



The Special Liveliness of Hooks in Popular Music and Beyond

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Jackson, MS, USA

ISBN 978-3-031-23975-5 ISBN 978-3-031-23976-2 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-23976-2>

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This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*To Bruce,
my Revealer*

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The book that more than any other opened the field of aesthetic reflection to me was Susanne Langer's *Feeling and Form*, and I hope to have paid tribute to Langer by thinking freshly about the powers of art and art forms.

I was fortunate to learn some basic concepts of music theory from high school and college teachers. In later life, I've learned a great deal about popular music aesthetics from discussions with Ted Ammon, Allen Burrows, Steve Esthimer, Rien Fertel, Bruce Golden, Howard Pickett, and Katy Smith. And I've been enlightened on many points of interest by my fellow writers on the Hooks website (hooksanalysis.wordpress.com): Jonathan Bellman, Richard Grant, Eric Griffin, Matt Smith, and the too-soon-departed Andrew Goodwin.

I'm heavily indebted to art historian Elise Smith for my awareness and interpretation of visual art works, and for a lot of great feedback on my writing. I also got some good suggestions for this book from an anonymous reader for the press.

Some years ago Annie Blazer gave me a brilliant piece of advice that led to the creation of most of my "grab-backs."

An earlier version of Appendix B appeared in my article "Hooks" in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67 (Summer 2009), pp. 311–319.

Without the encouragement and astute guidance of my editor, Robin James, this book would not exist.

S.G.S.
Jackson, Mississippi
January 2023

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The great last shot in Truffaut's film *The 400 Blows* (1959) shows the young protagonist Antoine Doinel wandering alone on the beach, seeming to have no direction home. (Note that I've just borrowed a great phrase from a work in another genre, Dylan's song "Like a Rolling Stone" [1965].)¹ When I think back on *The 400 Blows*, or Truffaut, I may recall the beach shot and reconstruct my Truffaut experience from it. It's one of a number of vivid bits in the film that have affected my sense of human life (along with the ecstatic shot of Antoine in the centrifuge, the little kids entranced at the puppet show, and the funny pronunciations in Antoine's English class).

For the last ten years, the monthly film magazine *Sight and Sound* has run an *Endings* feature on its last page with short essays on final shots that are charged with meaning like the shot of Antoine on the beach.² These final shots evidently hold the status of great *hooks* (again, using language from the realm of popular song), and the essays support several notions of broad relevance: first, that a particular component of a work of art can be decisively influential on an aesthetic experience; second, that we can declare ourselves and enrich our relationships with each other by freely

¹"How does it feel?/To be on your own, with no direction home/A complete unknown, like a rolling stone" (second chorus, "Like a Rolling Stone").

²It started in September 2012, with an essay on the finale of *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949).

picking out such components for appreciative attention, using artistic hooks as personal hooks; and third, that such components can reward our close attention richly, disclosing objective grounds for our appreciative response to them and furnishing valuable insight into how artworks work and how meaningful experience is constituted.

In many of our experiences of art (and not only of art), there are captivating singularities that are salient for us aesthetically and that may deserve to be salient in criticism, as in the *Endings* essays. To be sure, art criticism *does* often focus on such singularities: almost any serious critical assessment will cite notable lines in a literary work, or notable motifs in a musical work, or notable specifics of composition in a picture. But the main goal of art criticism is normally to construct an interpretation of a whole work, to which the component values are strictly subordinated. After all, one must see what the work makes of its elements; only then can one rightly see what is a crux or high point in it. And aesthetic theory tends to be well aligned with art criticism in this regard: the meaning of the experience of the part is ruled by the meaning of the experience of the whole, the whole-quality best exemplifying the essential character of aesthetic experience in that artistic mode or in general.³ For hook criticism, in contrast, the experience of the whole is deeply stamped by the experience of the part. The specific genius of the part gets its due. In paying that tribute, enthusiastic perceptions of the part are fully licensed to generate meaning.

“Hooks” is an apt word to use for aesthetic reflection on captivating singularities—so I wager—but it may seem to be tainted by some unsavory associations. For at least a century, the term has combined a sense of being almost hopelessly caught with a certain awareness of what the captor is up to, like the prostitute “hooker” or the salesperson with the “sales hook”; the term seems especially well suited for commercial pop music because often that cleverly designed, captivating *thing* repeats through a pop song and is enjoyed in frequently repeated listening experiences (as of songs played on the radio or on records or running through one’s head), so that the listener feels snagged.

