LINES OF LONGITUDE AND LATITUDE
Defining text genres in popular music discourse

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Abstract – This paper explores the discourse of popular music (PMD) and the complex ways in which language is used to represent popular music (PM). After tracing the development of PMD, which established itself as a self-standing type of discourse notably after the rise of rock 'n' roll as a significant phenomenon of mass culture, this paper examines – through a qualitative analysis – the interrelation and characteristics of three main PMD genres: musicology, musicography, and musical biography. Musicology genres, typically authored by music experts, are found to offer top-down categorization and precise analyses of PM as an object of art and craftsmanship and, as such, an object of study and investigation. Musicography genres, mostly written by journalists and critics, focus on the organisation and canonisation of PM as an ongoing process of collective creation. Biography genres, written by musicians themselves or by their acolytes and collaborators, disclose the musicians' personal sphere and present PM as the product of their subjective and emotive creativity. This study highlights the varying rhetorical and semiotic strategies employed in each genre, aiming to contribute to a deeper understanding of PMD as a multifaceted and socially significant discourse practice, revealing how different genres shape and reflect our perception of PM.

Keywords: musicology; musicography; musical biography; music journalism; music discourse.

> *Reviewing the popular music of the twentieth century as a whole,*
> *most people would probably agree that some of it is excellent,*
> *some unbearable, and most of it very indifferent.*
> *What the good, bad, and indifferent share is a musical language.*
> (van der Merwe 1989: 3)

1. Introduction

When Marc Woodworth introduced the volume about music writing he co-edited with Ally-Jane Grossan, he claimed that

> writing about music is like dancing about architecture' [...], the writing, obviously enough, doesn't speak to music in its own language [...]. The differences between music itself and language make for the difficulty and the pleasure of writing [...]. Despite all the distance between mediums – and all the

> allowances we might make for that distance – there's an undeniable pleasure
> when language comes closest, *on its own terms*, to the music. (2015, pp. 2-3,
> emphasis added)

The present paper focusses precisely on the 'terms' (in the quote above) by which music discourse represents music – by which it tries "to explain the inexplicable" (Frith 2002, p. 236; see also Barthes 1977; Machin 2010; Seeger 1977). It investigates the resources writers use to 'come closest' to what music is through ideation (by variably representing music as art, entertainment, craft, creative process, cultural object, experiential phenomenon, individual expression, etc.), attitude (music as the outlet of emotion or source of interest, appreciation, enjoyment, comfort/discomfort, sharing, etc.), and textualisation (by presenting music as an object of investigation or narration, of experience, of socialisation, etc.).

The main assumption is that music – whether conceived in abstract terms (as a general phenomenon or sensory experience) or in its specific realisations (such as songs) – can be all of the above, i.e., creation, emotion, performance, enjoyment, craftsmanship, etc.: its perception varies in relation to the discoursal choices used to represent it.

This paper deals specifically with the discourse *about* popular music, i.e. that has popular music as its object. For the purpose of this paper, popular music (PM) is intended here as

> a hybrid of musical tradition, styles, and influences [embodying] a
> fundamental tension between the essential creativity of the act of 'making
> music' and the commercial nature of the bulk of its production and
> dissemination. (Shuker 2001, p. 7)

and

> music that has a wide following, is produced by contemporary artists and
> composers, and does not require public subsidy to survive, [thus ruling] out
> classical music and publicly supported orchestras, [while including] rock and
> roll, pop, rap, bebop, jazz, blues and many other genres. (Connolly, Krueger
> 2006, p. 667).

The focus on PM discourse (PMD) underlying this analysis is due to the fact that the establishing of PM as an object of cultural relevance is fairly recent (Middleton 1990), dating back to the early 1970s, when "rock music – like, for instance, film, photography, the detective story, science fiction and jazz – has moved upmarket in terms of status [when] 'new intellectuals' begun to make 'enjoyment on the spot' a subject for serious treatment, first in the press, later in book" (Lindberg *et al.* 2005, pp. 1-2), thus moving PM from the rank of 'entertainment' (or heteronomous cultural object, cf. Bourdieu 1992) to that of 'art' (autonomous cultural object). In this context, the

language used to make PM discursively handable and appealing is a resource whose forms and functions are worth investigating (Frith and Goodwin 1990). In fact, PMD is a type of discourse that balances efficiency – granted by the upholding of discursive standards ensuring recognisability and transparence to texts, and conferring referential solidity to the object of discussion (Jones 2002; Lindberg *et al.* 2005) – and effectiveness – typically embodied by idiosyncrasies and personal preferences of the individual writers that confer originality, maximise impact, and enhance appeal (Woodworth and Grossan 2015). In this way, a text about PM maintains its poignancy and interest even once the novelty and the ephemeral relevance (Middleton 1990) of its subject dissipates (simply put, after the consumption of the PM object – songs, album, gig). In this sense, "music writers [...] invented a form that hadn't existed before: 'serious' responses to what had only been considered disposable pop product about which no one would think to write anything at all" (Woodworth 2015, p. 1), and did so through discoursal resources drawn from various domain (Lindberg *et al.* 2005; Machin 2010; Woodwoth and Grossan 2015) such as literature (notably poetry and narrative), social research, ethnography, biography, and cultural analysis (Jones 2002) – differently selected and combined depending on the slant of the writer's approach, which may range from "the creative, the recondite, the wry, the historically obsessive" etc. (Moody 2015, p. xii). This discourse has actively contributed, and still contributes, to representing PM as a cultural object of its own right, that is, as a form of art rather than mere entertainment (Bourdieu 1992), with the same aesthetic validity and artistic dignity as those art forms that have traditionally been considered as more 'noble', like classical or 'serious' music.

