

The aesthetic discourse space of popular music: 1985 and 2005

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Abstract

Move2 This article presents a comparison of the aesthetic classification system of popular music, as employed by
step1 newspaper critics in the Los Angeles Times, in 1985-1986 and 2004-2005. By way of a relational discourse
step2 analysis of popular music album reviews, which applies the ecological technique of measuring niche overlaps in
the analysis of an 'aesthetic discourse space', the genre structure of popular music is compared across a time
period in which the field of popular music has been argued to have undergone a process of growing 'isomorphism'
step3 of aesthetic principles and a blurring of boundaries between genres. The comparison of the two structures of
genres provides evidence for the suggestion that the perception and interpretation of diverse genres has become
more similar. Moreover, the comparison indicates that the boundary between two exemplary genres – rock music
and pop music – has become less salient in the perception of music reviewers, which could signal a weakening of
commercial boundaries within the popular music field over the last two decades.

1. Introduction

Aesthetic classification systems, as defined by DiMaggio, consist of ‘the way that the work of artists is divided up both in the heads and habits of consumers and by the institutions that bound the production and distribution of separate genres.’ The concept of aesthetic classification systems points towards the study of their formal characteristics. Boundaries between genres may be strong and rigid or they may be more fuzzy and weak (Zerubavel, 1991). Classification systems can ‘allow’ for overlap, blending and mixing of genres, but they may also emphasize categorical purity (Douglas, 1966). Moreover, the notion of classification systems puts emphasis on studying genres not in isolation but as a ‘totality’, as a system of relations between genres. The question, however, is how we can assess the characteristics of a classification system. How can we establish, for example, the strength of genre boundaries? How can we go beyond the study of boundary work around individual genres and examine the system of genres? And how can we uncover the way that classifications are divided up cognitively in people’s “heads and habits” as well as institutionally by the production and distribution of genres?

Arguably, studies of the institutional ‘grounding’ of classification systems have been most successful within the sociology of art. The work of DiMaggio and others has, for example, shown how the symbolic boundary between ‘high’ and ‘popular culture’ was established through the creation of the distinct organizational form of the non-profit (DiMaggio, 1982). Studies on consumption patterns have shown how taste preferences relate to social-structural distinctions and have shown the (changing) distribution of genres in relation to class-related variables (Bourdieu, Peterson, Bryson). However, the more *cognitive* and meaningful dimension of aesthetic classification systems – the way that genres are *perceived* and *interpreted* as more similar or different - appears a more difficult research problem. On the one hand, more interpretative oriented scholars tend to focus on a limited set of genres so as to make a more ‘thick description’ possible (Thornton, 1995), but thereby lose sight of the study of classification systems as a totality. On the other hand, more quantitative research on classification systems tends to work with data sets that restrict the ‘meaningfulness’ of the material. In this paper, I aim to strike a balance between studying the ‘meaningful’ way in which classification systems are organized - i.e. how genres are similar or different in the way they are ‘made sense of’ - and focusing on the system of relations that genres constitute together.

The dominant sociological model for analyzing systems of relations is, of course, the social network (Mohr, 1998). Modeling the relations of genres as a network can therefore be an appropriate

way of studying the formal and structural characteristics of a classification system. Moreover, the network model has been theoretically shown to have close ties with semiotic theories of meaning, while it has also been proven to be a useful tool in studying rich, meaningful data as texts and narratives. Network techniques can thus be used to study the meaningful side of classification systems by extracting a cultural model from textual material (Carley and Palmquist, 1992). For the study of *aesthetic* classification systems, *reviews* constitute a good source of data. Firstly, reviews can be used to construct a data set which includes interpretative statements about a large number of genres within a particular cultural field. This allows us to study the relations between these genres as a totality, and not limit ourselves to a particular genre. In this case, I will focus on the field of popular music and draw upon reviews published in the Los Angeles Times in 1985/86 and 2004/05. In these two time periods, many different genres are reviewed. Secondly, reviews provide relatively short but rich interpretive statements. This not only enables us to study the meaningful aspect of classification systems but also provides us with a ‘natural’ grid for coding and extracting information from these reviews as reviews themselves follow more or less established genre conventions of writing. For my purposes, reviews have several important structural features: reviewers try to place and classify an artistic product within a genre and they evaluate it within a limited ‘evaluative repertoire’ consisting of a number of aesthetic criteria. The combination of these two structural elements provides us with the material to extract the aesthetic classification system as it is constructed by the ‘interpretative labor’ of reviewers. I will argue that the ‘evaluative repertoire’ of reviewers can be seen as consisting of a multidimensional ‘aesthetic space’ in which genres occupy certain ‘niche regions’ (Mohr et.al, 2000, 2005; McPherson, 1983; Rawlings and Bourgeois, 2004) and that if genres tend to overlap in their respective niche regions – which can be visualized as a network – these genres have received similar aesthetic meanings by reviewers. By visualizing this niche overlap structure, I can then study the classification system or ‘mental model’ as it appears in the discourse of critics.

The aim of this paper is both methodological and substantive. First, by comparing the classification systems of *LA Times* reviewers in 1985 and 2005, I want to qualify possible changes in the perception of the field of popular music in a time frame that has been argued to have witnessed important transformations. These transformations could be described as a process of ‘declassification’. In the next section, I will discuss this declassification ‘thesis’ in more detail. Then I will turn to the methodological aim of analyzing the meaningful organization of classification systems, and describe

the application of the methods developed by Mohr et. al (2000, 2005) on modeling discourse structures by drawing on the ecological concept of 'niche spaces'. Next, I will discuss and compare the extracted model of the aesthetic classification system of *LA Times* popular music reviewers in 1985 and 2005.

2. Classification systems of popular music in transition

The contemporary field of popular music has been argued to exhibit many signs of the process that DiMaggio (1991) describes as 'declassification'. The field seems to have become more differentiated and characterized by a plethora of styles and genres. This differentiation has been related to increased demands for more finely grained 'ritual classifications' or the need for cultural resources to mark the social boundaries of various style groups and subcultures (McLeod, 2001; Thornton, 1995). The boundaries between genre categories have also apparently weakened. The appearance of hybrid genres such as techno-rock, world-beat and rap-metal, in which aesthetic elements from different 'genre worlds' are combined, indicates that producers, consumers and intermediaries might have become less purist in their boundary drawing. It can also be argued that the way in which hierarchical boundaries are drawn within the field of popular music has changed. Until the mid 1980s, hierarchical distinctions between 'serious' and 'authentic' rock music and 'frivolous', commercial pop music were more firmly based on the application of principles of distinction that mirrored the boundary between 'art' and 'commerce'. In contrast, the contemporary field of popular music seems to be characterized by an 'intermediate aesthetic' which combines commercial and artistic values (Lindberg et. al., 2000).

