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Distinguishing the 'Vanguard' from the 'Insidid': Exploring the Valorization of Mainstream Popular Music in Online Indie Music Criticism

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Media Studies

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DISTINGUISHING THE 'VANGUARD' FROM THE 'INSIPID': EXPLORING THE
VALORIZATION OF MAINSTREAM POPULAR MUSIC IN ONLINE INDIE MUSIC
CRITICISM

(Thesis format: Monograph)

by

Charles Blazevic

Graduate Program in Media Studies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
The University of Western Ontario
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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores recent transformations in the way mainstream popular music is valorized in online indie music publication *Pitchfork*. Indie music culture has traditionally defined itself in opposition to mainstream popular taste, through social and aesthetic differentiation mechanisms grounded in connoisseurship and DIY ethics. This thesis argues that the increased popularity and commodification of indie music has altered the culture's exclusionary taste boundaries, selectively welcoming mainstream performers. To explore these changes, I analyze *Pitchfork* reviews of albums that appear in the top 20 of the *Billboard* 200 Year-End Chart, 2006-2011. My findings show that *Pitchfork* critics tend to privilege modernist conceptions of rock authenticity in their evaluation of albums produced by mainstream performers; reviewers' willingness to perceive positively-valued musical innovation and artistic ambition counterbalances the potentially negative effects performers' commercial and economic success might otherwise have had on their evaluation by this resolutely "indie" publication.

Keywords: indie music culture, rock authenticity, online music criticism, album reviews, processes of valorization, indie aesthetic judgment, popular music studies.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Many artists and fans in rock and popular music culture have long depended on and supported a range of music publications for the circulation of news about and reviews of artists and releases. Initially in print and now online, music publications provide a forum for discussion and debate over new developments and releases in their respective worlds. Many critical music publications have dedicated themselves to particular genre worlds like jazz, folk, blues, and rock. A relatively recent entrant into the world of music criticism, the online publication *Pitchfork*, has become immensely popular in indie music culture while selectively crossing longstanding genre boundaries.

Pitchfork – “The Essential Guide to Independent Music and Beyond” – is a highly influential online independent music publication, which consists of album reviews, interviews, news features, and essays. The site began publishing music reviews online in 1995 out of CEO and founder Ryan Schreiber’s home (Frey 2004; Joseph 2008). Since 2006, *Pitchfork* has expanded its enterprise with the development and implementation of an annual music festival, *Pitchfork TV*, *Nothing Major* (a boutique art/fashion blog and shop), and *Advance* (an exclusive music streaming platform for upcoming releases). The selection of *Pitchfork* as an object of cultural analysis is timely and relevant; during the past decade, *Pitchfork* developed a high degree of power and influence unparalleled in contemporary rock music criticism, even in comparison to established print publications such as *Spin*¹ and *Rolling Stone* (Brownstein 2009; Kot 2009, 121; Barker 2010, 40; Beck 2011, 175).

1. As of December 2012, *Spin* ceased operation of its print edition (Spin 2012). It is now an exclusively online music publication owned by *Buzzmedia* (Buzzmedia 2012a).

Journalist Jon Caramanica encapsulates this point in a *New York Times* article entitled “Upstart Music Site Becomes Establishment”:

All empires have their insurgents, and in its early years Pitchfork was supposed to be the insurgency, pushing back against mainstream music magazines with committed and sometimes idiosyncratic coverage of independent music...it’s now the most prominent brand in online music journalism. (2010)

Within its first decade of operation *Pitchfork* gradually attracted indie music fans who valued the site’s uncompromising approach to music writing, evidenced in its writers’ willingness to disparage both big and small artists (Frey 2004). In this way, *Pitchfork* provided an alternative to commercial print publications of the late-1990s (cf. Lindberg et al. 2005, 325). By 2004, the site began to garner considerable media attention for its power to influence perceptions of artistic or cultural value in indie music culture, and in some cases affect album sales both positively and negatively (Frey 2004; Thomas 2006; Kot 2009, 120-1). The vast majority of “popular” indie bands of the past decade have been favourably received and regularly featured in *Pitchfork*, including Arcade Fire, Grizzly Bear, Wilco, Sufjan Stevens, Bon Iver, Beach House, M83, Animal Collective, Caribou, Broken Social Scene, Joanna Newsom, M.I.A., and Vampire Weekend.

Pitchfork’s online, rather than print, platform has contributed substantially to its commercial and critical success. While the site’s ethos and musical coverage was initially similar to underground print publications of the 1990s, *Pitchfork’s* online platform enabled wider reach than its print counterparts could ever have hoped to attain (Kot 2009, 116-7). Unlike major print publications, *Pitchfork* positively valued a range of indie-label music, from the experimental electronic music of Warp Records to the modest guitar-pop of Merge Records. In the site’s early years, positive perception of artistic integrity often coincided with an artist’s indie label affiliation (see Pitchfork Media 2001). In fact, Ryan Schreiber stated

that he named the site “Pitchfork” “to convey ‘an angry mob mentality’ . . . toward the corporate music industry” (Joseph 2008).

By 2003, the site began to occasionally review contemporary mainstream popular music artists (see Schreiber 2003). Favourable reviews of Top 40 rap, R&B, and pop music gradually increased as the decade progressed. At present, the site continues to brand itself as the “the leading voice in independent music and beyond” (Pitchfork 2012). On the one hand, major star performers such as Justin Timberlake, Rihanna, Kanye West, Drake, and Lady Gaga have received positive reviews in *Pitchfork*; on the other, the site is still recognized in the music industry as an “indie” music publication (Billboard 2012, 30). How does *Pitchfork* manage longstanding boundaries (and even antagonisms) between indie and mainstream music cultures while looking favourably (albeit selectively) on both indie and mainstream music?

In indie music movements of the 1980s and 1990s, its audiences and performers often rejected the aesthetics and commercial values of mainstream popular music (Azerrad 2001, 10; Fonarow 2006, 65). The only exception in some cases was when an indie-label artist achieved mainstream recognition and commercial success by signing (or collaborating) with a major record label (see Hesmondhalgh 1999; Kruse 2003, 24); certain groups that signed with a major label retained their artistic credibility among a large segment of indie music listeners (e.g., Husker Du, Sonic Youth). Crossing over to the mainstream, however, was most often perceived as “selling out”, “a betrayal of . . . the indie audience and canon” (Bannister 2006a, 81; Kruse 2003, 14). Since indie music culture had long sought to define itself in opposition to Top 40 popular music and taste (both socially and aesthetically), the selective valorization of mainstream pop in *Pitchfork* appears to contradict this powerful indie cultural norm. Just this past week (March 19, 2013), for example, Justin Timberlake’s

(former member of top-selling boy-band N'Sync) latest studio album received *Pitchfork's* coveted "Best New Music" designation (Dombal 2013) – a legitimizing act unimaginable in previous generations of indie culture. In light of these changes, this thesis investigates the valorization of mainstream music in *Pitchfork* and the historical processes contributing to this apparent realignment of indie taste. I fully acknowledge that the mainstreaming of "underground" or "oppositional" rock movements in the music press is a common phenomenon in rock music history (e.g., *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*). However, the technological, economic, and cultural transformations that underscore recent changes in contemporary indie taste and value have yet to be thoroughly explored in media and popular music studies scholarship. This research is especially important given the rise of the internet as a new platform for music criticism.