1.1. Literature review

Until the late 1960s and early 1970s, academic research on PM was relatively limited and largely considered a subset of media studies (Crozier 1996; Lindberg *et al.* 2005). This scarcity, with some notable exceptions (e.g., Adorno 1941), can be attributed to the fact that PM only became a significant subject of research – whether musicological or social – with the rise and subsequent development of rock 'n' roll in the mid-1950s, that is, when this form of 'light' music was incorporated "into the repertoire of the hegemonic bloc" of PM production (Middleton 1990, p. 18), disseminated through the media, controlled by the music industry, and firmly established as a mass culture phenomenon, gradually overshadowing earlier PM forms such as folk, spiritual and gospel, blues, jazz, country and western, movie scores or the Tin Pan Alley / Denmark Street tradition of dance-band style songs (Middleton 1990, p. 38). Since the early 1970s, research on PM (where the music is the object of investigation) has expanded considerably, developing

along various trajectories. Broadly speaking, these include a positivist one (Middleton 1990) that focusses on categorisation and organising principles for understanding PM phenomena (Fabbri 1982; Hamm 1982; Mantere and Kurkela 2015; Negus 1999; Tagg 2013; Théberge 1997), an aesthetic and cognitive one, which assesses PM as an object of emotion, creativity and performance (Fritz and Jentschke 2009; Francès 1988; Godlovitch 1998; Hallam 2001), and a sociological or critical one, which examines PM as a reflection of social relations (Clayton *et al.* 2012; Frith 1978, 1996; Middleton 1990; Morley 2002). By contrast, research on PMD (where the object of investigation is the discourse on PM itself), to this day, remains relatively limited and little homogeneous, mainly due to the diverse and multifaceted nature of this type of discourse. In fact, PMD includes, on the one hand, the discourse used by scholars with theoretical musical knowledge, who assess and map PM based on music theory principles and aesthetic criteria, often for pedagogical aims. On the other hand, it encompasses the language utilised by journalists and music critics, who discuss PM with the purpose "to arbiter taste" (Lindberg *et al.* 2005, p. 17) employing "reasonable arguments [that combine] 'impressionist subjectivity' and 'committed objectivity'" (Lindberg *et al.* 2005, p. 13). Finally, it includes the discourse of musical biographies, which explore the musicians' "ramifications of subjectivity" (Pekacz 2017, p. 3) and offer insights into PM as a personal act of creation.

Studies on scholarly PMD typically approach expert PMD from either a historical or a comparative perspective, exploring music theories and traditions (e.g., historical or perceptual musicology, ethnomusicology, music structuralism, performance studies, etc.), their development over time and across cultures (Clayton *et al.* 2012; Frith and Goodwin 1990; Herbert 2012; Nettl and Bohlman 1991; Tomlinson 2012), their distinctive features (Bergeron and Bohlman 1992; Bohlman 1993; Feld 1994; Floyd 1991) and their pedagogical transmission (Campbell 1991; Green 1997, 2008). A more cohesive set of studies, instead, is devoted to journalistic PMD, following specific lines of inquiry, notably, a diachronic one, mapping the origin and evolution of music journalism (Gorman 2001, 2023; Jones 2002; Roe and Carlsson 1990), a comparative one, examining different ways of writing about PM (Heylin 1992; Hoskyns 2003; Torkelson Weber 2016; Woodworth and Grossan 2015), and a socio-cultural one, analysing how music journalism contributes to the cultural legitimisation of PM (Lindberg *et al.* 2005; Martin 1993; McDonnell and Powers 1995; McLeod 2002).

Studies on biographical PMD, a field that has regained scholarly interest in recent decades after being sidelined in favour of more scientific and formal approaches to music, challenge the notion of musical autonomy and aesthetic self-referentiality, and the idea that music is solely a product of its time and culture (Adorno 1941; Clark 2012; Swinkin 2015), emphasising,

instead, the musicians' authenticity and the role of their creative impulses in the act of music-making. However, research in this domain has predominantly focussed on 'serious' composers rather than PM musicians (Mantere and Kurkela 2015; Lennenber 2019; Pekacz 2004, 2017; Wiley and Watt 2019).

Despite the depth and articulation of these three approaches to PMD, there remains a significant gap in accounting for them jointly – namely, in analysing both the commonalities that bind them and the specificities of their respective traditions. This paper aims to assess that gap from a critical, genre-based, and discourse-oriented perspective. In doing so, it seeks to outline the interrelations and typical characteristics of the various PMD genres, ultimately contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of PMD as a multifaceted discursive phenomenon.

2. Methodology: PMD as social practice

PMD is assessed here in critical analytical terms as social practice, thus as a "relatively stabilised form of social activity" (Fairclough 2001, p. 231; see also Fairclough 2003), accounting for "the ways things are generally done or happen in particular areas of social life [especially when] representing specific aspects of music life" (Aleshinskaya 2013, p. 425). Within this framework, genres are defined as the "means of organizing and formalizing social interaction in the sphere of contemporary musical art" (Aleshinskaya 2013, p. 425), where discourse affordances are strategically exploited to communicate music-related content in specific contexts and for specific purposes (i.e inform, entertain, instruct, etc.).

This analysis is a qualitative account[1] of the various genres through which PMD is realised. It is meant to offer an outline of the genres in PMD and their salient features, namely those which are typically (if not exclusively) found in this thematic domain, irrespective of the actual frequency of their use, that may vary due to merely contextual reasons (i.e. compliance to editorial guidelines, status of the writer, popularity of the musician, type and domain-specificity of the music object being discussed, etc.). The variables considered here to understand PMD genres regard the social agents, social relation, the purpose, and the content of music-related communicative acts.

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[1] Although this analysis is based on a relatively extensive corpus of 490 PMD texts – either read in full or carefully skimmed – the classification of PMD genres (§3) and their discursive features (§4) is not determined by frequency counts or computational criteria. Instead, it draws on observable trends and recurring patterns that appear to be characteristic of each genre, regardless of their overall frequency.