In music, one usually hears of hooks in two sorts of calculation: on the side of production, hooks are the well-made compact devices (the catchy riffs, rhythms, and refrains) that predictably *attach* listeners to the product; on the side of consumption as guided by mass-market reviews, hooks

³ I illustrate this point with reference to Hegel’s, Dewey’s, and Langer’s aesthetic theories in “Hooks,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 67 (2009), pp. 311–319.

are the delivered goods that will assuredly *satisfy* listeners.⁴ Prefigured and manipulative, hooks might seem antithetical to fresh expression in authentic art, or—thinking of Adorno’s concerns in his attack on the “culture industry”—to sincere openness or serious thought by artist or audience.⁵

Drawing from theatrical experience, the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein took stock of the “attractions” (i.e., hooks) at the disposal of the artist: “The attraction (in our diagnosis of the theater) is every aggressive moment in it, i.e., every element of it that brings to light in the spectator those senses or that psychology that influence his experience—every element that can be verified and mathematically calculated to produce certain emotional shocks in a proper order within the totality.” Attractions are things like “the ‘chatter’ of [the actor] Ostuzhev no more than the pink tights of the prima-donna, a roll on the kettledrums as much as Romeo’s soliloquy, the cricket on the hearth no less than the cannon fired over the heads of the audience.”⁶

Did Eisenstein really mean to put art on the level of cookery? If so, should we resist this way of thinking?

There is an important issue here, but I think it won’t be helpful to be a purist totally opposed to prefiguration and manipulation in art and aesthetic experience. Artists who could not prefigure and manage their “attractions” *at all* would be helplessly open-minded improvisers, clueless creators. Audiences who had no definite expectations to be fulfilled *at all* would have, if they were lucky, a succession of amazing experiences but not a coherent career of experiencing the powers of an art form.

In any case, the core of the hook concept that I propose is not that attachment or satisfaction is deliberately designed, whether for a commercial or any other sort of purpose. Many hooks have been designed, certainly, but the core of the concept is that attachment and satisfaction momentarily *happen* with certain components of aesthetic experience for

⁴For a general introduction to the ingredients of musical hooks, see Gary Burns, “A Typology of Hooks in Popular Music,” *Popular Music* 6 (1987), pp. 1–20.

⁵See Theodor W. Adorno, “On Popular Music” (with George Simpson) [1941], in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (University of California Press, 2002), pp. 437–469, and “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” in Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* [1944], trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972), pp. 120–167. Theodore Gracyk provides a useful critique of Adorno’s view of popular music in *Rhythm and Noise. An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), Chap. 6.

⁶Sergei Eisenstein, “Montage of Attractions,” in *The Film Sense*, trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1947), pp. 230–231.

certain subjects. A beat or refrain that was intended to hook you may fail to do so; on the other hand, you may find an accidental effect captivating.

You may find any element of an experience captivating *continuingly* and *deepeningly*. I say this in the teeth of a prejudice in aesthetic theory against the cheap immediate titillations of pop songs that will surely lose appeal over time, or even arouse disgust.⁷ Well, it is true that there are some pop hooks I once liked that I can no longer stand to listen to. But the more telling phenomenon is how many I have come to love, and love thoughtfully.

Despite the drawbacks of commercialized hook discourse, I propose to make popular music our primary field of reference for exploring the possibilities of hook criticism and the aesthetics of hooks. It lends itself supremely well to this kind of study as the experience of popular song is so widely and enthusiastically shared and affords most people their most palpable sense of an enactment of ideal living. At the same time, it furnishes an infinity of prompts for hook discernment, as experience shows that a listener can be captivated by any sort of acoustic or semantic event.

What might hook discernment involve? For me, on one occasion, my grab-back at what grabbed me came out this way, under the rubric of “Harmony as Event”:

To harmonize a melody is to give it a more specified resonance and a more structurally interesting and serious path to move along—a decorum. But harmony can also be an utterly contingent and individual event of companioning voices, a rendezvous (be it tryst or fight), and a preeminent hook—as when John Lennon joins Paul McCartney in an eventful harmony vocal on the third and especially the fourth verse of The Beatles’ “Hey Jude” (1968).

The ostensible theme of “Hey Jude” is Jude’s desire to start a relationship with a girl. “You have found her, now go and get her.” The message about relationships is clear in the text. But the song’s really meaningful substance lies in its being sung, where there’s a junction of the singer with Jude, hovering by Jude in solicitude, lending him strength by speaking of strength, companioning him. That’s the deep harmony that counts.

⁷“Our satisfaction in most popular art does not typically deepen and extend itself on successive encounters but rather comes quickly, all at once, often fading away precipitously after a certain point, when it does not actually turn into repugnance”—Jerrold Levinson, “Pleasure and the Value of Works of Art,” in *The Pleasures of Aesthetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996) 11–24, p. 13.