In this thesis, I use *Pitchfork* to symbolically represent contemporary indie aesthetic judgment and taste (which I explain and justify in the following section). The primary objective in this thesis is to investigate the newly permeable boundary between contemporary indie and mainstream taste in a decade that has seen notable instances of mainstream-indie crossover (and vice versa). This introductory chapter begins with an explanation of key terms and concepts used in this study. The first section delineates the key features of a *Pitchfork* album review. I also define my use of the terms 'mainstream' and 'indie', and explain how they are represented and applied in subsequent chapters. The second section discusses the theoretical frameworks and research methodology employed in this thesis. This chapter concludes with an outline of key arguments presented in this thesis and a description of the following chapters.

1.1 Key Concepts and Terminology

A major component of this thesis is an analysis of rhetorical strategies employed in *Pitchfork* album reviews of mainstream artists. Every *Pitchfork* album review includes an essayistic qualitative evaluation and a quantitative rating on a scale of 0 to 10, in increments of one-tenth. *Pitchfork* does not provide an explanation of its rating methodology on its website. However, former *Pitchfork* editor-in-chief Scott Plagenhoef revealed aspects of the site's rating system in an interview with *The New York Times*. He explains, “[o]ver and over we revisit decisions [about ratings] before they’re [posted] on the site” (Caramanica 2010). In his interview with Plagenhoef, Jon Caramanica further explains *Pitchfork*'s review process: “Albums are discussed via e-mail and on a staff message board. The review is then assigned to a writer trusted to deliver the group’s opinion. Reviews have individual bylines, but they represent the Pitchfork hive-mind” (2010). Assuming its review practices have not changed since 2010, *Pitchfork* ratings represent the collective opinion of its writers.

In some cases, high-ranking albums also receive a special designation entitled “Best New Music”. The “Best New Music” designation is the highest marker of prestige and distinction *Pitchfork* assigns to albums its writers deem exceptional. “Best New Music” is typically awarded to fewer than sixty albums annually: In 2011, for example, 47 albums received this designation, out of an approximate 1100 album reviews.² Since the site’s inception, album reviews have appeared (and continue to appear) at the top of the site’s main web page (Beck 2011, 190). Ryan Schreiber contends that the site’s “primary role is still as a critical entity. One of the main purposes it serves is keeping long-form music criticism alive [...] [which] speaks to fans [that] are more directly engaged. They want information and

2. Five album reviews are published every weekday for approximately 47 weeks in a given year.

context” (Matos 2012). *Pitchfork* thus preserves rock’s valorization of the album format (Keightley 2004, 386) and penchant for taking popular music seriously, as “something ‘more’ than just pleasure or fun” (Keightley 2001, 128-9).

‘Mainstream’ is a key term used in this study. Indie scholar Wendy Fonarow describes indie culture’s relationship to and characterization of mainstream music as follows:

From its very inception, indie music was considered to have an antithetical approach to the mainstream production of music. Here, ‘mainstream’ designates the majority of music that appears in the national charts and appeals to a broad cross-section of the public. (2006, 63)

To preserve this characterization, this study employs a sample of *Pitchfork* reviews of albums that appear within the Top 20 of the *Billboard* 200 Year-End Chart from 2006 to 2011. By selecting albums that appear within the top 20 of the *Billboard* national album chart, they stand to represent popular music that “appeals to a broad cross-section of the public” (Fonarow 2006, 63). Throughout this thesis I refer to these as “mainstream albums”, and the performers of these works as “mainstream artists”. I explain in greater detail the process of constructing this album review sample later in this chapter.

‘Indie’ is another key term frequently employed in this thesis. At present, the term is admittedly open to much interpretation and contestation in regards the aesthetic and institutional attributes it represents. Firstly, genres consisting of small-scale producers have emerged in the past decade that more closely resemble past formations of indie subcultures. For instance, music genres such as hypnagogic pop, hauntology, and dark ambient are usually featured in specialty online record stores (e.g., Boomkat.com, AquariusRecords.org) and niche music blogs. As well, these musical styles are often produced and sold as limited edition vinyl or cassette pressings (see Reynolds 2011, 345). *Pitchfork*, however, continues to selectively feature artists of these aforementioned genres in albums reviews and in “The Out

Door” – a column dedicated to coverage of small-scale producers whose music emphasizes experimental aesthetic qualities. On the other hand, *Pitchfork* also features commercially successful rock-oriented groups such as Arcade Fire, the Black Keys, and Wilco, who are also most often regarded or described as “indie”. Furthermore, the site selectively valorizes commercially successful chart-pop, rap, and R&B (e.g., Justin Timberlake, Kanye West, Rihanna), while branding itself as the “leading voice in independent music” (Pitchfork 2012). *Pitchfork’s* online platform permits expansive coverage of both obscure and popular music styles within the vast and fragmented popular music landscape. In this way, *Pitchfork* subsumes under the aegis of indie music culture various strands of small- and large-scale popular music in the scope of its coverage.

Given the diversity in musical style and commercial-scale of artists covered in *Pitchfork*, ‘indie’ does not refer to a particular sound or institutional orientation at present.³ Like ‘rock’ before it, the plurality of musical styles and genres subsumed under the title ‘indie’ problematizes attempts at defining its musical essence (Keightley 2001, 109). “Indie rock”, Hibbett argues, “is a malleable space filled by discourse and power, whose meaning is always under construction by various agents...with diverse objectives” (2005, 58). The stylistic eclecticism of contemporary indie, however, does not preclude the existence and (re)negotiation of exclusionary boundaries between it and popular taste. Indie functions similar to past iterations of rock in that exclusion is a necessary part of what defines it in particular historical moments (Hibbett 2005, 58; Keightley 2001, 109). Since exclusion is an integral differentiation mechanism that distinguishes indie from mainstream popular music,

3. I account for changes in the value of institutional autonomy in Chapters 2 and 3. Institutional autonomy is an important distancing mechanism historically prevalent in indie music practice. My claim in this case refers to the present context, which I do not establish until Chapter 4.

this thesis focuses specifically on the developing permeability of the boundary between the two that is evident in *Pitchfork*.

Pitchfork's diverse coverage notwithstanding, the site continues to primarily address an indie demographic. Music journalist and *Pitchfork* contributor Nitsuh Abebe recently stated that *Pitchfork's* “audience has become a sort of metonym for ‘indie-rock circles’” (2012). This assertion informs the basis of how ‘indie’ is represented in this study: First, I construe *Pitchfork's* audience as a symbolic representation of contemporary indie music culture. It follows that the discursive dimensions of *Pitchfork* album reviews may symbolically represent contemporary indie aesthetic judgment. I contend that these symbolic representations are an appropriate approximation of indie taste, aesthetic judgment, and value for the purposes of this thesis. Further justification is offered in the Literature Review (Chapter 2).

1.2 Theoretical Frameworks and Methodology

This thesis employs aspects of theoretical frameworks developed by John B. Thompson (1990), Keir Keightley (2001), and Pierre Bourdieu (1984). In Chapter 3, I examine *Pitchfork's* ascendancy in the field of online music criticism using John B. Thompson’s “structural” approach to cultural analysis (1990, 136-62). In order to understand the ways in which certain musical styles or artists come to be positively valued in rock culture (or indie culture in this case), one ought to examine the “specific historical contexts, audiences, critical discourses, and industrial practices [that work] to shape particular perceptions” (Keightley 2001, 109). Thompson’s framework offers a structure for my analyses of the development of *Pitchfork's* critical discourse and the power it comes to exert in influencing perceptions of cultural and artistic value among indie audiences. This section includes historical analyses of

major technological, economic, and cultural transformations that coincide with and comprise salient contexts of *Pitchfork's* growing influence; in doing this, we can account for the ways in which indie music practice and values have evolved in the digital age. I also make use of Thompson's framework for analyzing aspects of cultural transmission (1990, 163-71), which highlights the relatively high degree of accessibility and reproducibility of digital, rather than print, media. In terms of methodology in Chapter 3, I gather and analyze evidence from archived versions of *Pitchfork* at the Internet Archive (www.archive.org), articles from online newspapers and music industry trade publications, and academic scholarship to support my claims.

