> 1984: 66.

<sup>50</sup> See *DHLF*, 1992 s.v. *folklore*, *folklorique*.

<sup>51</sup> s.v. *folk*

<sup>52</sup> [1982]: 155.

<sup>53</sup> See A. S. Hornby, [1974] s.v. *pop*.

<sup>54</sup> Mark Slobin, 2003: 72-73.



### Popular/modern

Even if we restrict ourselves to a simple analysis of evolutions in music, it is clear that the sense of *popular* soon became equivocal following the social changes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The transition from the essentialist to the positivist point of view<sup>55</sup> in the modern sense appears in various books concerned with music aimed at a broad readership. Their Latin etymon *popularis* derived from *populus* and the Germanic etymon *folk* (1000) both meant /people/, but by adequation with pragmatic circumstances in the course of time, the feeling for the etymological sense has been transferred from Herder's point of view (which is now the 9<sup>th</sup> sense of the *Webster*): /originating among the people/, /composed or transmitted by the people/, a kind of production of the original text to /meant for the people/. Richard Middleton says "Here the 'essence' of the popular is constant, though whether this is seen as proffered from above or engendered from below, whether 'the people' is regarded as an active, progressive historical subject or a manipulated dupe, varies".<sup>56</sup>

Romantic authors considered authorship as a creation of literary culture and the marketplace; it is one of the great markers of 'high' as opposed to 'popular' culture. Cecil Sharp's reflection at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and later that of Vaughan-Williams, on what constitutes the *common people*, the *vulgus* in England, shows some of the advances made in English in this field. According to Middleton this sense may have then the (depreciatory) implication of inferiority or having been designed to suit low tastes.<sup>57</sup> In French, it is still mainly connoted, as /meant for the *populace*/ for the people 'below'.

A L. Li says in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1990: p. 1022) that three considerations have for centuries affected the nature of popular music:

- 1) it is produced by professionals<sup>58</sup> ;
- 2) mainly in the towns ;
- 3) at the same time -unlike fine art music- it is in many cases diffused by oral means.

### Romance: an example of intercultural influence

Sometimes the semantic change is also due to intercultural influence. Thus, *romance* in French first referred to the short Spanish epic poem in a narrative style. But under the influence of the Germans who had borrowed it from English, it started to be concurrence rivalled by *ballad* in the XIX<sup>th</sup> century, referring to poetic pieces on a sentimental subject.<sup>59</sup> According to the author of the article of the *New Grove* (1981), the German *ballade* was itself "partly influenced by the narrative strophic folksong tradition of Britain and Scandinavia". As early as 1530 in the bilingual dictionary of Palsgrave (*l'Eclaircissement de la langue française*) *song*/ and *balade* appears under the same headword. This interchangeability still occurs in John Bell's *Rhymes of Northern Bards* published in 1812.<sup>60</sup>

From a comparative point of view, *song* also serves to translate *mélodie*, likeas in the work of Barbara Meister with the revealing title *Nineteenth Century French song, Fauré, Chausson, Duparc* (1980). In this sense, the lexical unit *Song* is used as a genus to designate *melodie* which is, admittedly, also called *chanson* in French, but never as a genus word synonym of *mélodie* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When we talk about the modern song the terms *music* or *popular music* are more frequent. *Song* seems to be less used alone in contexts relating to the modern popular song. It often appears in combination with determiners such as *popular*, *rock*, etc.

<sup>55</sup> See Middleton, 1990: 5-6.

<sup>56</sup> Middleton, 1990: 5.

<sup>57</sup> Middleton, 1990: [3].

<sup>58</sup> For this part, Middleton affirms that 'popular' is the type « specifically produced by the lower class » (Middleton, 1990: [3]).

<sup>59</sup> See Rey, 1992: 1823 and Bénichou, 1970: 43

<sup>60</sup> See Dave Harker, 1985: 72.