Regev (2002) describes the process of declassification in the field of popular music as a process of 'pop-rockization'. He argues that increasingly more styles and genres occupy the field of popular music and the boundaries between genres such as rap/hiphop, electro-dance, mainstream pop, heavy metal, alternative rock, reggae, 'classic' rock are less strictly drawn and are lumped together into a meta-category of 'pop/rock'. The increasing use of the label pop/rock signals the waning of the hierarchical distinction between the 'heavy, hard and difficult' (i.e. rock) and the 'light, soft and easy' (i.e. pop). Regev regards this as indicative of an underlying cultural logic, a 'pop/rock aesthetic', which allows for the grouping of these diverse genres into one meta-category. All these genres are connected by their reliance on similar creative practices: electric and electronic sound textures, amplification, studio craftsmanship and a vocal delivery that can be characterized as 'untrained' or 'spontaneous'. This pop/rock aesthetic has furthermore expanded within a global field of pop-rock in which it has

become a global cultural model (Regev, 2007). The assumed unity underlying the diversity of genres within contemporary popular music, the logic that validates the use of the meta-category of pop/rock, according to Regev, is therefore provided by an aesthetic similarity: the use of similar aesthetic practices in the production of different styles of music ensures that all genres of 'pop/rock' are drawn into 'one sonic idiom, in one semiotic system'.

Changes within the industry structure of popular music could have facilitated this 'declassification'. Especially since the 1980s, a decentralized or 'open' system of production – in which many labels are controlled by a few large firms – has resulted in larger numbers of new acts and an increase in genre diversity in the mainstream market (Burnett, 1996; Lopes, 1992; Dowd, 2004). The success of rap and new wave in the 1980s and 'alternative rock' in the 1990s testifies to this growing diversity (Lopes, 1992). The blurring of institutional boundaries between 'majors' and 'independent' labels within the open system of production could also have resulted in the waning of hierarchical distinctions within the field of popular music between commercial 'pop' and authentic 'rock' which has often been superimposed on the institutional distinction between large-scale and restricted production (Bourdieu, 1993) or 'generalist' and 'specialist' organizations (Carroll and Swaminathan, 2000; Burnett, 1996). Moreover, the 'open' system of production could also have made possible the increased commercialization of 'communal' genres, and which could result in the blurring of the boundaries of genres. As argued by DiMaggio (1987: 450), commercial actors tend to push towards broader classifications and the erosion of boundaries of genres, due to the pressures to increase their market share and appeal to previously unexplored markets.

The commercialization of previously 'communal' genres has also been argued to change the aesthetic practice and conventions of genres. Peterson (1976) for example describes how the attempt to create a wider appeal for 'country music' resulted in the replacement of a 'hard core' style – characterized by rougher and twangy elements – by a 'soft shell' style which was more 'polished' and took elements of rock and pop music and thereby made 'country music' less distinguishable from other style of popular music. Hesmondalgh's study of electronic dance music (1998) provides another example of changing aesthetic practices due to commercial pressures. Aficionados of the genre often argue that 'electronic dance music' occupies a different position in the aesthetic system of contemporary popular music. Electronic dance music would, for example, not emphasize the importance of authorship and circumvent the star system. Hesmondalgh describes, however, how

economic pressures have pushed independent music labels to cooperation with ‘the majors’ and thereby also pushing dance acts into the direction of adopting many of the aesthetic features of rock acts – as in the case of The Prodigy. Even though the discourse on electronic music has often been couched in an almost postmodern discourse on the deconstruction of the author as writer, the dance music field has adopted the ‘authorship policies’ of rock culture (Hesmondalgh, 1998: 247).

The question I want to address in this paper is if this assumed process of declassification – the blurring of genre boundaries – can be found on the level of the perception and evaluation of popular music albums by critics. Has the perception of aesthetic boundaries of popular music genres by critics changed over the last 20 years? From a field theoretical perspective, studying the classification system of critics is important for several reasons. In general, field theory emphasizes the importance of symbolic and meaningful distinctions as co-constitutive of field structures. Central to the work of Bourdieu, for example, is the assumption of a correspondence between social and mental structures, between the objective divisions of the social world – particularly into dominant and dominated in the various fields and the principles of vision and division that agents apply to it’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 12). This assumption of a duality of structure and culture points us towards investigating the way in which actors within the field of popular music perceive the structure of the field, or in other words, the symbolic system of a cultural field. The blurring of institutional boundaries between ‘majors’ and ‘indies’ in the open system of production could by this logic also affect the symbolic classifications of actors within the field – and for example push towards eroding the boundaries between ‘art’ and ‘commerce’. As Bourdieu also argues, critics in cultural fields are *producers* of symbolic systems and influential actors in the struggle over the ‘dominant principles of vision and division’ in cultural fields. Moreover, critics are argued to patrol the internal boundaries of cultural fields between the large-scale and the restricted pole. Since in the subfield of restricted production, producers produce predominantly for other producers, and aim for evaluation according to field internal criteria, critics and critical success become important sources of legitimation among producers within the restricted subfield of production. Commercial success and wide appeal with non-producers are the heteronomous criteria which operate predominantly within the subfield of large-scale production. In this view, critics are performing the ‘boundary work’ between the ‘artistic’ and ‘commercial’ pole of cultural fields (Baumann, 2001). However, this role of critics might be more characteristic for autonomous cultural fields which are internally more strongly bounded and partitioned, but critics might have a more

ambiguous status within fields with fuzzy internal boundaries between the restricted and large-scale subfields. Critics might be less inclined to draw strong distinctions between ‘commercial’ and ‘artistic’ in fields in which the institutional structure is also less bounded.