Analysis of *Pitchfork* album reviews of mainstream artists in Chapter 4 is structured using Keir Keightley's framework for the analysis of rock authenticity (2001, 137). I selected this theoretical framework in part because scholars of rock music criticism assert that conceptions of rock authenticity continue to figure prominently in rock criticism discourse (McLeod 2002, 107; Weisethaunet and Lindberg 2010). I theorize my findings in terms of conceptions of "modernist" and "romantic" rock authenticity that *Pitchfork* writers employ in album reviews. In structuring my analyses in this theoretical paradigm, I suggest that *Pitchfork* writers tend to privilege modernist conceptions of rock authenticity in the evaluation of mainstream albums. I compare these results to historical antecedents of indie music culture that often distinguished itself from mainstream practice and taste through privileging markers of romantic authenticity (Reynolds [1986] 1989; Straw [1991] 2005; Hesmondhalgh 1999; Bannister 2006a; Bannister 2006b; Fonarow 2006). In this way, Keightley's theoretical framework is very useful in accounting for changes in value and

discourse in indie music culture.⁴ I conclude this analysis by revisiting Bourdieuan theorizations of cultural capital in indie rock. In this discussion, I incorporate theoretical insights from Pierre Bourdieu (1984), Douglas B. Holt ([1998] 2000), and Bernard Gendron (2002) to contextualize my findings.

In terms of methodology, I initially engaged in a close reading of each album review in this sample and took note of the overarching themes and patterns that emerged; many salient claims corresponded to characteristics of rock authenticity in Keightley's framework. I discuss key findings from this analysis in Chapter 4, which are presented thematically (the themes are derived from Keightley's framework). The decision to present my findings thematically is inspired by Chris Atton's comparative discourse analysis of albums reviews in *The Wire* and *Sound Projector* (2009). Like Atton's study, the album review serves as the primary unit of analysis in this thesis (2009, 57). Rather than discuss every detail of each review, a thematic presentation emphasizes salient patterns and tendencies that emerge across several album reviews. I explain the components of Keightley's authenticity framework in greater detail in Chapter 4.

I constructed my sample of *Pitchfork* album reviews using *Billboard* chart data. I compiled a list of the top 20 albums that appear in the *Billboard* 200 Year-End Chart from 2006 to 2011. This chart is comprised of "top-selling albums [of a given year] across all genres, ranked by sales data as compiled by Nielsen Soundscan" (Billboard 2006). *Pitchfork*

4. Although Keightley's framework has not been used in previous studies of popular music criticism, Kembrew McLeod notes that "there is no sustained scholarly writings that examine rock criticism in North America from a historical, sociological, or communicative perspective" (2001, 47). In the absence of standardized research methods and theoretical frameworks, Keightley's framework provides ample insight into changes in indie culture's value discourses and distancing mechanisms.

reviewed only 27 of the 120 top-selling albums, of which 24 were consulted in this analysis.⁵ These 24 album reviews include artists that perform pop, R&B, rap, and rock musical styles. Artists in teen pop (e.g., Justin Bieber, Hannah Montana), country pop (e.g., Carrie Underwood, Taylor Swift), country rock (e.g., Rascal Flatts), and adult contemporary (e.g., Susan Boyle, Michael Bublé) genres receive virtually no coverage in *Pitchfork*. Since indie music culture has historically defined itself in opposition to mainstream taste and music, my rhetorical analysis of these top-selling albums in *Pitchfork* reviews reveals the ways in which indie culture positively (and negatively) values certain strands of mainstream popular music. Deriving data from *Billboard* reduces the arbitrariness of self-identifying appropriate examples, and adheres to Fonarow's definition of indie culture's perspective of mainstream music and taste (2006, 63). The following table lists the 24 *Pitchfork* album reviews consulted in this study, in order of *Pitchfork* rating (from lowest to highest):

Table 1.1 Albums Reviewed in *Pitchfork* that Appear in the Top 20 of the *Billboard* 200 Year-End Album Chart, 2006-2011

<i>Pitchfork</i> Rating	Artist	Album	Year
2.1	Mumford & Sons	<i>Sigh No More</i>	2010
2.8	Eminem	<i>Recovery</i>	2010
3.8	Kings of Leon	<i>Only By the Night</i>	2008
4.2	U2	<i>No Line on the Horizon</i>	2009
4.5	Jay-Z	<i>The Blueprint 3</i>	2009
4.8	Eminem	<i>Relapse</i>	2009
4.9	Metallica	<i>Death Magnetic</i>	2008
5.0	Jay-Z	<i>Kingdom Come</i>	2006
5.7	Beyoncé	<i>I Am...Sasha Fierce</i>	2008
6.2	Lil Wayne	<i>Tha Carter IV</i>	2011
6.5	Nicki Minaj	<i>Pink Friday</i>	2010
6.5	Gwen Stefani	<i>The Sweet Escape</i>	2006
6.9	Coldplay	<i>Viva la Vida or Death and All His Friends</i>	2008
7.0	Sade	<i>Soldier of Love</i>	2010
7.2	Beyoncé	<i>B'Day</i>	2006
7.6	Rihanna	<i>Loud</i>	2010

5. Omitted titles include greatest hits compilations of Johnny Cash and the Beatles, and the Twilight Soundtrack (various artists). My interest is in *Pitchfork's* evaluation of top-selling albums by contemporary mainstream artists; thus retrospective and various artist collections fall outside the scope of this study.

7.6	Kanye West	<i>808s & Heartbreak</i>	2008
7.8	Lady Gaga	<i>The Fame Monster</i>	2009
8.1	Justin Timberlake	<i>FutureSex/LoveSounds</i>	2006
8.4	Drake	<i>Thank Me Later</i>	2010
8.5*	Jay-Z/Kanye West	<i>Watch the Throne</i>	2011
8.7*	Lil Wayne	<i>Tha Carter III</i>	2008
9.5*	Kanye West	<i>Late Registration</i>	2005
10*	Kanye West	<i>My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy</i>	2010

*Indicates album received *Pitchfork's* "Best New Music" designation.

1.3 Central Arguments and Description of Chapters

Historically, indie music culture has often sought to distinguish itself from the musical taste and practices that appeal to the "masses". In the digital age, however, many of indie culture's previous distancing mechanisms have lost some or much of their utility. In an age where "selling out" ceases to matter in the same way it has for generations, and mainstream-indie and indie-mainstream crossover is prevalent at specific junctures, I argue that contemporary indie taste manages to retain its distinctiveness by positioning itself as the modernist stratum of popular music. *Pitchfork's* valorization of modernist tendencies are intensified precisely at the boundary between indie and mainstream taste, and is revealed in *Pitchfork* reviews of top-selling mainstream albums. At stake in this analysis is the way *Pitchfork* inverts former markers of romantic authenticity that characterized past formations of indie music culture. *Pitchfork's* selective embrace of pop and African American musical forms stands in contrast to previous indie culture values rooted in white male "rock classicism" (Straw [1991] 2005, 472; Hesmondhalgh 1999, 46, 52). While some female artists in this sample are positively valued for their modernist 'indirectness', many still have a difficult time accruing positive value in *Pitchfork* due to male-centric conceptions of expressivity which still hold sway. As such, male artists continue to dominate the critical hierarchy in this case.