2.1. Social agents

Unlike other communicative settings (notably, professional, specialised, academic, operative or 'paid-work related' ones, cf. Aleshinskaya 2013, p. 425; Gunnarsson 2009, p. 9; see also Bhatia 1993, 2004) – where agents are members of communities of discourse or practice sharing comparable competence, experience, needs, and goals – the domain of PM is not restricted to PM community members (i.e. musicians, people working for music companies or outlets, members of professional associations, etc., cf. Chung *et al.* 2007; Lindberg *et al.* 2005; Woodworth and Grossan 2015), but it grants access to a more diversified range of agents. To better understand PMD as socialisation it is thus relevant to distinguish agents according to their roles as *senders* or *intended audience*.

2.1.1. Senders

Senders in music-related communication can be *internal*, *proximal* or *external* to the act of music-making.

2.1.1.1. Internal agents

Internal agents are creators, those directly involved in (or present during) the act of music creation, completion, and performance, as either main responsible, assistants or direct witnesses (vocalists, players, producers, sound engineers, managers, record manufacturers, etc.). As such, they hold an internal perspective on music-making: they had an active role in shaping music objects and/or making them available, and now they transform their experience into text.

2.1.1.2. Proximal agents

Proximal agents are associates, relevant others, relatives, friends or acquaintances of the creators. Given such a privileged bond, they may disclose little known pieces of information concerning contexts, anecdotes, attitudes or backstories about the genesis of some piece of music, despite not participating directly in or being present for the actual act of music-making. Proximal agents offer a personal perspective: even though they were not actively involved, they were around when pieces of music were created.

2.1.1.3. External agents

External agents are those who evaluate, analyze, write about or teach other-produced music objects. External agents may include experts or journalists. Experts are typically musicologists, with qualifications acquired through

conservatoire training or degrees, subscribing to "an agreed account of musical tradition or art history [and] to institutional principles of musical analysis or artistic techniques" (Frith 2002, p. 236). PM journalists and critics, instead, are writers having acquired credibility and authoritativeness by writing for established magazines and PM publications (Fenster 2002, p. 83), thus being recognised by readers as aesthetic arbiters (Cloonan 2002, p. 128), cultural mediators (Stratton 1982), professional opinion leaders and consumer's guides (Fenster 2002, p. 82), whose task is to listen carefully to the music, ponder its aesthetic qualities and offer their informed judgement (Lindberg *et al.* 2005). External agents have an extrinsic perspective on music-making: although they did not contribute to creating music – but possibly only to promoting and circulating it – they transform into text their sensitivity, knowledge and the impression they received from listening to or studying a piece of music.

2.1.2. Intended audience

The target audience of music-related texts can be represented by *experts*, *semi-experts* or *non-experts*.

2.1.2.1. Experts

Experts are part of a restricted community of discourse and practice (scholars, composers, performers) whose members share the same competence (though at different degrees) and needs. Competence may stem from formal musical education and training – this being the case of musicologists, "musically sophisticated students" (Woodworth 2015, p. 2) or teachers – or from professional experience in music composition, arrangements, performance, or even instrument design, which is reflected in "a good understanding of specific musical phenomena" (Aleshinskaya 2013, p. 438). Such epistemological competence is typically accompanied by a solid mastery of the domain-specific language. Experts' needs may be related to their willingness to expand their specialised knowledge either for the sake of acquiring an in-depth understanding of a music object, or for such knowledge to be applied to practical contexts (creation, completion, performance, or pedagogy).

2.1.2.2. Semi-experts

Semi-experts are readers whose knowledge of PM stems from their interest in the domain as record buyers, would-be musicians, devoted music fans (Aleshinskaya 2013), "well-educated connoisseurs" (Gudmundsson *et al.* 2002, p. 57) or 'niche audiences' (Woodworth 2015, p. 2) of readers who wish to expand their PM-related encyclopedic knowledge. For this reason, if

they are unlikely to be familiar with the specialised discourse of PM academic research, they are instead familiar with journalistic PMD practices. Their lack of musical training or scholarly education is not a hindrance, in that their interest in PM is for typically informative reasons – and only peripherally for applied or operative ones.

2.1.2.3. Non-experts

Non-experts are users with neither expertise nor specific interest in acquiring or expanding PM encyclopedic knowledge, but who have a general curiosity about very specific and circumscribed aspects of PM – especially about some musicians. Non-experts may be little familiar, not only with academic registers, but possibly also with the style and terminology typically found in PM journalism. This is not a concern in that they are likely to be willing to read about anecdotes or discover the exegesis of a piece of music rather than be able to analyze it or assess its aesthetic merit.

The distinction concerning PM social agents allows us to also define the type of social relation and purpose that influence generic choices.

2.2. Social relation

Although most domain-specific communication is vertical or asymmetric – being produced by those having relevant information and meant for those lacking relevant information – within PMD it is possible to distinguish between three types of relations: *vertical proper, quasi-vertical* and *quasi-horizontal*.

2.2.1. Vertical relations

Vertical proper is the type of relation between providers of information and an audience who need to acquire it, notably experts (Aleshinskaya 2013, p. 430). In this case verticality is represented by aligning to a very specific and gate-keeping language, which grants adequacy of content treatment and communicative comprehensibility. This relation is reader-responsible and exclusive, in that contents are accessible only or primarily to those mastering domain-specific discourse conventions.

2.2.2. Quasi-vertical relation

Quasi-vertical relation is the one between the provider of information and an audience who are mainly interested in it, notably semi-experts. In this case (the impression of) verticality is represented by textualisations which, in terms of micro-language (terminology and phraseology) and macro-language (information packaging), opt for apparently gate-keeping resources and

strategies[2] – but which are in reality merely domain-specific and conventional (Aleshinskaya 2013; Woodworth and Grossan 2015) – that is, they are not used for exclusive purposes, but rather to confer relevance and dignity upon the content, and stimulate readers' involvement by implying a certain level of PM knowledge on their part.