Within the field of journalistic criticism, there might however also be internal variation and struggle over symbolic systems (Cf. Zuckerman and Kim, 2003). The type and formal characteristics of the classifications drawn, have been found to depend on actors’ relative positions within the field. For example, critics writing for national newspapers might perceive boundaries between genres as less distinct than their colleagues writing for more specialized publications that have a more segmented audience. As DiMaggio has argued, ‘structural consolidation’ could have an influence on the strength of artistic boundaries. When persons occupy similar positions on several dimensions, classifications will be strongly defended. The more general-oriented media outlets – such as national newspapers, which have a broader readership in terms of socio-demographic variables – are therefore likely to defend genre boundaries to a lesser extent. Moreover, critics writing for newspapers and magazines located more to the heteronomous pole of the journalistic field might also be more likely to use commercial values in evaluating cultural goods and perceiving less distinction between commerce and art than critics writing for newspapers or magazines located at the autonomous pole of the journalistic field.

With these considerations in mind, the aim of this paper is not to study field variation between newspaper outlets in their classification systems. The aim is to make a longitudinal comparison of the classification system of genres from the perspective of one particular national newspaper, the *LA Times*, across a time period in which it has been argued that a symbolic declassification has occurred. The *LA Times* is chosen as a widely distributed newspaper with a readership that is varied in social demographic variables and more importantly, can be said to discuss and review a wide variety of popular music genres. Although, of course, the *LA Times* selects only a specific - and because of the large extent of the popular music field in terms of yearly produced albums and active artists, only relatively small - subset of the field of popular music, the *LA Times* is relatively varied in its attention in terms of genres, but also on reporting on both the mainstream centre market (artists and albums that appear on the Billboard charts) as well as more peripheral and ‘specialists’ music genres. The inclusive and more encompassing perspective of the field within the *LA Times*, makes the study of how the

perception of the field has changed possible. Although our study is therefore limited to only one newspaper, the units of which the classification system is constructed are multiple and diverse.

2. Structural analysis of the discourse of music reviews

How can we extract a model of the classification system from the discourse of critics? In extracting the classification system, I will follow the three core principles of structuralist analysis (Levi-Strauss, 1963; Mohr, 1998). First, I will identify elementary components of which the discourse of reviewers is constructed. Second, I will identify how these elements are positioned vis-à-vis each other through relations of similarity and difference. Third, I will analyze the overall structure of these relations ('the relations of relations').

The first step in the structural analysis of music reviews consists of identifying two basic elements in the popular music discourse: (1) the use of genre labels to classify artists/albums within more general categories and (2) the use of evaluative criteria which can consist of sentences, short text passages or words that have evaluative meaning. These elementary units of the discourse are coded on a low level of generalization. An effort is made to stay as close to the text as possible and postpone the aggregation to larger semantic categories. This approach differs from other content analytic studies in that it tries to avoid generalization at the lower level of analysis by not working with a preconceived coding scheme (Cf. Roberts, 1989; Franzosi, 1989). Especially for research that wants to gauge the characteristics of classification systems it can lead to problems of circularity to assume (for example in the devising of a coding form) the content of categories and their boundaries. The 'anti-categorical' imperative of structural analysis therefore seems preferable in studying classifications and boundaries (Emirbayer, 1997; Cf. DiMaggio, 1986). Although the typification of the discourse into different 'aesthetics' is not the aim of this paper (cf. Van Venrooij and Schmutz, forthcoming), I do in fact find the typical kinds of criteria discussed in the literature on popular music discourse, for example, by Frith (1996) on the 'art', 'folk' and 'pop' discourses. Traditional 'art' criteria such as innovation, authenticity, authorship and creativity appear in these reviews. 'Pop' criteria which frame popular music as a form of entertainment and a commercial product also are found in, for example, emphasizing the 'accessibility' of the music, the functional uses to which it can be put, and the overall enjoyable experience which it can generate. 'Folk' values that emphasize the connection between 'art'

and ‘life’ can also be found in the critical discourse, for example in the degree of realism and credibility of the performer and the music.

The second step in the structural analysis consists of assessing relations of similarity and difference among the categories of genres. As a measure of similarity, I will use the concept of ‘structural equivalence’ which posits that elements which have similar relations with other elements are considered similar. In this case then, if genres have similar relations to evaluative criteria, or in other words, have similar ‘evaluative profiles’, they are considered as similar. This is consistent with the idea of genres as sets of conventions, which guide expectations and provide ‘standards for evaluating and appreciating cultural objects’ (Crane, 1992: 112). ‘Authenticity’ or ‘expressivity’ might for example be central to the discourse on country music, but less so for electronic dance music. Connotations can also vary between genres: soul is associated with ‘smooth and sweet’, punk with ‘raw and rough’, pop with ‘light and easy’ and rock with ‘heavy and difficult’. Behavioral rules also apply differently to genres: intimate revelatory music by a singer/songwriter should be listened to quietly and more contemplatively whereas hip-hop and R&B are more often associated with dancing or other functional values. In other words, genres can be said to have different ‘affordance’ structures (DeNora, 2000). They are situated in a semiotic space of values, connotations, uses, etc. Therefore it can also be argued that genres can be considered more or less similar in meaning by taking into account which meanings are attributed to them by reviewers. If genres receive similar evaluative judgments and are treated the same by reviewers in terms of the criteria used to evaluate them, these genres can be said to be similar in meaning. The closer together in semiotic space, the more similar I consider genres to be.

The third step then consists of analyzing the structural mapping of the relations of genres, or assessing the structure of the relations of genre as a whole. As argued by semiotic and structuralist theories, the meaning of each individual genre must be considered through its structural position within the overall relational system of how each genre is positioned vis-à-vis all other genres. To assess this overall relational structure, I will conceptualize genres as occupying *niche spaces* within the aesthetic discourse space and consider the overlap structure of genres. The assessment of the position of genres within the aesthetic discourse space therefore proceeds in two steps. (1) I will assess how reviewers position *individual* artists and albums within the aesthetic discourse space. Every genre classification of an artist/album is treated then as a discrete unit of meaning. (2) Since each individual album/artist has received a genre classification, it is then possible to conceptualize the position of a genre as a

discursive region, or as occupying a *niche* space within this aesthetic discourse space. Developed for the study of organizational ecologies (McPherson) but also applied to discourse spaces (Mohr), the measurement of these niche spaces of genres can then be used to measure the way in which genres occupy similar or different regions within this space by measuring the niche *overlaps* between genres. Genres that will overlap in their niche spaces will have similar meaning and genres that do not overlap will not have similar meanings. This overlap structure can then show the relational structure of genres by genres.