In order to build this argument I begin by examining distancing or distinguishing mechanisms in indie music culture's past, such as do-it-yourself (hereafter DIY) ethics, the

high cultural value ascribed to institutional autonomy (i.e., not signing to a major label, withholding from corporate engagement), practices and discourses of connoisseurship, and the construction of an indie rock canon. In the Literature Review (Chapter 2), I discuss each of these mechanisms in greater depth and suggest that recent changes in indie taste and aesthetic judgment can be attributed, at least partially, to the faltering of these mechanisms. Although some scholars address instances of indie bands crossing over to and gaining value in the mainstream (see Hesmondhalgh 1999), the reverse phenomenon is not prevalent in these historical contexts and thus remains open to academic study. I also analyze and evaluate previous applications of Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital in indie rock scholarship. I argue that these applications tend to overlook the ways in which indie subcultural capital may be employed in the aestheticization of mainstream popular music. This chapter also examines and evaluates academic literature on rock music criticism. I conclude that Keightley's model consolidates many of the evaluative features explored in past applications, and thus is an appropriate theoretical framework for my purposes.

Chapter 3 examines the rise of *Pitchfork* and indie music culture in the digital age. First, I outline *Pitchfork's* trajectory from a subordinate to a dominant position in the field of online music criticism. *Pitchfork's* legitimizing power increases in tandem with economic, technological, and cultural transformations in 21st century music making. These transformations impact the exclusionary mechanisms used to sustain difference from mainstream taste and practice (namely, connoisseurship, canonicity, DIY ethics, and institutional autonomy) in indie music culture. In particular, online file sharing facilitates the proliferation of indie music, which undermines to some extent the exclusionary function of indie connoisseurist practices (Ott [2006] 2012b, under "Independence Goes Pop"). A generational shift in online music audiences and critics threatens to undermine the sanctity

and of the indie rock canon and the norms of rock aesthetic judgment (Wilson 2007, 12-14); this shift coincides with a residual openness toward Top 40 popular music styles (including rap and R&B) in rock culture. Denied revenue from album sales and commercial radio play, many indie artists turn to corporations to support their careers (see Taylor 2012; Meier 2013). Both indie and mainstream artists become implicated in the same processes of monetization via corporate channels, undermining to some extent the value and utility of DIY ethics and institutional autonomy in sustaining difference between mainstream and indie music practice. During this process, *Pitchfork* becomes a key arbiter of cultural value in indie music culture and comes to represent part of a means for ambitious and aspiring indie artists to support themselves. *Pitchfork's* growth in power also contributes to its ability to legitimize various music styles, which opens the door for selective valorization of mainstream music.

I then conduct a rhetorical analysis of evaluation strategies in *Pitchfork* reviews of mainstream albums in Chapter 4. As previous distancing mechanisms have faltered (to varying degrees) in the digital age, I argue that contemporary indie taste (as represented by *Pitchfork*) retains its distinctiveness by positioning itself as the innovative and artful stratum of popular music; it does so by legitimizing popular musical forms formerly restricted in the field, primarily through the use of valorization strategies grounded in modernist conceptions of rock authenticity. Key findings reveal that patterns of evaluation in many cases correspond to race and gender. African American musical forms are most positively valued primarily for their modernist aesthetic qualities (embrace of technology, openness regarding rock sounds). The positive value assigned to these musical forms illustrates an inversion of historical exclusionary boundaries in previous indie music culture formations that typically eschewed non-standard technology in favour of rock classicism and gradual stylistic change (Straw [1991] 2005, 472; Hesmondhalgh 1999, 38, 52; Bannister 2006a, 81). Pop artists are

typically valued for exhibiting qualities of ‘indirectness’; the perceived ‘directness’ of male rap artists, however, is more positively valued. Commercial rock albums are outright disparaged for their perceived imitative form and commercial intent. I conclude Chapter 4 by exploring the role of indie cultural capital and aesthetic judgment in light of these findings. By reemphasizing the importance of the embodied rather than objectified form of cultural capital in practices of distinction, I argue that indie aesthetic judgment preserves indie culture’s distinctiveness from mainstream taste while simultaneously valorizing these musical forms.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Despite *Pitchfork's* status as a preeminent tastemaker in indie music culture, there remains an absence of media and popular music studies research that directly engages with the online publication. However, there is a related body of research that investigates various aspects of indie music culture and popular music criticism. Extant research and popular music texts on indie music culture include discussions of institutional autonomy and DIY ethics; oppositional attitudes towards mainstream popular music; (sub)cultural capital; practices and discourses of connoisseurship; and canonicity. In this chapter, I review and evaluate research on these topics, situate my research within these academic debates, and establish an aesthetic and historical context of indie music practice and culture.

This chapter also reviews and evaluates media and popular music studies research that examines the relationship between the recording industry and popular music criticism; evaluative criteria and authenticity frameworks employed in rock criticism; and the persistence of value dichotomies in contemporary popular music culture. This section situates my research within ongoing debates in the academic study of indie music culture and popular music criticism. Lastly, two important and related fields of scholarship are omitted from this literature review. First, research pertaining to new media and music is directly applied in Chapter 3. Second, literature pertaining to the role of gender and race in popular music is discussed in Chapter 4, and is thus absent in this literature review.

2.1 Indie: Institutional Autonomy, DIY Ethics, and Oppositional Attitudes toward “Mainstream” Popular Music

A *Pitchfork* news feature entitled “Report: Our Band Could Be Your Concert” refers to the book *Our Band Could be your Life* by Michael Azerrad as the “indie bible” (Pitchfork 2011).

In addition to frequent citation of this text in academic discussions of indie (Kruse 2003; Hibbett 2005; Bannister 2006b), the bands featured in Azerrad's text, such as Sonic Youth, Dinosaur Jr., Fugazi, and Husker Du, represent the historical antecedents of 1990s indie rock that *Pitchfork* regularly featured in its early years. In this text, Azerrad enumerates the characteristics of an indie ethos (mostly) upheld by 1980s underground American rock music groups. Azerrad contends that the artistic and cultural value of 1980s American alternative rock was contingent on the institutional autonomy of its practitioners; he asserts, for example, "[v]irtually every [alternative] band did their best work and most influential work during their indie years; and once [or if] they went to a major label, an important connection to the underground community was invariably lost" (2001, 5). Azerrad emphasizes the ethical commitments of indie rock artists rather than the aesthetic qualities of the music; he explains, "the key principle of American indie rock wasn't a circumscribed musical style; it was the punk ethos of DIY, or do-it-yourself" (2001, 6). In contrast to the "inflated" lifestyles of corporate rock musicians, Azerrad claims that "indie was about living realistically and being proud of it [...] You didn't need [a] big corporation to fund you, or even verify if you were any good. It was about viewing as a virtue what most saw as a limitation" (2001, 10). These claims suggest that the artistic and cultural value of 1980s American indie rock music, in Azerrad's view, was predicated on the institutional autonomy of its practitioners and their embrace of DIY ethics.

Azerrad's conception of institutional autonomy evokes Jason Toynbee's description of 'proto-markets' (2000, 25-32). In *Making Popular Music* (2000), Toynbee describes 'proto-markets' as 'exist[ing] at the edge of the sphere of commercial music production [where] there is a high degree of ambivalence towards the industry' (2000, 27). Borrowing from Pierre Bourdieu's field theory (see Bourdieu 1993, 37-40), Toynbee states that proto-

markets “constitute a ‘field of restricted production’” where “[i]n many cases [commercial] success is equated with ‘selling out’” (2000, 27). Unlike Azerrad, Toynbee conceptualizes institutional autonomy as a key feature of popular music in general. In addition to proto-markets, Toynbee argues that institutional autonomy in popular music can be derived from the “the cult of authorship”; in this case, the music business grants creative control to certain artists whose audience demands they be free of creative interference (2000, 32).