And the harmony is enacted in the singing by John and Paul, whom we know. Their voices together make the sound of a benchmark friendship. John has come in with various touches earlier in the track but at the ripest moment, fourth time around, slips into harness and sings the whole verse. He wraps around Paul's notes with close intervals, giving the lines a gentle spring. Toward the end of the verse John and Paul's partnership starts to fly apart backstage, as it were, in obscure ejaculations, possibly even expletives, around the 3:00 mark. But that drama is soon superseded by four minutes of people's chorus, the great na na na na.

And now for a bonus that comes with a deep harmony reading of "Hey Jude." There's a mysterious line in the song that Paul would have changed but the poetically more open-minded John made him keep: "The movement you need is on your shoulder." A harmony, or a friendship, is an enabling hook-up and a fulcrum in power transmission, a harmos, in Greek a shoulder. Paul's encouragement of Jude (originally "Jules," John's son Julian) is a shoulder; Paul's implicit address of John is a shoulder; John's hanging in with Paul (while he's leaving Paul, in a sense, for Yoko Ono) is a shoulder.⁸ The song is a shoulder for all; indeed, no harmony keeps its resonance just to itself.

What have I done? It remains to be seen whether I've begun to shed light on larger topics or have shared pleasure or insight with anyone else, but immediately I've discovered a satisfying interpretation of a song I love by creating an intellectual figure congruent with an emotional and even kinesthetic experience of one of the song's moments—an experience that had emerged for me as a high point in hearing the song. The images and metaphors I used seemed essential for following the extending and thickening of the hook's impact on me. I don't know how my interpretation might interact with other interpretations. Undoubtedly, I have more to learn about the powers of the song and its devices, and also about my own capacities for being gotten to and my intentions for using those capacities. But I've made a start. I hope I've made a good enough start to hook you.

Writing an appreciation centered on one small part of one song proves that the opportunities for hook analysis must be infinite, but now the higher-order questions arise of what inclusive patterns or structures hooks

⁸ *On the lore of what went into the song, see William J. Dowlding, Beatlesongs (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), pp. 203–206. Compare how Paul comes in on harmony vocals in "The Ballad of John and Yoko" (1969) after John and Yoko were married. For an interesting cross-genre comparison, listen to how George Jones and Tammy Wynette harmonize with beautiful restraint on their hit "Golden Ring" in a performance two years after their divorce (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9KniULwvjE>).*

and hooks criticism will exhibit, and how hook experiences fit into what aesthetes and philosophers call aesthetic experience. Are hooks just the “attractions” from which art works are made, relatively intense doses of standard kinds of aesthetic gratification, or are they, more like people we know, unique monads in their aesthetic universe? Are the analytical and metaphorical gambits of hook criticism constrained by objective characteristics of the hook or are they freely generated posits that come to the hook a-wooping? I will have to work through a range of hook encounters and gambits of hook criticism to show what would go into answering such questions.

The present inquiry is designed to bring some helpful conceptual order to hook experience and to show how an illuminating aesthetics can be generated by putting hooks in the foreground. We’ll find that an orientation to hooks leads our attention not only to good focus points in pop music but also to analogous focus points in other art forms, so that connections are woven between pop music aesthetics and the larger conversation about all art forms and vivid experiences.

I plan to check in frequently with my own earlier-written “grab-backs,” continuing to set them apart in italics, to show how grabbing actually happens in both directions—how my sensitivities are engaged and how I’m able to articulate my enlivenment and try to share it in the *jeux d’esprit* of hooky hook reviews. I ask all my readers to join this game.



CHAPTER 2

Some Relevant Aesthetic Principles

Even if we don't find all our hooks in the same places, hooks *are* interesting and important to us—the “us” for whom this is true. That's the hook phenomenon. What general expectations for aesthetic experience best fit with our shared love of hooks and our interest in elucidating them? I shall put forward three general principles that I think revealingly amplify the meaning of hook experience and get confirmed by it:

1. *Special liveliness*—aesthetic experience increases the ideally desirable, “high” and cherishable quality of life; I live more vibrantly, and am impressed and grateful that I do so, when I am grabbed in great aesthetic moments.
2. *Usable models*—aesthetic experience is well-formed so that it provides usable models of highly desirable living; the telling moves in great love songs, for example, enable me to express and comport myself in definite repeatable ways, and anticipate definite responses, in the aesthetic experience of ideal loving (which *could* be helpful in real loving).
3. *Ringling realizations*—aesthetic experience delivers perceptions that are resonantly convincing, fatefully defining one's position in that staging of higher life.