This ‘ecological’ conceptualization of an aesthetic space in which genres occupy niche (and possibly overlapping) locations can speak to a number of conceptual questions. First, the measurement of niche spaces can take into account the ambiguous and often contested nature of discourses. Different reviewers might mean slightly different things by labels as ‘rock’, ‘pop’ or ‘hip-hop’. Discourses often allow for some ambiguity and uncertainty. Also, the exact ‘extension’ of a genre label is often contested and the subject of debate and struggle within cultural fields. However, since niche regions are measured by using measures of central tendency, or in other words, by averaging across all the discrete uses of a genre label, this measurement of niche regions points towards a certain *core* use of a genre. Although reviewers might have different and conflicting ideas about the extension of a genre, by relying on measures of central tendency in establishing the region of a genre, this measurement strategy can take into account the ambiguous nature of discursive classifications. Second, the measurement of niches spaces can also indicate whether genres have more ‘elaborate’ or more ‘restricted’ meanings (Bernstein, 1960). The relative breadth of a genre niche space indicates whether reviewers attribute a wide range of meanings – wide in terms of the dimensions that the aesthetic discourse space takes on – to a genre or if the range of meaning is relatively limited. If genres have very diffuse meaning patterns, their evaluative codes are not schematic and well-defined (Swidler and Jepperson, 1994). Although the fact that a genre label is used frequently enough to appear in these reviews indicates that a category has formed, and thereby functions as an ‘institutional fact’, the breadth of a genre niche space can be a way in which we can measure the institutionalization of the meaning of a genre. Third, this conceptualization of an aesthetic discourse space can be seen as a way to study the process of cognitive ‘aggregation’ (Cf. DiMaggio, 1997: 278). As described by Bourdieu, the *habitus* – as a structuring structure – can account for the process of aggregation since it applies similar, ‘transposable’ and often basic – sensori-motoric – oppositions such as high/low, left/right, etc. to different domains, which

thereby reduces complexity and structures perception into higher and more simple categorical structures. In a similar way, the evaluative repertoire which reviewers apply to albums and artists is also inherently limited. In our conceptualization, the aggregation of genres in a higher-order system of categorization is actually achieved since the evaluative repertoire that reviewers use poses its own limitations on the perception of complexity. The use of the spatial metaphor of 'aesthetic discourse space' already emphasizes the constraints that the evaluative discourse places on the positioning of genres. Since genres have a location within this space and because of the boundedness of this aesthetic space, they will overlap to a certain extent and form a higher-order system of relations.

3. The discourse on popular music: data and methods

The data consists of two sets of reviews, both collected from the Los Angeles Times through the electronic database Proquest newspapers, covering two time periods: from January 1985 until November 1986 and from October 2004 to September 2005. The 2004-2005 reviews were gathered by searching for document type 'audio review', which returned reviews on classical, popular and jazz music but from which I selected the reviews that were published under the heading of the rubrics dedicated to pop albums such as *Record Rack*, *Pop Album Review* and *Latin Record Rack*. This returned 157 reviews. The 1985-1986 were collected by searching on the column 'Record Rack' since document type 'audio review' was not available and did not return any results. This returned 212 reviews.¹

A textual analysis was subsequently performed on these reviews with the help of the coding program AUTOMAP, in which I used lists of text strings to identify the elements of the two discourses. The two sets of words and text strings were constructed by an iterative process of coding and recoding the reviews. First, a list of words was constructed that recognizes the actual use of genre-terms in the reviews.² Second, a list of text strings was constructed that identified the use of evaluative criteria. In both cases, the aim was to stay as close as possible to the actual word usage in the reviews themselves without aggregating or imposing theoretical categories so as to reflect the naturally occurring discourse. In the case of evaluative criteria I however used a slightly aggregated list of text strings to

¹ Reviews which discussed more than one album in the same review were deleted

² The reviews were furthermore 'cleaned' from text segments that included the titles of albums, the title of songs and the quotation of lyrics in order to exclude the recognition of genre terms or evaluations not used by the reviewer but possibly appearing in the title of an album, as in the example of 'The Rock of my People'. For the same reason, the texts were cleaned from expressions and words that could be mistaken for genre terms such as the word soul in 'soul of the American people'. I also deleted sentences that included genre terms which did not pertain to the artist in question (as when a link was made to a previous review).

disregard the difference between a positive and negative implementation of a criterion (is_not_authentic and is_authentic are both coded as an invocation of the criterion of 'authenticity') because, in first instance, I was interested in the use of evaluative criteria more than the positive or negative direction of the evaluation.³ Not all genre-labels or evaluative criteria were present in both time periods since different genres were of course discussed and also the use of evaluative criteria differed slightly.

Although the lists for genre labels and evaluative concepts were much longer, I only listed and used genre labels and evaluative concepts that had a minimal occurrence of 4 in the data set of each period. For each review I also selected the main genre designation per review, which I defined as the genre label that occurred most frequently within a review. If, for example, the label 'hip-hop' was used 3 times within a review and the label 'rock' only once, I assigned 'hip-hop' a 1 and 'rock' a 0. If two genre labels were equally used within a review they both received a 1. From this recoded matrix of genres by reviews of artist/albums I then selected the genres that had a frequency of minimally 4.⁴ For the evaluative concepts, per review I only coded for the presence or absence of an evaluative criterion in a review. I therefore disregarded whether an evaluative criterion was used once or more than once since this could be a result of the length of the review and not the importance of the criterion for this type of artist. Again, I only included evaluative criteria that had an overall frequency of minimally 4.