Alternatively, artists who achieve “superstar” status may commodify themselves, rendering them “untouchable” from totalizing corporate coercion (Toynbee 2000, 32). In comparing these formulations to Azerrad’s conception of institutional autonomy, American indie music practice in the 1980s is most appropriately characterized as a proto-market.

Azerrad’s insistence on equating institutional autonomy and DIY ethics with artistic and cultural value finds resonance in other historical accounts of indie music culture. In “The Problem with Music” (1997) Steve Albini, renowned music producer and music industry cynic, argues for the value of DIY ethics; he exposes and delineates the exploitative clauses that comprise major label recording contracts in an effort to deter independent musicians from compromising their institutional autonomy (1997). In *Performing Rites* (1996), Simon Frith, too, acknowledges the historical prevalence of institutional autonomy as a primary feature of indie music practice:

[I]ndie music...refers to both a means of production (music produced on an independent rather than major label) and to an attitude, supposedly embodied in the music, in its listeners, and, perhaps most importantly, the relationship between them. It can therefore lead, in turn, to intricate (and fiercely debated) judgments as to whether a band ‘sells out’, changes the meaning of its music, by appealing to a wider audience. (86)

Debates regarding the value of institutional autonomy in indie music practice tend to evoke the discourse of “selling out”. In particular historical moments, the contentiousness of

“selling out” manifested itself most clearly in cases where indie artists garnered mainstream recognition. Holly Kruse comments on the artistic value that was often lost when indie artists received mainstream recognition: “Once a musical form like punk or indie pop/rock begins to receive some recognition from mainstream institutions and audiences, it is ‘co-opted’ by the mainstream, thereby losing much of the aura of authenticity that it held for its original audience” (2003, 14). In the early 1990s, polarized and contradictory debates emerged in the discourse of alternative music publications and underground fanzines, such as *Spin* and *MAXIMUMROCKNROLL*, concerning “the infiltration of alternative bands into the mainstream” (Kruse 2003, 21-3). These historical accounts of indie music culture and practice highlight the positive value that was often ascribed to indie artists who remained independent from mainstream audiences and corporate institutions.

In “Indie: The Institutional Politics and Aesthetics of a Popular Music Genre” (1999), David Hesmondhalgh provides a contrasting account of 1990s British indie music practice. In 1980s British indie culture, he explains, the value of institutional autonomy was derived from the post-punk movement that preceded it, which placed great emphasis on DIY ethics and values of independence (1999, 39). Hesmondhalgh states, “the mid-1980s’ coining and adoption of the term [indie], an abbreviation of ‘independent’...was highly significant: no music genre had ever before taken its name from the form of industrial organization behind it” (1999, 35). However, by the mid-1980s British indie practice became contradictory in itself, as “its counter-hegemonic aims could only be maintained, it seem[ed], by erecting exclusionary barriers around the culture” (Hesmondhalgh 1999, 38). By the 1990s, certain UK indie artists and record labels relinquished some of their institutional autonomy by collaborating with major record labels; in some cases, it provided an opportunity for artists to reach a wider audience and expand upon their musical aesthetic and production values

(Hesmondhalgh 1999, 55-7). He argues that efforts to uphold institutional autonomy became quite difficult for some practitioners in the field (1999, 44-5); as such, institutional changes that occurred in 1990s “marked a new era of major/independent collaboration” (1999, 55).

Hesmondhalgh’s analysis challenges indie music proponents who regard institutional autonomy as a guarantor of aesthetic value (1999, 56-7). Despite the emergence of major/independent collaborative partnerships, oppositional attitudes toward dominant musical practices and institutions tend to resurface. In the early 1990s, for example, American underground rock achieved mass popularity in North America, which later became known as alternative rock (Bannister 2006a, 79). A new crop of indie music artists emerged, whose musical styles stood in opposition to mainstream alternative rock (Abebe 2010). This movement coincided with *Pitchfork’s* online inauguration. During the site’s early years, artistic integrity often corresponded to artists’ indie label status (see Pitchfork Media 2001), bringing to the fore once again a softer reiteration of DIY ethics and the value of institutional autonomy. As oppositional values rise and fall, it is important to examine historical accounts of indie music culture to gain insight into recent changes that underscore evaluative practices in online indie music contexts. Furthermore, these aforementioned studies address issues pertaining to the mainstream co-option of indie artists. *Pitchfork’s* selective valorization of mainstream performers (a process of “reverse co-option”) stands in stark contrast to the practices and values of past indie music cultures. Lastly, there is a corresponding need in media and popular music studies to explore the differences between indie and mainstream musical taste in the digital landscape, as musical boundaries overlap and value discourses evolve at an accelerated pace.

Recent debates in indie music criticism suggest a more ambivalent perspective towards the institutional orientation of indie artists. In particular, certain strands of indie-

label music have become popular, and thus no longer signify difference from mainstream taste in itself. For example, Nitsuh Abebe explains,

[t]here are [still] major issues and tensions involved in one variety of indie being popular [...] the sense has been that the average ‘indie’ listener would like a bit of both, some pop records to sing along to and some stranger ones [i.e., experimental works released by small-scale producers] to be vowed by, plus plenty in between. (2010)

While the desire to maintain distance from popular taste is still present among a segment of indie music audiences, a growing acceptance of the popularity of indie music among other segments in the past decade problematizes valorization and characterization of indie music artists in relation to their institutional autonomy and adherence to DIY ethics. I explore in greater depth the economic changes that impact the relationship between indie music culture and commercial practices in Chapter 3.

2.2 Indie: Cultural Capital, Connoisseurship, and Canonicity

Previous indie music studies have employed the theories of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to explain its underlying social and cultural logic (e.g., Kruse 2003, 145-158; Hibbett 2005, 56-7; Bannister 2006a, 80-1). In particular, Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital is very useful in explaining specific practices (e.g., connoisseurship, indie canon formation, aesthetic judgment) that indie music artists and audiences’ employ to enact distance from popular taste. This section examines and evaluates uses of Bourdieuan theory in studies of indie music culture and taste. These studies, while very useful, do not explicitly discuss the use of indie cultural capital in the aestheticization of popular taste. This is not an intentional oversight; rather, these studies examine historical contexts where differences between indie and popular aesthetics and taste were for the most part more distinct. This section begins with an account of Bourdieuan theoretical concepts to contextualize their use in indie music research. I then look at applications of these theories in indie-related scholarship.

In *Distinction* (1984) Pierre Bourdieu outlines the central differences between the ‘pure’ and ‘popular’ aesthetic. The ‘pure’ aesthetic of high culture, Bourdieu argues, is rooted in “an ethos of elective distance from the necessities of the natural and social world” (1984, 5). The social and economic privileges of the upper class provide a “life of ease” (1984, 5), by which the sublimation of necessities is made possible. The production and appreciation of art via the ‘pure’ gaze is ideologically indebted to Kantian aesthetic theory, which characterizes art as functionless, an end itself, and “linked to...an autonomous field of artistic production” (Bourdieu 1984, 3). However, Bourdieu argues that the ‘pure’ gaze is an historical invention whereby the ability to decode ‘meaning’ from art objects is “a product of history reproduced by education” (1984, 3) – and thus solidifies the relationship between taste formation and social class, as well as the function of the former in reproducing categories of the latter. The distance from necessity in conjunction with the influence of educational background on taste formation are necessary conditions that inform ‘pure’ aesthetic perception. This mode of aesthetic judgment places value on the form, rather than the function, of art objects (Bourdieu 1984, 29-31).