2.2.3. Quasi-horizontal relation

Quasi-horizontal is the relation between the information provider and an audience that are simply curious about certain aspects of PM, typically non-experts. Given the likely superficial interest of the readers, this type of relation produces writer-responsible texts, whereby writers need to make their texts linguistically easy to process (hence as 'horizontal' as possible) in order to attract and maintain the reader's attention.

2.3. Purpose

The purposes of PMD are of three different types – aligning to the types of relation seen above – namely, *instruct, inform* and *engage*.

2.3.1. Instruct

Instruct purpose is embodied in vertical relations: this purpose is central in those PMD genres meant to expand the abstract competence of the reader, very often for operative and applied reason (for such competence to be useful when creating PM, finessing it, performing it, investigating it or teaching it).

2.3.2. Inform

Inform purpose is reflected in quasi-vertical relations: this is the main aim of genres meant to provide and organise (even varied and complex) PM-related information aimed at responding to the readers' specific interest and expanding their encyclopedic knowledge.

2.3.3. Engage

Engage purpose is typical of quasi-horizontal relations: this is the purpose of PMD genres meant to satisfy the readers' general interest, for them to have

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[2] PM "critics have been responsible for the growth of a public aesthetic discourse with strong 'heteroglot' traces – a hybrid discourse in which elements of 'high theory' mingle with discursive practices derived from everyday intercourse with the music" (Lindberg *et al.* 2005, p 4).

some basic knowledge of specific aspects of the artist's life and creative output.

2.4. Content

PMD genres and their semiotic specificities are to be understood also in relation to their content. Although in abstract terms the content of such genres is PM, the concept of PM points to articulated sets of referents whose relevance depends on the epistemologies of the communicative context, the social agents involved and their roles, and the purpose of socialisation (Middleton 1990; Machin 2010). In order to assess this variability, it is useful to organise contents into different groupings: notably, when PM is dealt with as *object*, as *process*, or as *product*.

2.4.1. Object

PM as object is found in those texts where PM is discussed in terms of tecnhé, i.e. by focussing on formal and technical aspects concerning its creation, completion and performance (Di Scipio 1995; Rehding 2021; Siertsema 1962). Music as objects is thus assessed on the basis of its component parts, defined according to domain-specific criteria (i.e. notation, timbre, pitch, structure, etc.), which are thus taken apart and analyzed on the basis of specific epistemological categories (i.e. melody, harmony, rhythm, etc.) for the music object, its parts and their interplay to be comprehended by the ideal reader.

2.4.2. Process

PM as process is the notional centre of texts where the focus is on music as a social and experiential phenomenon or collective reality (Cook 1990), stemming from the interplay of several variables, among which strictly social ones (i.e. the musicians' age, taste, kinship, will to be part of a community, will to impress, etc.), structural ones (i.e. the availability and accessibility of certain affordances – notably instrumentation, phonographic support, venues, media programs, etc. – and their influence on music-making), and notional ones (i.e. recognisable formats, styles, genres of music, etc.). The focus is neither on PM objects nor on single musicians, but rather on framing PM outputs on the basis of some commonalities across pieces of music, various musicians and contexts.

2.4.3. Product

PM as product is the subject of texts where music is seen as the output of a specific musician or restricted group of musicians (a band), as a peculiar form

of self-expression, and the result of personal hypostases – experiences, sensitivity, psychology, etc. (Barthes 1977) – which, precisely for their role in the act of music creation, finessing and performance, confer uniqueness and a personal or anecdotal dimension to such a product.

3. Results: PMD genres

On the basis of the criteria above, three main macro-genres (each containing possible sub-genres) can be identified in PMD, namely, *musicology*, *musicography*, and *biography* genres. The table below outlines the main features of these PMD genres.

	sender	*audience*	*relation*	*purpose*	*content*
Musicology Genres	external	expert	vertical	instruct	PM object
Musicography Genres					
Review	external	semi-expert	quasi-vertical	inform	PM object
Overview	external	semi-expert	quasi-vertical	inform	PM process
Interview	external	semi-expert non-experts	quasi-horizontal	inform engage	PM process PM product
Biography Genres					
Biography	external	non-expert	quasi-horizontal	engage inform	PM product
Dual-Autography	proximal	non-expert semi-expert	quasi-horizontal	inform engage	PM product
Autobiography	internal	non-expert	quasi-horizontal	engage	PM product

Table 1
Outline of generic features in PMD genres.

3.1. Musicology genres

As we can gather from the table above, musicology genres (ranging from research articles to thematic monographs, to collection of essays) are those authored by experts in the domain of musicology (as external agents) and are

targeted to expert audiences, already having solid competences in musicology contents, as well as solid mastery of the codes through which such contents are vertically transferred (to be acquired, rather than negotiated). The purpose for these genres is to expand the readers' competence (instruct), very often for operative reasons (to be used when composing, performing, researching or teaching). The semantics of musicologies concerns PM as object, considered as a datum (i.e. irrespective of the musicians' hypostases) and dealt with from an external perspective (i.e. irrespective of the intuition, opinion and emotion of the writer, or the appreciation and response on the part of the general public). Musicology genres offer anatomies, through detailed analysis (Frith 2002, p. 239) and systematisation: they take apart and deconstruct PM objects according to domain-specific parameters (i.e. notation, scales, intervals, composition and performance techniques). They identify and isolate component parts as elements of techné so as to favour assessment, measuring and understanding, thus "mapping a particular area and distilling key elements of thought about it" (Pickering 2010, p. 474) and, at the same time, corroborating the efficacy of such parameters. In this sense musicology genres provide a top-down framing of PM, that is a categorial systematisation whereby PM objects are dissected and filtered through representational parameters which allow for abstraction (relating the single contextual instance to some general system), indexicalisation (relating the particular to the category), and modelisation (relating the separate to some coherent paradigm) in order to facilitate operationalisation – i.e. the application of the theory to PM-related activities.