To construct the aesthetic space, I deleted reviews that did not contain any genre label and/or in which none of the included evaluative criterion appeared. The album reviews that were included for analysis therefore had both a main genre designation as well as at least one evaluative criterion. For the 2004-2005 data set, this finally resulted in a binary 126 artist/album x 53 evaluative criterion matrix. The 1985-1986 data set, had a binary matrix of 152 x 57 artist/album by evaluative criterion matrix. Next, by calculating the degree of similarity in their aesthetic profiles⁵, I constructed two square matrices (126 x 126 and 152 x 152) in which every artist/album is located vis-à-vis all other artists/albums. This matrix was then submitted to a multidimensional scaling analysis which locates all artists within a 6-dimensional evaluative space.⁶

³ I coded combinations of genres as pop-rock, folk-rock, country-rock with these actual labels and did not code them as separate instances of genres pop_music and rock_music.

⁴ By selecting the main genre per review, I also circumvent the possibility that genres will be similar only because they occur in the same review.

⁵ We used a Jaccard measure to calculate the similarity coefficients.

⁶ The 6-dimensional solution of the MDS on the 2004-05 dataset had a stress value of 0.158. For the 6-dimensional solution of the MDS of the 1985/1986 the stress value was 0.172. We used the metric MDS application in UCINET.

Through the reduction provided by the multidimensional scaling analysis, I now have a 6-dimensional evaluative space in which all artists have a location. Note that the organization of this space is structured according to the duality of artists and evaluations. The next step is to calculate the volume of space occupied by different genres in this evaluative space. As mentioned earlier, reviewers draw on a genre discourse to classify artists and albums. Because all artists and albums are located within this 6-dimensional space, and these artists and albums have all received a genre classification, it is possible to determine the core location of genres within this aesthetic space. McPherson (1983) proposed a simple procedure that can be followed to calculate this niche space. First I calculate the core location of the genres in this evaluative space by taking the mean value of all the points in the aesthetic space that have been classified with the particular genre label. Next I add 1,25 of the standard deviation on both sides of the mean. For example, in the case of the 2005 aesthetic space, 22 artists have been classified by reviewers with the label 'rock_music' as the most important genre label, and since the evaluative space has 6 dimensions, I therefore took the mean of the 22 scores on the 6 dimensions and in each case added 1,25 of the standard deviation. In the case of rock_music, the mean of the 22 artists classified as rock_music on the first dimension was 0.67 with a 0.28 standard deviation, the window size on the first dimension was $0.67 \pm 1.25(0.28) = 0.32$ to 1.02. The volume of the space occupied by the genres can then be calculated by multiplying the window on all 6 dimensions. In the case of 'rock' the total volume was 0.0492 – the diagonal of table 1 lists the volume of the space of all 15 genres of the 2004/05 data (See Table 3 for the 1985/86 data set).

To assess how the genres are positioned vis-à-vis each other within the aesthetic space, the next step is to calculate the size and proportion of the overlap between genres. Because the window of each genre on the dimensions is known, the overlap can be calculated between all genres on the 6 dimensions. The window on the first dimension of hip-hop, for example, is 0.327 to 0.943 and for pop this is 0.238 to 0.928 – they therefore overlap on the first dimension from 0.327 to 0.928. Again by calculating the overlap on all 6 dimensions, the volume of the overlap can be found and table 1 lists the regional overlap of 15 genres of 2004/2005. Table 3 lists the overlap of the 17 genres of 1985/1986. Next the overlap relative to the overall size of the region space of each genre can be taken. This matrix is therefore asymmetric because the overlap is proportioned to the size of the region of the genre itself. It can be seen, for example, that in 2005 rock shares only 9% of its space with the space of funk but that the overlap between rock and funk constitutes 46% of the space of funk. To create a visual

representation of the structure of genres within evaluative space, I first plotted the overlap structure as a valued network – in which the percentage of overlap between two genres is considered as the strength of the tie between them – and used the Kamada-Kawai algorithm to find the optimal position of genres vis-à-vis each other in which genres that have much overlap are close together and those that do not overlap are further away (the value of the lines is considered as the strength of the similarity). Secondly, to enhance the visual inspection, I dichotomized the matrix at 50% of overlap. When more than 50% of the region space of a genre overlaps with another genre, there will be a directed line from one genre to the other genre. A doubled-headed arrow indicates that the overlap between two genres is more than 50% of the space of both genres. The relative position of the genres, however, remains based on the complete (valued) overlap structure.

4. Comparison of aesthetic boundaries between genres

With the visual representation of the two niche overlap structures of genres within aesthetic space, we are now able to answer our questions regarding possible changes between 1985 and 2005 in the aesthetic classification system of critics.

From the positioning of the genres in both 1985 and 2005 it seems clear that there is a core area of more densely overlapping genres and – in both years – four genres that are located more on the periphery of the aesthetic space. In figure 2 of the overlap structure in 1985, hip-hop, jazz, heavy-metal and country-rock were genres that did not share much of their space with other genres. In figure 1 of the overlap structure of 2005, these isolate positions are taken over by bluegrass, soul, salsa, and funk. Considering this center-periphery structure in both years, we can see that interestingly enough, hip-hop has moved between 1985 and 2005 from the periphery to the center, and funk has moved from the center to the periphery. In the 1980s, hip-hop was a relatively new genre and the meanings that reviewers attached to it seemed to have had a more separate aesthetic space in the perception of reviewers. The change from the periphery to the core, therefore also might reflect the particular genre-trajectory of hip-hop from a relatively marginal and aesthetically distinct type of music to now a very central genre which together with rock, pop and R&B form the core area of the aesthetic space. Funk on the other hand, which had a strong presence on the charts in the 1980s and also was seen by reviewers as a category which overlapped in meaning with some of the broader genres as rock, reggae, folk, dance-music and pop-rock, has moved in 2005 to a relatively separate niche. This trajectory from

center to periphery could be related to funk now seen as a re-traditionalized genre, a genre which is now perceived as outside of the pop-rock mainstream. Regarding the other isolates in 1985, heavy-metal was not reviewed much in 2005 and country-rock also became less used as a label in the discourse of reviewers. Jazz was still used as a label and made a slight move towards the center in 2005 but although country shares more than 50% of its space with jazz and jazz also shares a relatively large part of its space with blues, the genre remains somewhat on the periphery of the aesthetic discourse space in 2005.