Popular taste, on the other hand, involves “a systematic reduction of the things of art to the things of life”, where “appreciation always has an ethical basis” (Bourdieu 1984, 5). Popular aesthetic perception identifies with the “primary stratum of the meaning” in works of art that is “grasp[ed] on the basis of...ordinary experience” (Panofsky quoted in Bourdieu 1984, 2). In contrast to the pure gaze, popular taste identifies with the function of cultural objects, rather than their form. For example, the moral content of a film is likely to appeal to popular taste whereas the pure aesthetic is attuned to a film’s formalistic and connotative dimensions. Finally, Bourdieu asserts that popular aesthetic perception, like the pure gaze in high art culture, is inextricably linked to social and economic class and educational

background; he asserts, “[a] work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence...into which it is encoded” (Bourdieu 1984, 2).

Taste distinctions rooted in pure and popular aesthetic perception may be employed within a field of cultural production. Symbolic resources at stake within a given field include cultural capital and symbolic capital, among others. In the most general sense, cultural capital can be characterized as “a form of knowledge, an internalized code or a cognitive acquisition which equips the social agent with empathy towards, appreciation for or competence in deciphering cultural relations and artifacts” (Johnson 1993, 7). Symbolic capital, by contrast, “refers to degree of accumulated prestige, celebrity, and consecration or honour and is founded on a dialectic of knowledge...and recognition” (Johnson 1993, 7). Cultural and symbolic capital thus impact agents’ mobility within a given field. For example, positive reviews from esteemed music publications (i.e., an example of symbolic capital) may help a band reach a larger audience and increase their potential to acquire economic capital. An indie band’s encyclopedic knowledge of rock music history (i.e., their cultural capital) may likewise facilitate creative use of unlikely musical combinations that may, in turn, generate interest among indie fans and critics.

In “The Social Logic of Subcultural Capital” ([1995] 2005) Sarah Thornton updates Bourdieu’s conception of cultural capital to account for practices and social relations in youth-oriented club cultures. At stake in this field is the accumulation and display of subcultural capital. In Bourdieu’s theorization, cultural capital is inculcated through family education and class-based social institutions (Johnson 1993, 7), which function to reproduce social and economic class. By contrast, subcultural capital –the specialized knowledge that circulates in club cultures – is not taught in school (Thornton 1996, 13), and thus not expressly rooted in economic class distinction. Thornton claims that, unlike other fields

analyzed by Bourdieu, the social logic of subcultural capital in club culture is ‘hipness’ ([1995] 2005, 184). Individuals’ subcultural capital, or ‘hipness’, is measured both in its objectified and embodied form. Objectified forms of subcultural capital include, for example, possession of fashionable clothes or revered musical recordings that are valued by the community. Embodied forms of subcultural capital pertain to the manner in which knowledge and group membership is employed socially, for example, in “using (but not over-using) current slang and looking as if you were born to perform the latest dance styles” (Thornton [1995] 2005, 186). Hipness, then, manifested in both embodied and objectified forms of subcultural capital function as markers of distinction, which are “never just assertions of equal difference; they usually entail some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of *others*” (Thornton [1995] 2005, 185). Although I am not explicitly discussing dance music cultures in this thesis, Thornton’s conception of subcultural capital has nonetheless been applied in studies of indie rock culture (see Bannister 2006a, 81).

In “What is Indie Rock?” (2005), Ryan Hibbett employs Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital to explain similarities between the internal cultural logic of indie rock and high art culture. He asserts,

As with high art in its relation to popular culture, indie rock is part of a dichotomous power structure in which two fields – (A) [the popular] having a large audience and producing an abundance of economic capital, the other (B) [indie and ‘high art culture] having a much smaller audience and producing little economic capital – operate in a contentious but symbiotic relationship: while resisting the conventions of A, B acquires value through its being recognized as ‘not A’. (57)

In employing this analogy, Hibbett argues that indie rock, like high art, “depend[s] upon a lack of popularity for [its] value, and require[s] specialized knowledge [i.e., (sub)cultural capital] to be fully appreciated” (2005, 55). He also demonstrates how the music of aesthetically diverse indie artists Lou Barlow, Godspeed You! Black Emperor, and Sigur Rós

are amenable to high art aestheticization (2005, 62-66). Since the publication of “What is Indie Rock?” (2005), indie has gained greater recognition in popular music. Indie band Arcade Fire, for example, received Album of the Year at the 2011 Grammys (Caramanica 2011). Indie label acts such as Bon Iver and Best Coast have formed artist-brand partnerships with Bush Mills Whiskey and Urban Outfitters, respectively (Battan and Phillips 2011; Nika 2012). However, the increased popularity of performers of underground origin is nothing new (e.g., the mainstream commercial success of Nirvana and Green Day in the 1990s, among countless other examples since the punk era). What is relatively new, at least for indie culture in the past decade, is the growing popularity and inclusion of mainstream artists within indie music culture – of which Kanye West, Justin Timberlake, and Drake are paradigmatic examples. By emphasizing the positive value of obscurity (2005, 57), Hibbett’s account of indie rock eschews discussion of how indie cultural capital may be used to aestheticize mainstream popular music artists.

According to several popular music scholars (Straw [1991] 2005; Bannister 2006a; Bannister 2006b; Leonard 2007, 46) the musical aesthetic dimensions in indie (or “alternative rock”) culture have been, to varying degrees, informed by connoisseurist practices. This section outlines the impact of connoisseurship on aesthetic formations in indie and its relationship to Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital. This section, for the purposes of this chapter, attempts to illustrate how retrospective or obscure musical influences have helped in part to define the aesthetic boundaries of indie rock. In these historical contexts, positive regard for contemporaneous mainstream performers is quite uncommon.

In *Rip it Up and Start Again* (2005) Simon Reynolds states that the initial demographic constituting post-punk⁶ were “arty middle-class bohemians” who decided to break with rock’s tradition and instead explore “electronics, noise, jazz, and the classical avant-garde, and the production techniques of dub reggae and disco” (1). In this milieu, musical groups such as “PiL [Public Image Limited], Joy Division, Talking Heads, Throbbing Gristle, Contortions, and Scritti Politti” emerged (Reynolds 2005, 1). Post-punk eventually “rebuilt bridges with rock’s own past”, deriving inspiration from David Bowie, Roxy Music, Soft Machine, King Crimson, and Velvet Underground, as well as Krautrock groups such as Neu and Kraftwerk (Reynolds 2005, 4). In the mid-1980s, ‘indie’ emerged as a distinct genre after the fragmentation of post-punk; indie replaced the stylistic eclecticism of post-punk with “a canon of white, underground rock references” (Hesmondhalgh 1999, 38). This canon consisted of a selective inclusion of 1960s rock/pop, including artists, producers, and auteurs such as The Byrds, Phil Spector, and Brian Wilson (Bannister 2006b, 38-9). UK indie by the mid-1980s was largely characterized as past-oriented, romantic, and “anti-modern” (Reynolds [1986] 1989, 255).