3.2. Musicography genres

Musicography genres (i.e. reviews, overviews, interviews) are usually authored by journalists or music critics (as external agents[3]) and are targeted to semi-experts, i.e. devotees with advanced knowledge (although not technical) of PM, with the purpose to offer extended and detailed information about PM and musicians for it to be integrated (i.e. quasi-vertically) to the knowledge readers are expected to already possess. PM is here represented as a process, resulting from the interplay between the musician's intention and various contextual factors (time, place, cultural background, age, public response, existing trends, etc.), and interpreted on the basis of the framing writers decide to use to assess such processes. More specifically, musicography genres offer rationalisation, through narrative and canon-

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[3] With some notable exception, i.e. Lol Tolhurst, of the band The Cure, authoring a monograph on the Gothic movement, *Goth* (2023), or Jaki Floreck (with Paul Welhan), of the band The Adams Family, authoring *Liverpool Eric's: All the Best Clubs are Downstairs* (2009), about the Liverpool post-punk scene that gravitated toward the club Eric's.

construction: they highlight the connection and interaction between PM phenomena (or parts of a PM phenomenon) – by "narrativizing [...] what matters in popular music's recent history [applying] broad critical terms and concepts [...] connecting new sounds with those one has heard, and evaluating these sounds according to certain standards and values of judgment" (Fenster 2002, p. 89) and "plac[ing] performes in a musical/ideological tradition" (Frith 2002, p. 239) – thus providing organisation and harmonisation of heterogeneous material into a cohesive whole, through "the fixing of chaotic and incohate elements in music [...] in a lasting scheme of value" (Reynolds 1990a, p. 9) according to the writer's subjectively selected parameters (i.e. not necessarily scientific or academic, cf. Einarson 2024). These genres offer a bottom-up framing of diverse PM realities, evidencing distinctive features and trends at the phenomenological level that may reveal a coherent continuum or indicate forms of progress and dynamic development at a higher level of abstraction.

With such genres, writer's evaluation is as important as content presentation, but in order to contain the possible threat posited by writer's subjectivity – that is, to resist "eccentric [...] or ambitious writing" (Woodworth and Grossan 2015, p. 92), and enhance the perception of the empirical validity and referential accuracy of the content – writers filters subjective stance through some quasi-objective parameters and organising principles (Lindberg *et al.* 2005). These parameters vary according to the three main musicography sub-genres, namely, *reviews*, *overviews* and *interviews*.

3.2.1. Reviews

Reviews (single or collected in extended texts,[4] track-by-track comments,[5] chronicles,[6] etc.) express the writer's stance about songs, full albums, gigs, discographies, etc. according to aesthetic (standard vs creative, trivial vs symbolic) or cognitive criteria (expected vs unexpected, conventional vs exceptional) – whereby the framing of PM is on the basis of its aesthetic value and impact, by which a music object or event is noteworthy because it stands out.

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[4] Cf. Doyle 2022; Pegg 2016.
[5] Cf. Farmer 1998; Swan 2018.
[6] Cf. Endeacott 2014; Parker 2001.

3.2.2. Overviews

Overviews are attempts at mapping complex PM phenomena (movements,[7] PM aesthetics,[8] trends,[9] genres and styles[10] – either general[11] or very localised[12]) according to organising principles drawn from "literary criticism, political theory and cultural studies" (Lindberg *et al.* 2005, p. 280), thus on the basis of temporal (from origin to articulation, from genesis to completion), geographical (from periphery to center), social (from individual to collective), and cultural specificities (from common to salient, from marginal to typical).

3.2.3. Interviews

Interviews (ranging from interviews to single musicians or several band members,[13] to oral histories,[14] which are collective interviews to people even remotely or not concerned with the act of music creation, i.e. scenesters, friends, fans, etc.) are texts where the writer is concealed behind the voice of the interviewees, using their privileged positions and personal experience as an organising principle, thus conferring textual relevance to contents (moving them from private to public, from anecdotal to emblematic, from subjective to empirical and reliable).

3.3. Biography genres

Biography genres are authored by either agents who are internal, external or proximal to the act of music-making. Internal agents (musicians, performers, technicians who were present while PM was being created) are responsible for *autobiographies*. External agents (mainly journalists, but also fans[15] – with no relevant connection with musicians) write *biographies*. Proximal agents (musicians' partners and relatives,[16] friends,[17] collaborators,[18] etc.) author *dual-autography* (Abbott 1988), whereby the story of their own life – in itself of little interest for PM readers – acquires relevance in that it

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[7] Cf. Heylin 2008; Robb 2023.
[8] Cf. Cooper, Smay 2001; Meltzer 1970.
[9] Cf. Reynold 1990b; Whiteley 2000.
[10] Cf. Evans 2022; Toop 1995.
[11] Cf. Azerrad 2023; MacIntyre *et al.* 2022.
[12] Cf. Du Noyer 2002; Haslam 2000.
[13] Cf. Woodworth 1998; Zollo 1997.
[14] Cf. Bean 2019; Katz 2024.
[15] Cf. Lurie 2009; Stafford 2020.
[16] Cf. Curtis 2005; McGuinn 2017.
[17] Cf. Butcher 2011; Ronson 2024.
[18] Cf. Brown 2011; Little 2022.