SPECIAL LIVELINESS

Whether or not by the artist's design, a hook, like Lindsey Buckingham's guitar lick at 2:38 in "You Make Loving Fun" (Fleetwood Mac, 1977), is a *high point* in my experience of a work; the work, in turn, is probably a high point in my listening or viewing or reading life; and my good experiences of artworks and art-like situations all share in a high value. What is this "height," presumably different from the height of moral excellence or moral authority? There may not be one answer. I plan to invoke fuller personal *enlivenment* as the best general conception of aesthetically high life. But perhaps, as many think, the high value of aesthetic experience generally lies just in the highly desirable distinctive *pleasure* it gives—an enduring pleasure that seems to rise *above* more ephemeral or conflicted pleasures—while hooks and favorite works rise up high because they sharply focus for us some of the ingredients of aesthetic pleasure.

The trouble with citing pleasure as a principle of aesthetic value is that it stops our conversation too soon, shedding no light. You say you *enjoyed the play*? Or that it was *delightful*? That's good, but clearly if anything is worth probing and contemplating in our experience of the play, it lies on the other side of that fact of pleasure, in the why and how of it. At least we take a step in that direction by differentiating "high" pleasures from ordinary ones; we challenge ourselves to make sense of that discrimination and that aspiration.

Anyone worried about cultural elitism might want to reject the whole idea of "high" pleasure. Mightn't we value aesthetic pleasure simply as a distinct extra kind of pleasure, recognizing that we would be poorer without it, just as we would be poorer without many other desirable components of our lives? Perhaps we enshrine artworks or celebrate "natural beauty" simply for the sake of protecting and promoting certain pleasures that we otherwise might miss out on. No *aspiration* need be involved other than wanting to have the most good things in one's life. And so the aesthetic enjoyer need not pretend to any personal or cultural superiority.

The sense of a distinct "exhilarating" quality in aesthetic pleasure could be interpreted as a highness.¹ To be exhilarated is to be cheered (*hilaris*); to be cheered is to be encouraged, boosted in making one's best way. But making one's best way needn't involve going "higher" in any sense other than the mounding up of the most good things. Perhaps we should be

¹Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form* (New York: Scribners, 1953), p. 395.

careful not to overrate great pleasures: after all, from certain serious perspectives the good things of aesthetic experience are relatively “low” because they make no practical difference in life.

There is a lot wrong with pleasure as the category in which to look for aesthetic value. Part of the problem is that pleasure only gets to be *high* by being *more*—or, for the sake of a *more*, simply being *different*.² True, we also tend to value so-called *rare* pleasures highly, but so what if a pleasure is rare? Is it just that it is less likely to grow stale? Or is the point that one should seize the rare opportunity to add that pleasure to one’s portfolio, filling that lacuna? But so what if one has a filled-out portfolio?

We tend to ascribe higher value to so-called *distinct* pleasures, meaning by “distinct” something more than “relatively more” or “different,” as in: “It’s a distinct pleasure to welcome tonight’s speaker.” In that case, our appreciation noticeably swings from the generic pleasure aspect to the pleasure-causing individual. The accompanying pleasure confirms but does not constitute the value of what occasions it.³ The significance lies beyond the fact of pleasure.

It’s a mark of the highness of aesthetic experience that normally we’re more interested in the distinct identities and actions of the objects of aesthetic pleasure than in the pleasure as such. The typical framework of aesthetic value is not a quest for a kind of pleasure, like my own daily quest for various forms of good food and drink, but the particular relationship we find we can have with a Beatles chorus or a Shakespearean speech. It is more like having a friend, or an awe-inspiring leader, than having a great

²In Jeremy Bentham’s hedonism, aesthetic pleasure could earn a high ranking only by offering us a greater intensity or endurance or accessibility of pleasure—*An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation* [1789], Chap. 4. John Stuart Mill tried to improve on Bentham’s crudely quantitative utilitarianism with a recognition of the qualitative superiority of some kinds of pleasure over others. To stay true to his empiricism, Mill had to rest the qualitative superiority of X to Y on the (posited) empirical fact that the most fully experienced subjects, those best capable of comparison, prefer X to Y. But he also invoked the important normative premise that a higher, more valuable experience is associated with a fuller exercise of human capabilities. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, in *Utilitarianism and Other Writings*, ed. Mary Warnock (New York: New American Library, 1974), pp. 258–260. Mill’s approach is continued by the more recent aesthetic hedonists who require cognitive discernment for aesthetic pleasure—see James Shelley, “The Concept of the Aesthetic,” in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2022 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/aesthetic-concept/>.

³Admittedly, the “pleasure-causing individual” could be an interesting *form* of pleasure rather than an entity—say, the arc of sexual climax.