In “Communities and Scenes in Popular Music” ([1991] 2005) Will Straw discusses the characteristics of geographically bound music scenes in the context of North American alternative (i.e., indie) rock and dance music in the 1980s. Straw argues that connoisseurship became central to alternative rock in light of organizational changes that occurred in punk scenes after the late 1970s ([1991] 2005, 472-3). First, he states that there were interactions “in the mid and late 1970s, between the terrain of punk and ‘New Wave’ and the pre-existing connoisseurist tendencies within the culture of rock music” ([1991] 2005, 473). This led to

6. Post-punk is a musical movement (circa 1977-81) that eschewed the narrow aesthetic dimensions of punk in favour of radical stylistic eclecticism (see Reynolds 2005).

an “overlapping of alternative rock culture and the cultural space of record collectors and historical archivism” – practices commonly identified with “a largely white bohemia[n]” demographic and characterized by practices of “tracking down old albums [and] learning genealogical links between bands” (Straw [1991] 2005, 473). The rise of connoisseurship in 1980s North American alternative rock culture led to “the construction of a relatively stable canon of earlier musical forms – 1960s trash psychedelia, early 1970s metal, the dissident rock tradition of the Velvet Underground and others – which serve[d] as a collective reference point” (Straw [1991] 2005, 473). Similar to Bannister and Reynolds’ account of mid-1980s UK indie, the North American alternative rock canon was past-oriented and anti-modern (Straw [1991] 2005, 472).

Matthew Bannister explains the subversiveness and centrality of record collecting and connoisseurship in indie culture’s attempt to reconnect with rock’s past in the 1980s:

To even find, say, a Velvet Underground or a Byrds album in New Zealand (or Minneapolis, or Manchester) in 1980 would have taken effort, commitment, and a lot of hanging round (usually second-hand) record shops [...] Such awareness of the past was (at the time) subversive. Unlike today, when classic hits stations and CD reissues are ubiquitous, in the early 1980s, the 1960s were virtually unheard, a kind of secret. (2006a, 81)

It is important to note that the attempts by indie audiences and artists in the 1980s to selectively recover strains of 1960s rock was a means of distancing themselves from contemporaneous popular taste. These connoisseurist practices informed the aesthetic standards of indie canonicity, which Bannister asserts may be viewed as a form of subcultural capital (2006a, 92). Thus, to incorporate aesthetic elements of the Velvet Underground in the 1980s signified – or rather, had the potential to signify – a high degree of subcultural capital to indie music insiders. Knowledgeable indie fans could demonstrate their specialized knowledge of music genealogies informing indie aesthetics, and thus exclude

those who lack the requisite knowledge (cf. Thornton [1995] 2005, 131). Rock music journalists and publications, such as Lester Bangs in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and *NME* in the 1980s helped shape the indie rock canon (Bannister 2006a, 79), illustrating the power of the music press in influencing the aesthetics of indie music practice and taste. The specific aesthetic referents of 1960s groups characterized some strands of indie practice in the 1980s, helping in part to define the aesthetic boundaries that functioned to distance indie culture from popular music and taste.

By the mid-1990s the indie canon expanded significantly, in part as a response to the mainstreaming of grunge and alternative rock (see Keightley 2001, 110). Connoisseurship in indie culture peaked once its initial aesthetic referents had become commonplace. As Hibbett notes, “[c]ultural capital can cease to have value as it becomes increasingly accessible... indie rock must perpetually seek out new artists, records, and sounds: toward the old ends of social distinction new currencies must be forged” (2005, 64). For example, in “Cannibals, Mutants, and Hipsters” (2002) John Harvey describes how artists such as Yo La Tengo and Stereolab pushed the boundaries of ‘record collector’ rock, incorporating musical references beyond the scope of legitimate works in indie culture, and perpetuating the taste for obscurity in maintaining their distance from contemporary popular music (117).

The processes outlined in this account become far more complex by the early-mid 2000s. The longstanding symbolic power of connoisseurship and canonicity, manifested as forms of embodied and objectified cultural capital, gradually alter in function by the early 2000s. Chapter 3 explores the technological and cultural changes involved in this process, such as the proliferation of online file sharing, music blogging, and the emergence of

“poptimism” (Wilson 2007, 12-4).⁷ The residual effects of these changes are seen in *Pitchfork*’s coverage of mainstream performers. For example, in 2008 Scott Plagenhoef, former *Pitchfork* editor-in-chief, published an article on the site entitled “Through the Cracks” (2008b); he discusses *Pitchfork*’s increased coverage of mainstream popular music and the site’s perception of certain performers as “artists” (2008b). Although we can draw comparisons to late 1980s/early 1990s *Spin* magazine, *Pitchfork*’s selective valorization of mainstream performers does not completely cohere with previous accounts of indie culture that I have outlined in this section. As the two spheres continue to overlap at particular junctures, indie culture’s relational obscurity loses some of its symbolic power in sustaining perceptions of difference from popular taste. The distancing mechanisms of connoisseurship and canonicity, as expounded by Bannister and Straw, have changed to some extent; selective valorization of contemporary mainstream performers and musical styles in contemporary indie music culture has little to do with the ‘subversiveness’ of recuperating popular music styles from bygone eras. If indie (sub)cultural capital has played an integral role in enacting and sustaining exclusionary boundaries between it and popular taste, then we must reconsider how these boundaries remain intact in the contemporary moment of intra-field cultural consumption.

I realize that *Pitchfork* cannot accurately represent the constellation of subjectivities that comprise indie music audiences. Indie music scholars Matthew Bannister and Wendy Fonarow, however, argue that dominant indie music press publications have historically served an integral role in shaping the discursive dimensions and taste boundaries in indie

7. In general, “poptimism” refers to an embrace of ‘non-rock’ musical styles and “guilty pleasures” – e.g., Top 40 pop, bubblegum, hip-hop, R&B (see Wilson 2007, 12-4). Poptimism opposes the practice of “measuring all popular music by the norms of rock culture” (Wilson 2007, 12). I explore the emergence of “poptimism” in greater depth in Chapter 3.

music culture (2006b, 58; 2006, 26). On the relationship between fans and critics, Simon Frith argues that the “ideology of rock – the arguments about what records mean, what rock is for – has always been articulated more clearly by fans than by musicians [...] Hence the importance of the professional rock fans – the rock writers” (1981, 165). Most importantly, Frith argues that music criticism publications “are important even for those people who don’t buy [or read] them – their readers act as opinion leaders, the rock interpreters, the ideological gatekeepers for everyone else” (1981, 165). Thus, if we are to gain any insights into the manner by which mainstream artists are assimilated into contemporary indie taste, I suggest rhetorical analyses of album reviews published in *Pitchfork* – the most widely-read indie music website in recent years – ought to be justified as legitimate means.

2.3 Rock Criticism and the Music Industry

In “Policing Bohemia, Pinning up Grunge” (1993), Jason Toynbee analyzes transformations in the function of British popular music press publications in the 1980s and early 1990s. Toynbee states that during the rise of “New Pop” and the economic decline of the music industry in early 1980s, magazines such as *Smash Hits* “were simultaneously constructing a genre and a readership” rather than “following pre-existing demand in the record market” (1993, 291-2); this reinforced the record industry’s dependency on the music press and other “institutional regulators” (Hirsch [1972] 1990, 137). The emerging proliferation of music media – for example, satellite radio and television – and the emergence of a popular, yet relatively autonomous underground dance music market between the mid-1980s and early 1990s had altered the traditional relationship between the music press and the record business; the former could now act as either “sponsors or initiators of music texts rather than mere [record industry] filters” (Toynbee 1993, 291); this transformation, rather than actual record sales, initiated a resurgence of rock values in British press publications *NME* and

Melody Maker in the late 1980s. Toynbee asserts that these conditions contributed to the development of 1990s alternative rock.