interacts with and sheds light upon the one of the musicians. These three subgenres are appealing to audiences of non-experts, having neither musicological competence nor (necessarily) encyclopedic musical knowledge, but a general curiosity about specific musicians. PM is dealt with as a product, that is a projection of a musician's life experience, to be explained in relation to the artist's attitude, psychology, relationships, break-ups, etc. The purpose of these genres is to satisfy readers' curiosity in engaging ways. Engagement can be achieved in two sensibly different fashions: in the case of autobiographies and dual-autographies, by enhancing subjective stance and personal voice (thus providing readers a way to picture themselves 'in the author's shoes'); in the case of biographies, on the contrary, by containing personal stance and voice (notably personification and overt evaluation, since the reader's curiosity is not about the writer's opinion) and instead maximising referential informativeness (in terms of quantity, accuracy and reliability of the information provided) and, where possible, musician's intervention (by reporting – verbatim or through paraphrases – the musicians' words, opinions, anecdotes, etc.). Biography genres offer stories, through introspection and contextualisation: they provide biographical information, extended anecdotal data, and access to personal opinions in order for the reader to be able to see what is behind and beyond a PM product, and what motivated and affected its coming into being (by presenting PM as the result of a progress from context to outcome, from intention to achievement, from life to art, from personal work to collective consumption).

4. Discussion

4.1. PMD: Acceptability and adequacy

Language is the fabric of text, and texts are semiotisations of content for it to be handable and easily processable by the intended audience. Processability depends not only on referential transparency, but also on the alignment on the part of writers to specific credibility conditions (Hyland 1998, 2005), namely acceptability and adequacy. The former concerns the authors' perceived authoritativeness and knowledge of the contents they are presenting; the latter refers to the way the contents are presented and, more specifically, to their "plausible relationship with reality" (Hyland 1998, p. 440) and the alignment to the "rhetoric of the discourse community" (Hyland 1998, p. 440) which, in the case of PMD genres, is constituted by PM writers, readers, consumers and artists.

Acceptability and adequacy are semiotised differently in the various PMD genres, as can be seen in the table below.

	Acceptability	*Adequacy*
Musicology genres	From membership to academic community	Alignment to community standards Language of exactness
Musicography genres	From access to reliable sources	Ability to map and organize Language of relation
Biography genres	From access to personal hypostases	Language of emotion

Table 2
Acceptability and adequacy features in PMD genres.

In musicology, acceptability is granted by the writers' established membership to the PM academic community, retrievable, for instance, from the type of outlets issuing their contributions (journals, publishing houses, book series,etc.) – on the basis of their circulation and impact factor – or from their citation status (the fact of being often referred to or quoted in academic research). Adequacy stems from alignment to the expert community's standards (in terms of conceptualisations, vocabulary, and formats). Musicologists, in fact, write 'on behalf' of their community. Therefore, musicology genres' discourse hinges on the little visibility of the writer and the little noticeability of their voice, or, at least, on the predominance of logos (language, reasoning, argumentation) over pathos (evaluation, impression, intuition) – see example (1). Although first person pronouns and personalisation can be found in musicology, when writers opt for being textually visible, they tend to lexicalise their persona as emissaries for the academic community (2) engaged in the advancement of disciplinary knowledge (3).

This can be easily observed especially in those parts of the texts with a marked metatextual character (i.e. preface, prologue forewords, epilogue, etc.), where writers anticipate what readers are going to find in the ensuing text, specifying or implying their roles and how their text will approach, assess, segment and deal with the content, as in the examples below.

1) *This book discusses* that struggle in detail within the context of the bands' social and cultural lifestyle. In doing so *it considers* the interrelationships between art and society, *attempting to explore* the tension between creativity and commerce *through description and analysis* of the processes of musical production and performance by the bands. (Cohen 1991, p. 4; emphasis added, as in all examples below)

2) *A good deal has changed in music studies since 2003,* not least in the areas and debates that are explored in the book. [...] For this edition, *we invited all contributors to the first edition to participate again*. We are grateful to all of them for [...] the revisions and

updating that have been made. [...] *Each took the opportunity to consider how they might take account of new interventions into their areas of interest.* (Clayton *et al*. 2012, p. x)

3) *My particular concern* is to suggest that the sociological approach to popular music does not rule out an aesthetic theory, but, on the contrary, makes one possible. [...] *In my own academic work I have examined* how rock is produced and consumed, but there is no way that *a reading of my books* (or those of other sociologists) could be used to explain why some pop songs are good and others are bad. (Frith 2004, p. 32)

While musicology is a domain of research with established epistemologies and discursive conventions to resort to, in musicography acceptability and adequacy are constructed on different grounds. Acceptability is through authorial visibility, that can be expressly established in metatextual sections, where writers claim their competence – or have their competence assessed by recognisable figures in the domain (i.e. musicians, journalists, media personalities, etc.) – by explicitating the type and kind of information in their possession and associating it to reliable sources (4). Adequacy – in terms of referential coherence, more than alignment to given standards – is attained by conferring significance to contents, notably by pointing out how and why their rationalisation and canonisation is relevant or necessary, often referring to gaps in the existing literature, to the absence of a coherent mapping (5), or the scarceness of interest or awareness about a given phenomenon which instead deserves consideration (6).