If we move our attention to the center of both figures, we can see that the center of both years is structured differently. In general it seems that in 2005 the overlap structure is more evenly dispersed among the genres of the core, whereas in 1985 the overlap within the core is for a large part dependent on the centrality of one large genre niche, namely pop-rock. As we can also see in table 3, the genre pop-rock occupies a large region of the aesthetic space – the artists/albums labeled as pop-rock are widely dispersed throughout the aesthetic space – and this region is also occupied by most of the other genres like punk, rock ‘n’ roll, country, pop, soul, blues, rock, funk, folk, dance-music and R&B. Only the isolates and reggae do not share more than 50% of their own space with pop-rock. It is therefore safe to say that in 1985, pop-rock is used as one of the most general labels and the artists/albums classified as pop-rock are perceived and evaluated according to criteria that appear to be located far apart in aesthetic space. The generality of this label then, is what connects many of the genre labels in 1985. If we would remove this label, the structure of the 1985 genres becomes more loosely connected and only a core area of 5 genres (dance-music, folk, rock, reggae and funk) would appear as a densely populated area within the aesthetic space. In that case, apart from these 5 overlapping genres, most other genres would have a more specific niche aesthetic space. In 2005 on the other hand, the overlap structure shows a larger group of connected genres which, as a structure, does not hinge on one general category for its connectedness. Apart from the isolates all other genres share their space with at least two other genres. Jazz and blues are two genres which have relatively separate niche positions but still are connected, not only with each other, but also share space with country and norteno. The core of this structure is formed by the 4 genres pop, rock, R&B and hip-hop, which all overlap with all other three genres. A more formal measure of the ‘interconnectedness’ of the two graphs can be given by the overall density of the two networks which is larger in 2004/05 (0.1238) than in 1985/86 (0.0846). This comparison of the overlap structure in these two time periods therefore seems to suggest that in 2005

there seems to be greater structural overlap, and therefore a growth in similarity in aesthetic judgment. If the genre structure of popular music has undergone a process of isomorphism and aesthetic boundaries between genres have blurred, we would have indeed expected to see more genre overlap in aesthetic space in 2005 than in 1985.

The centrality of the label pop-rock in 1985 however seems to indicate that the process of ‘pop-rockization’ was already underway in the 1980s. The comparison of the two genre structures could however point out that whereas in the 1980s reviewers seemed to perceive a blurring of the boundary between pop and rock, they wanted to reserve the two labels for designating two more separated aesthetic areas. The use of the label of pop-rock as a general label could be interpreted as reviewers trying to ‘isolate’ the blurring of the boundary as a separate stream, a separate genre, whereas in 2005 reviewers have lost the distinctiveness of pop and rock and apply them to the same kinds of aesthetic principles. In 2005, pop and rock share a large part of each others aesthetic space – in which they are joined by hip-hop and R&B – and reviewers do not tend to perceive strong categorical boundaries between these two genres – at least not in the kinds of criteria that they associate with these genres.

Conclusion/Discussion

In this paper I aimed to model the way in which popular music critics position different genres within an aesthetic discourse space. I have argued that studies of aesthetic classification systems – i.e. relations of similarity and difference between genres – should pay attention to the way that these classification systems are meaningfully ordered, and, in the case of artistic classifications, are structured in and by the ‘categories of perception and evaluation’ of actors within the field. The study shows how an aesthetic classification system can be conceptualized and measured by (1) assessing how genres occupy niche regions within an aesthetic space, which is defined as consisting of the evaluative repertoires available to reviewers and (2) measuring the niche overlap structure of genres. Genres that overlap in their niche regions within aesthetic space are evaluated similarly by reviewers and therefore could be argued to have similar meanings.

This conceptualization of an aesthetic space is then used to study, in an exploratory way, possible changes within the aesthetic classification system of popular music reviewers between 1985 and 2005. The thesis of ‘declassification’ or ‘pop-rockization’ was found to be substantiated by the

changes in the aesthetic classification system of reviewers. The comparison of the two structures in 1985 and 2005 revealed that in the latter time period genres, tended to overlap more in aesthetic space than in 1985 which signals that reviewers tend to perceive and evaluate different genres with more similar evaluative criteria. Moreover, critics also tend to perceive less distinction between the category pair of 'pop' and 'rock'. In 1985, 'pop' and 'rock' had less overlap than in 2005. However, the centrality of the label of 'pop-rock' in 1985 signals that at this point in time, reviewers perceived 'pop-rock' to be a general category which was positioned centrally within aesthetic space and – we could argue – signals the acknowledgment of pop-rock as a separate stream of music, but which still indicates that reviewers tended to perceive rock and pop as two more or less distinct categories. These results could indicate then that, over the last 20 years, critics have moved from perceiving a boundary between commercial, illegitimate 'pop' versus artistic, legitimate 'rock', they nowadays might draw less strong boundaries between 'commerce' and 'art' – possibly due to the aforementioned changes in the structure of the music industry. As in the case of film (Baumann 2001), the creation of a boundary between 'high' and 'low', 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' within the commercial cultural industry of popular music might have been at its high point in the 1970s and 80s but, due to commercial pressures, has perhaps eroded in more recent decades.

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Table 1: Size of region and regional overlap 2004-2005

	bluegrass	norteno	funk	gospel	soul	folk	blues	jazz	salsa	randb	singersongwriter	country	rock	hiphop	pop
Bluegrass	0,0061														
Norteno	0,0013	0,0896													
Funk	0	0,0031	0,0099												
Gospel	0	0,011	0,0037	0,0192											
Soul	0	0	0	0	0,0247										
Folk	0,0012	0,0171	0,0043	0,0123	0	0,0406									
Blues	0,0029	0,0275	0,0023	0,0072	0	0,0189	0,0496								
Jazz	0,0022	0,0157	0,0022	0,005	0	0,0162	0,0242	0,0479							
Salsa	0	0,0113	0,0004	0	0	0,0075	0,0063	0,0049	0,0326						
Randb	0,0008	0,0186	0,0042	0,0105	0	0,0216	0,0139	0,0097	0,0137	0,0459					
singersongwriter	0,0021	0,0222	0,0041	0,0102	0	0,023	0,023	0,022	0,006	0,0187	0,0478				
Country	0,0015	0,0192	0,0029	0,0046	0	0,0151	0,0174	0,0195	0,007	0,0135	0,0268	0,0389			
Rock	0,0009	0,0179	0,0045	0,0065	0	0,0163	0,0137	0,0164	0,01	0,0233	0,024	0,0187	0,0492		
Hiphop	0,0005	0,0173	0,0033	0,006	0	0,0185	0,013	0,0133	0,0159	0,0241	0,0173	0,0178	0,024	0,0429	
Pop	0,0007	0,0275	0,0048	0,0097	0	0,0192	0,0171	0,0155	0,014	0,0296	0,0257	0,0216	0,0313	0,0309	0,0535