## CONCLUSION

### Neology with *popular*

Therefore we can talk about few elements of the meaning of *song*. *Popular song* should be replaced by *song of oral transmission* since the first uses of Francis J. Child at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>61</sup>. The French preference for *tradition orale* over *populaire* has emerged very recently as *populaire* is still used sometimes. The phenomenon of song-culture and mediators has changed, but not the phenomenon of oral poetry. So we can state that the referent is the same in oral song but a new denomination is needed, leading us to *chanson de tradition orale*. On the other hand, the referent of *chanson* is various we must then employ *chanson populaire à texte* or *commercial*. *Commercial* would be the result of productivity and immediate profits but also the result within the past two centuries of the creation of musical production within the public sphere and of its performance which creates a difference between the *modus operandi* of popular music and traditional music. Grimm's earlier distinction between /artificial product/ of the individual and the /spontaneous creation of the people/ no longer prevail with the recent development of industrialised and sonorised song.<sup>62</sup> *Commercial song* differs in many aspects from older form of *popular song* in the types of social communication which mean the uses (jingles, movies) and functions (ritual, calendar celebration) of the song. But it can also have traditional functions when it is integrated into daily activity or daily work. Such implications makes invaluable the separation between modern and popular music in the sense of *traditional* because we know that traditional songs are still sung today even if they have lost their formal types of dissemination and are performed outside their original contexts

In the case of *popular* the conditions of production and dissemination of the songs make not valuable the current definition of *popular music* outside beyond the deep semiotic understanding of the culture in which words are attested. Neology seems to us a suitable solution for this semantic vagueness. It consists of a denomination that can translate the new phenomena in song-culture.

In his book *Meaning and change of meaning*, Gustaf Stern analyses sense-changes and arrives at the conclusion that there are seven main classes of change. *Substitutions*<sup>63</sup> are sense –changes due to external, non – linguistic causes. Thus, *song* may currently possess features that were unknown one hundred years ago before the existence of radios, record-players and the industry that is now making song what it is today -with the changes in the channels of communication- and the technology of sound. Our knowledge of the genre also changes even if the reference in reality remains unchanged. This reflection leads us to conclude that sometime the "referent is not new, but for some reason its habitual name does not appear to the speaker as the best way of denoting it in the actual situation" (Stern, 1965: [282]). Both of those types of substitution are part of the semantic change of the term *song* as well as the term *popular*, in the sense that there is a shift of attention from one characteristic of the referent to another. Sarah Cohen also remarks that there has been a recent shift within popular music studies, "from the study of the global to that of the local, and from work on production to consideration of consumption, subjectivity and identity in the context of everyday life."<sup>64</sup> This observation leads us to the idea expressed by E. Sweetser that "synchronic polysemy and historical change of meaning really supply the same data in many ways. No historical shift can take place without an intervening stage of polysemy."<sup>65</sup> Synchronic and diachronic sense relations shows, with a componential analysis, that if a lexical unit like *popular* once had component like /oral song/, and now has /commercial song/, there was a moment when the term signified both /oral song/ and /commercial song/. Stern says "The semantic history of many words, denoting references that are affected by the progress of culture and civilisation is thus, when

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<sup>61</sup> See Dave Harker, 1985: 111.

<sup>62</sup> See Dave Harker, 1985: 109.

<sup>63</sup> Stern, 1965: 166.

<sup>64</sup> S. Cohen, 1993: 127.

<sup>65</sup> Eve Sweetser, 1990: 9.

analysed in detail, shown to be a complicated series of alternating substitutions and adequations." (Stern, 1965: 382).

*Popular* is diachronically polysemous. It meant /traditional/, then /meant for the people/. /Commercial, industrial/, and successful songs are not really referentially precise because they can refer at the same time to traditional song and rock song, folksong, progressive music (song). We must then add another adjective: to /traditional song/ and /literary song/ isolating at the same time the notion of /more or less successful/ and /voluntarily destined for the masses/. Then we could say *chanson traditionnelle populaire (ou commerciale)*, and *chanson signée à texte* and *chanson signée à succès*. The vagueness of the referent itself and the referential indeterminacy of the group of collocations teach us that adjusting the sense according to the context remains wiser than trying to define. It is also useful to bear in mind that today, all types of music can become popular on the basis of the new phenomena in song culture but also because of the semantic change of the lexical item *popular*.

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