4) *Grant and I both knew arts culture journalist Neil Cooper*, largely through being interviewed by Neil over the years. We felt his overview of what we were trying to achieve with the book would prove invaluable – it did. *Neil interviewed Geoff Travis [and] spoke to Bob Last and Hilary Morrison to corroborate our thoughts on the Fast Product story.* (MacIntyre *et al.* 2022, pp. 1-2)

5) While I enjoyed the books that had come out on the group, *I felt something was missing* on those rollercoaster rides up and down Go-Stop Boulevard. Or maybe I just needed more Love [...]. That's how I felt about the band. I wanted more about the music itself [...], *there has been no archeological dig for every last bit of their music*, so I figured maybe I should do the exploring. I've come up with a structured song-by-song guide through Love's full catalog. (Spevack 2021, p. 6)

6) *The people in this book had their own particular place 'beyond the pale'.* From Arthur Brown and the Pretty Things in Britain, to the Beau Brummels and Tim Buckley here in America, *the world-absorbing nature of these eclectic artists and the turbulent times around them reflected a world exploding with possibility and impossible dreams. [...] This is invariably true about all the artists here*, in relation to the people they eventually influenced. (Kantner 2000, p. vii)

In biography genres, acceptability is realised differently in the case of internal and proximal agents, on the one hand, and external, on the other. The acceptability of the former agents is not in question, given their first-hand

experience with music creation and privileged access to personal hypostases. In such cases authorial presence may be explicitated and emphasised by disclaimers pointing out the personal, subjective, potentially biased and even self-mythologising (or other-mythologising) perspective through which they tell their stories (7). External agents, on the contrary, enhance acceptability by claiming objectivity and reliability – or having it claimed by the biographees themselves (8) – based on their access to first-hand and authoritative sources (9), which makes them trustworthy storytellers of someone else's story. Adequacy as a coherent relationship to reality is also accounted for by these acceptability concerns. While adequacy in terms of alignment to discursive standards – given the range of agents, contents and purpose of these genres, and the consequent lack of homogeneous standards – is of little relevance.

7) *This book may be a pack of lies*. Or the unmitigated truth. It really depends what you prefer to believe. I *have* [emphasis in the original] dutifully researched, as well as trawled the memory banks of myself and others, but have written without being slavish to fact. *These are my memories and I can't demand absolute accuracy of them*, so neither should you. *My story is certainly based on true events but even the most honest of men and women are prone to exaggeration in the pursuit of self-mythology,* wouldn't you agree? (Hussey 2019, p. xi)

8) Thanks John Einarson for wanting to tell the story, for *diligently seeking out the facts from the people who were there* [...] and for putting them accurately into this book for us to reflect upon. For those who want to know what was going on in our lives 30 years ago, this book tells the story. *I don't know how it could have been written any better*. (Furay 2004, p. 7)

9) I always believed for many years that the story of Chic needed to be chronicled in more than simply a chapter or a paragraph in a wider work. [...]. *I then made every attempt to contact everybody associated with the Chic circle. I have been very fortunate that in almost every instance, the ex-members of the group agreed to speak with me*. (Easlea 2004, p. ix)

4.2. PMD: Language and rhetorical choices

PMD is the implement through which to bridge the gap between the difficulty of pinpointing what PM is (Barthes 1977; Machin 2010; Seeger 1977) and the necessity, usefulness or pleasure to write about it. At the micro-linguistic level, language offers tools (vocabulary, phraseology, figuration, etc.) which do not just frame a specific referent as a social, psychological or physical reality, but indeed construe it by "provid[ing] clues as to what we think music is" (Machin 2010, p. 23, see also Frith 1996). Since PM may be experienced differently by individuals (creators, performers, technicians, listeners, experts, music lovers, etc.), different rhetorical standards can be used to relate such experiences, which are represented by the language of *exactness*, the

language of *relation*, and the language of *emotion* – each reflecting the three generic groupings outlined above.

As a matter of fact, musicology genres tend to resort to the language of exactness (or the rhetoric of mathematics, cf. Reyes 2022), typified by choices which are technical and gate-keeping, used to enhance precision and explicitness, to maximise referential transparency and contain approximation and vagueness, as well as to mark the writers' disciplinary competence, "expertise and authority of aesthetics" (Machin 2010, p. 24), as we can see in the examples below:

10) One widely used approach centers on *diatonic modes*. Moore [...] argues that many rock songs and progressions can be understood in *modal terms* (usually *Ionian, Mixolydian, Dorian,* or *Aeolian*); even progressions that appear *chromatic* on the surface, he suggests, can often be reduced to *modal prototypes*. (Temperley 2011, p. 2)

11) In fact, it seems that a number of grunge acts (such as Nirvana, Mudhoney and Soundgarden) and other artists from across the alternative rock field (My Bloody Valentine, Liz Phair, and others) play with the *modal ambiguity* of the *power chord* to great effect. In such music, the *major-minor distinction between modes* is blurred considerably through the use of *third relations* (sometimes called *cross relations*), which involves changing chords by moving up or down in *increments of a third*, and usually contradicting an established *modality*. (McDonald 2000, p. 357)

12) In this context you need to know if the music contains any *melodic figures* and, if so, how many occur at the same time. You also need to identify the *backcloth, if any, against which those figures are profiled*. Then you have to find out how the *figures interact with each other and with the background* and establish any *connotative meaning* you might find in (a) *the figure*, (b) *the ground* and (c) *in the relationship, if any, between figure and ground*. (Tagg 1994, p. 217)

Musicography genres tend to resort to the language of relation (the rhetoric of maps), where relations are to be interpreted both in lexical and semantic terms, and are to be found in resources such as figures and metaphor (relating literal and conventional) (13), adjectives (relating simple and modified), professionalisms (relating general to domain-specific, cf. Aleshinskaya 2013) (14), generalisations (relating single and series), ties (relating several entities), sets (relating part and whole), cues and allusions (relating expressed and implied) (15). This language is rich in "thematically coloured" modification (Aleshinskaya 2013, p. 435), implicitness and evocation, which require and stimulate an active response on the part of the reader (mainly cognitive) who is called upon as someone who can work out such references and their relevance for the interpretation of the meaning, as can be seen in the following examples:

13) True to its *mod origins*, ska was a curiously *sexless dance craze* – its *twitchy energy* appealed *to the feet, but not the hips. Mining their most fertile seam of embarrassment,*

Madness's number 1 hit 'House of Fun' – a song about going to buy your first packet of condoms at the chemist's – made sexual awakening seem like a *fall from grace into a world of sordid grotesquerie.* (Reynolds 2005, p. 292)