Table 2:Overlap as proportion of region space 2004-2005

	bluegrass	norteno	funk	gospel	soul	folk	blues	jazz	salsa	randb	singersongwriter	country	rock	hiphop	pop
bluegrass	1	0,2166	0	0	0	0,192	0,477	0,3639	0	0,1292	0,3407	0,1292	0,3407	0,2421	0,147
norteno	0,0147	1	0,0344	0,1223	0	0,1908	0,3064	0,1754	0,1259	0,207	0,2476	0,2141	0,1994	0,1935	0,3066
funk	0	0,313	1	0,3725	0	0,4375	0,2287	0,2259	0,0426	0,4226	0,4207	0,2977	0,4595	0,3396	0,4827
gospel	0	0,5721	0,1918	1	0	0,6432	0,3775	0,2604	0	0,5493	0,5314	0,2389	0,3375	0,3146	0,5071
soul	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
folk	0,0288	0,4214	0,1063	0,3036	0	1	0,465	0,3984	0,1838	0,5333	0,5662	0,3729	0,402	0,4555	0,4726
blues	0,0585	0,5542	0,0455	0,1459	0	0,3809	1	0,4878	0,1267	0,2814	0,4649	0,3512	0,2764	0,2628	0,3446
jazz	0,0462	0,3284	0,0465	0,1042	0	0,3377	0,5049	1	0,1021	0,2033	0,4599	0,4063	0,342	0,2783	0,3245
salsa	0	0,3458	0,0129	0	0	0,2285	0,1923	0,1498	1	0,4212	0,1846	0,2145	0,3064	0,4864	0,4291
randb	0,0171	0,404	0,0907	0,2291	0	0,4713	0,3037	0,2119	0,2993	1	0,407	0,2938	0,5079	0,5253	0,6434
singersongwriter	0,0434	0,4647	0,0869	0,2132	0	0,4813	0,4824	0,4612	0,1262	0,3915	1	0,5622	0,5025	0,3616	0,5385
country	0,0379	0,4939	0,0755	0,1178	0	0,3895	0,4479	0,5007	0,1802	0,3473	0,6909	1	0,4823	0,4574	0,5569
rock	0,0182	0,3633	0,0921	0,1314	0	0,3317	0,2784	0,3328	0,2033	0,4742	0,4878	0,3809	1	0,4872	0,6365
hiphop	0,0127	0,4043	0,0781	0,1405	0	0,4311	0,3037	0,3107	0,3701	0,5625	0,4025	0,4143	0,5589	1	0,7203
pop	0,0128	0,5133	0,0889	0,1814	0	0,3583	0,319	0,2902	0,2616	0,5519	0,4803	0,4041	0,5848	0,577	1

Table 3: Size of region and regional overlap 1985-1986

	pop	rock	funk	dance_music	country	soul	rock_n_roll	blues	punk	folk	Heavy_metal	hiphop	pop_rock	jazz	r_and_b	reggae	country_rock
pop	0,1076																
rock	0,0517	0,1083															
funk	0,0449	0,0604	0,1046														
dance_music	0,0418	0,0413	0,059	0,0931													
Country	0,0399	0,0403	0,0291	0,0271	0,1032												
Soul	0,0487	0,0367	0,029	0,0308	0,0261	0,0935											
rock_n_roll	0,0462	0,0394	0,0301	0,0315	0,0286	0,0346	0,0936										
Blues	0,0339	0,0414	0,0382	0,0399	0,0437	0,0231	0,0339	0,1039									
Punk	0,0365	0,0378	0,043	0,0278	0,0424	0,0167	0,0225	0,0304	0,0968								
Folk	0,0484	0,0597	0,053	0,0471	0,0388	0,0446	0,0382	0,0457	0,0224	0,1327							
heavy_metal	0,0208	0,0139	0,0168	0,0167	0,0109	0,0159	0,011	0,0075	0,009	0,0203	0,0526						
hiphop	0,0235	0,0192	0,0257	0,0218	0,0179	0,0123	0,029	0,0237	0,0156	0,0309	0,0093	0,0618					
pop_rock	0,0641	0,0689	0,0569	0,0533	0,0632	0,0499	0,0505	0,0609	0,0486	0,0809	0,0171	0,0266	0,1739				
Jazz	0,0094	0,0112	0,0117	0,0018	0,0066	0,0084	0,005	0,0027	0,007	0,0096	0,0056	0,0032	0,0098	0,0264			
r_and_b	0,0464	0,0354	0,0366	0,0488	0,0426	0,0391	0,0386	0,0492	0,0229	0,0552	0,014	0,023	0,0632	0,0001	0,1141		
reggae	0,047	0,0552	0,0561	0,0558	0,0393	0,0444	0,0365	0,0509	0,0379	0,055	0,0149	0,0191	0,0676	0,0079	0,0361	0,1549	
country_rock	0,0136	0,0114	0,0082	0,0057	0,0205	0,0113	0,0128	0,0118	0,0165	0,0072	0,0019	0,0046	0,0182	0,0025	0,0115	0,0102	0,0529