14) "[...] we'd *sample* our own *guitar feedback*, which instead of just being *one tone*, it could be a *tone having bends and quirks in it* [...]. One of the most sampled songs we created was 'Glider' [...], that's all guitar feedback [...] that we just *sampled* and *played in.*" (McGonigal 2007, p. 56)

15) In many of their songs, Wire pursues the kind of *'simplicity'* that punk musicians favoured, but steers this simplicity in unexpected, *nonpunk directions*, which relates to Rambali's idea that Wire 'stuck to the letter of the'*punk credo.* (Haddon 2020, p. 43)

Biography genres tend to resort to the language of emotion (the rhetoric of empathy), in order to favour impact and elicit an emotive response on the part of the reader. This stimulation may be achieved in different ways: in the case of autobiographies, by allowing readers privileged access to the musician's 'world' (notably through personalisation and anecdotes) (16), and letting them read, form a personal and exclusive perspective, the musician's reaction to given contextual or psychological situations that may have influenced the act of music creation or performance; in the case of biographies or dual-autographies, active involvement can be attained, on the one hand, by providing readers biographical, contextual or anecdotal information through which to interpret the musician's attitude and response to given contexts (17), and, on the other, by resorting, when possible, to the musicians' own words or the words of their assistants, fellow musicians, acolytes, etc. (18), through direct quotations or paraphrases.

16) Emma, Robin and I spend a night recording a cover of Dennis Wilson's 'Falling in Love'. *Freed from the 'my song / Emma's song' competitive pressure, we are effortlessly productive, excitedly chiming in with ideas. My vocal goes seamlessly and Robin and I are loudly cheering when Emma executes the tricky keyboard solo. She is giggly and playful and fun to be with.* At the end, Robin kicks back in his studio chair, smiling and happy: 'That was fucking great, no?' And I'm thinking, God, why can't it be like this all the time? (Berenyi 2022, p. 236)

17) I didn't know the lyrics of the new material (which was a first – I'd always known all his other songs by heart). As the words began to roll on the teleprompter, my heart sank. *He had written, and he sang, about what a sham he believed the entire length of our marriage to have been.* It was one of the saddest moments of my life. I stood in front of a crowd of thousands and tried to hold back my tears. (Forsberg Weiland 2010, pp. 211-212)

18) 'If You're Gone' was another of Clark's lyrical admission of emotional insecurity, albeit without the melodic grace of his finest work. *It was already evident to the other Byrds that Clark's complicated love life played a key part in inspiring his muse.* 'David Crosby was very aware of that,' Dickinson recalls. 'He would kind of promote it and say, *'Well, as soon as he breaks up with her* [Clark's girlfriend at the time] *we'll get another song*' and stuff like that. (Rogan 2001, p. 146)

5. Concluding remarks

This paper aims to provide a workable outline of PMD genres and their typical features, offering a tentative systematization (though possibly incomplete[19] and open to future refinements) that may be particularly useful given the range and variety of existing discourses that have PM as a referent. Such variety is not merely a matter of writers' personal choice or cultural convention but is instead linked to the complex nature of PM itself. As a matter of fact, PM is a multi-faceted phenomenon (at the same time cultural, cognitive, emotive, structural, and market-based) whose definition is not just complex, but very elusive (Middleton 1990; Shuker 2001). This elusiveness stems not only from its intrinsic phenomenological characteristics but, more significantly, from the perspectives and intentions of those who observe and choose to write about it. Each approach towards PM representation, in fact, is likely to provide a very specific understanding of it, which is different for experts, musicians, fans, music enthusiasts, scholars, students, practitioners, etc. Precisely due to the variety of contexts where PM contents are textualised, very specific discourse resources are needed for their semiotisation, firstly, for music-related texts to be clear and transparent and, secondly, for their main referent – PM itself – to be cognitively handable, so that, in plain terms, we know what we are referring to when we write/read about PM. Through this analysis we have seen how different types of competence, aim, and interest that writers/readers may have predict different discursive framings through which to look at PM.

These framings are not only effective and appropriate to given contexts (i.e. for expert, semi-expert or non-expert readers; in vertical, quasi-vertical or quasi-horizontal communication; to instruct, inform, or engage), but will also produce different readings of PM, by casting a specific light on given meanings (technical, social, emotive, etc.), and by emphasising certain features as essential, character-defining and worth noticing, while downplaying others as being less significant, little interesting, idiosyncratic or even irrelevant.

This study has sought to provide a workable outline of such framing resources – namely, of PMD genres – through which PM acquires diverse

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[19] Potential limitations reside in the fact that – although the criteria offered here can be applied to broader analyses – this paper does not assess trends of generic variations over time (PMD in the 1970s, 1980s 1990s, etc.) or across cultures (e.g. British and American PM journalism, for instance, have very different histories, developments and traditions; cf. Lindberg *et al.* 2005; Gorman 2023). Nor does it consider other variables that may bias PMD such as, for instance, the popularity of the musicians or of a given style of PM (Sala 2024) – notably, its inclusion in the canon or 'hegemonic bloc' (Middleton 1990) or exclusion from it – as well as the status and recognisability of the PMD writers (Jones 2002), their education (Clayton *et al.* 2012) and their gender (Gleeson, Gordon 2022), among others aspects.

and distinct referential values: as a work of art, or an object of craftsmanship, defined and analysed in technical terms, in musicology genres; as an ongoing and articulated process of creation, refinement and cross-pollination requiring organisation, rationalisation and canonisation (Fenster 2002), in musicography genres; as the result of some subjective expression and personal experience worth narrating, in biography genres. As such, PMD is not only or mainly a matter of vocabulary, information packaging and style, but, more distinctively, a series of generic choices whereby "to cast different degrees of illumination on music's many mysteries, to link them together to create new paths" of meaning (Rogers 2022, p. 8).

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