Table 4 Overlap as proportion of region space 1985-1986

	pop	rock	funk	dance_music	country	soul	rock_n_roll	blues	punk	folk	heavy_metal	hiphop	pop_rock	jazz	r_and_b	reggae	country_rock
pop	1	0,48	0,4172	0,3888	0,3706	0,4524	0,4291	0,3151	0,3392	0,4494	0,1932	0,2179	0,5952	0,087	0,4312	0,4365	0,1265
rock	0,477	1	0,5576	0,3816	0,372	0,3384	0,3638	0,3824	0,3487	0,551	0,1282	0,1776	0,6362	0,1031	0,3269	0,5095	0,1053
funk	0,4295	0,5776	1	0,5641	0,2787	0,2771	0,2878	0,365	0,4115	0,5068	0,1606	0,2455	0,5443	0,1122	0,3504	0,5366	0,0784
dance_music	0,4494	0,4439	0,6334	1	0,2906	0,3307	0,3385	0,4287	0,299	0,5058	0,1792	0,2345	0,5721	0,019	0,5245	0,5995	0,0609
country	0,3867	0,3906	0,2825	0,2623	1	0,2533	0,2773	0,4237	0,4107	0,376	0,1055	0,1739	0,6129	0,0644	0,4126	0,3811	0,1989
soul	0,521	0,3921	0,31	0,3294	0,2796	1	0,3702	0,2473	0,179	0,4771	0,1696	0,1319	0,5341	0,0897	0,4185	0,4747	0,1214
rock_n_roll	0,4936	0,4211	0,3216	0,3368	0,3058	0,3698	1	0,3624	0,2402	0,4087	0,1174	0,3102	0,5393	0,0536	0,413	0,3906	0,1373
blues	0,3264	0,3986	0,3673	0,3841	0,4206	0,2224	0,3263	1	0,2923	0,4396	0,0718	0,2276	0,5862	0,0255	0,4735	0,4902	0,1135
punk	0,3773	0,3903	0,4446	0,2877	0,4378	0,1729	0,2323	0,3139	1	0,2313	0,0929	0,1609	0,5017	0,0721	0,2369	0,3916	0,1707
folk	0,3646	0,4497	0,3994	0,355	0,2923	0,3361	0,2882	0,3442	0,1687	1	0,1533	0,2326	0,61	0,0724	0,416	0,4143	0,0539
heavy_metal	0,3957	0,2642	0,3196	0,3174	0,2071	0,3017	0,2091	0,142	0,1711	0,3871	1	0,1772	0,3252	0,1063	0,267	0,2828	0,0353
hiphop	0,3797	0,3114	0,4156	0,3535	0,2904	0,1996	0,4698	0,3829	0,2521	0,4997	0,1507	1	0,4306	0,0511	0,3731	0,3087	0,0743
pop_rock	0,3684	0,3963	0,3273	0,3063	0,3636	0,2871	0,2902	0,3503	0,2792	0,4655	0,0983	0,153	1	0,0561	0,3633	0,3885	0,1049
jazz	0,3546	0,423	0,4443	0,067	0,2515	0,3176	0,1898	0,1004	0,2644	0,3639	0,2117	0,1196	0,3694	1	0,0031	0,3009	0,0939
r_and_b	0,4069	0,3104	0,3213	0,4281	0,3732	0,3429	0,3388	0,4314	0,201	0,484	0,123	0,2021	0,5539	0,0007	1	0,3168	0,1013
reggae	0,3034	0,3563	0,3623	0,3604	0,2538	0,2865	0,236	0,3289	0,2447	0,355	0,096	0,1231	0,4362	0,0513	0,2333	1	0,0656
country_rock	0,2573	0,2154	0,1549	0,107	0,3875	0,2142	0,2427	0,2228	0,3119	0,1351	0,035	0,0867	0,3446	0,0468	0,2181	0,192	1

Figure 1 Dichotomized overlap structure (cutoff 0.5) 2004-05

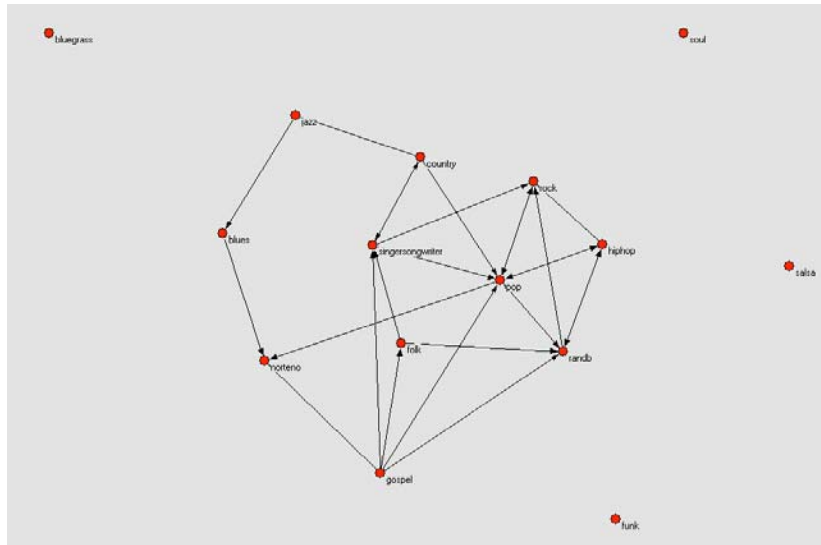
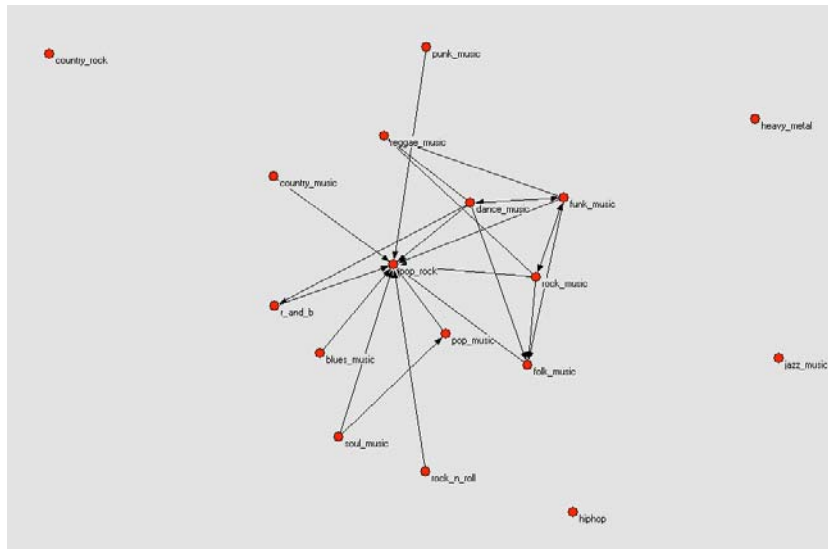


Figure 2 Dichotomized overlap structure (cutoff 0.5) 1985-06



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