Since the publication of Toynbee's essay, the music and press industries have changed significantly: Recorded music sales have significantly declined (see Leyshon et al. 2005, 178-9); the proliferation of online music blogs and peer-to-peer file sharing has changed the stakes of music distribution and consumption. Analysis of the music press' transition from a print to digital platform is lacking in contemporary media and popular music studies scholarship. Chapter 3 advances aspects of Toynbee's inquiry by examining the economic and technological transformations that have restructured the music industry and its influence on the rise of online indie music criticism.

2.4 Evaluative Frameworks and Authenticity in Rock Criticism

This section surveys academic studies that examine evaluation frameworks and authenticity discourses in rock music criticism. This section explains how analysis of 'high-art' evaluative criteria in music reviews is not useful for my purposes; the extant literature in this field suggests that analysis of rock authenticity in album reviews is a productive means of explaining contemporary processes of distinction in (indie) rock criticism.

In "Producing Artistic Value: The Case of Rock" (1994) Motti Regev argues that rock music critics constructed a corpus of rock music "masterpieces" produced during three "authentic" periods of rock music (i.e., early 'rock n'roll', 'the sixties', and 'punk'). Regev asserts that evaluation parameters employed by rock critics of the late-1960s and 1970s were influenced by "the traditional concept of art" (1994, 88). These parameters include the "ideology of subversiveness", the "autonomous creative entity", and "aesthetic genuineness". Rock albums legitimized by critics often embodied an "ideology of subversiveness", which he describes as "negation of and resistance to...conditions of existence, against anything

which is ‘square’, routine, expected...and conformist. In its sounds rock music expresses rage, alienation, anomie, anxiety, anger, fear” (1994, 91). This definition consists of an alternate ‘pop’ formulation which emphasizes “expression of immediate hedonism: love, sex, dance, consumerism and driving offer a relief from boredom and anxiety [...], present[ing] fun and pleasure as a rejection of the ethic of work and restraint, and as redemption from it” (1994, 91). Furthermore, positively valued rock albums were often created by “autonomous creative entities” who wrote, performed, and often produced their own music (1994, 91-2), in contrast to, for example, early 1960s vocalists whose repertoire was written by Brill Building songwriters and produced by designated industry professionals. Lastly, rock critics often positively valued rock albums that embodied “aesthetic genuineness” (1994, 95-7); it manifests itself in artists’ use of ‘electric sound’, ‘studio work’ (i.e., artful studio production and experimentation), ‘voice and lyrics’, and ‘stylistic eclecticism’ (1994, 95-7).

Regev’s study is one of the first to delineate and classify evaluative criteria employed by rock music critics. Regev’s analysis, however, is limited to three specific historical moments of rock music spanning the late 1950s to 1980. Lindberg et al. point out, however, that while Regev places great emphasis on the centrality of high art parameters in rock music criticism, “folk authenticity was equally useful to attempts to set rock off from mainstream popular taste” in the 1960s (2005, 45). Furthermore, certain evaluation parameters are less prominent in contemporary rock music discourse; for example, distinguished popular music critic Simon Reynolds asserts that “the idea of pop as subversive” has more or less been abandoned in American rock criticism (Lindberg et al. 2005, 261).

A book-length study of rock criticism as a cultural field, entitled *Rock Criticism from the Beginning* (Lindberg et al. 2005), employs a qualitative, critical-historical approach. In this comprehensive study, Lindberg et al. construct detailed case studies of influential

American and British rock music critics and press publications from the early-1960s to 2005. The authors thoroughly investigate the historical contexts that underwrite changes and developments in rock criticism discourses. For example, the authors contextualize historical antecedents of ‘serious’ rock, found in 1960s ‘counterculture’ rock publications such as *Crawdaddy!*, *Creem*, and *Rolling Stone*, by analyzing the influence of “folk authenticity” on 1950s Blues criticism in *Melody Maker* (2005, 92-8). They also explore the development of the ‘autonomous’ and ‘commercial’ pole⁸ in 1960s rock, which originated in discourses from 1930s and 1940s jazz criticism (2005, 89-91). Furthermore, the authors use Bourdieu’s field theory (see Bourdieu 1993, 37-40) to establish the position of each publication in the field of rock criticism based on the nature and scope of music coverage, advertisements, and circulation figures. At the turn of the past century, for example, *Wire* magazine (UK) occupied (and still occupies) the ‘autonomous’ pole of the field, due to their small-scale circulation and non-commercial music coverage (2005, 325). *Spin* (USA) and *The Face* (UK), by contrast, occupied the commercial, or ‘heteronomous’, pole, based on the prevalence of commercial advertisements and popular appeal of their music coverage (2005, 325-6).

The field of rock criticism has altered since the (relatively recent) publication of *Rock Music from the Beginning* (2005). At present, *Spin*’s website reaches nearly 700,000 monthly visitors (Buzzmedia 2012a); by contrast, *Pitchfork* currently reaches “a fiercely loyal audience of more than 3.5 million unique visitors each month—with a nearly 30% increase in visits each year” (Pitchfork 2012). The authors do not include extensive analyses of online popular music websites or any mention of *Pitchfork* in particular (and understandably so

8. The contrasting terms ‘autonomous’ and ‘commercial’ are symbolic of relational field positions and are not meant to be taken literally.

since *Pitchfork's* tastemaker status and brand cache did not fully develop until later in the decade). This thesis aims to fill this gap in the extant research and, most importantly, develop a scholarly approach to account for new developments in indie music criticism and value discourses.

Significantly, the authors argue that an “intermediary aesthetic” has come to define contemporary rock criticism, which they describe as follows:

To say that rock criticism advocates an “intermediary aesthetic” is to focus on a seminal feature of the field’s self-understanding: the common belief that the constant tension between...the “rock” approach that wants to situate the music in a context of social and/or aesthetic revolt and the original “pop” approach to it as part of a consumerist lifestyle, is not only distinctive in relation to other cultural fields...but even productive for the music’s ability to register signs o’ the times and renew itself. It was vital to stress the opposition and set up “authentic” rock against “commercial” pop when the field was founded, but the construction felt increasingly problematic in the 1970s, and significantly it was a self-conscious return to pop that broke it up and ushered the field into its postmodern phase. (2005, 338)

Despite the erosion of distinct ‘high’ and ‘low’ categories of music production and consumption, the authors argue that authenticity remains a primary legitimating strategy in rock criticism (Lindberg et al. 2005, 8, 44-8). They assert that since distinctions are still deployed with “some form of self-conscious ‘meta-authenticity’” at work – “whose markers may be subcultural”, causal historical explanations and theoretical references, or “originality as a central value criterion” (2005, 340) – “the ghost of authenticity still lurks in the shadows”, despite “high/low hierarchies hav[ing] become jumbled” (2005, 340). The authors’ extensive historical research of rock criticism discourse bestows great authority to this claim.

Scholars of media and popular music studies continue to explore conceptions of authenticity employed in rock culture and criticism (Grossberg 1992; Frith 1996; Keightley 2001; Leach 2001; Weisethaunet and Lindberg 2010). Hans Weisethaunet and Ulf Lindberg

in “Authenticity Revisited: The Rock Critic and the Changing Real” (2010) analyze multiple forms of authenticity that function as indicators of value and meaning in rock criticism. These include folkloric “Authenticity” (2010, 469-71), “Authenticity” as self-expression (2010, 471-2), “Authenticity” as negation (2010, 472-3), “Authentic Inauthenticity” (2010, 473-5), body “Authenticity” (2010, 475-6), and “Authenticity” as transcendence of the everyday (2010, 476-7). Each form is described and contextualized historically in its use in rock criticism. In “Authenticity” as self-expression, for example, the authors explain that “truth is conceived in terms of the degree to which representation is taken to offer access to the inner worlds of an exceptional subject” (2010, 471). Weisethaunet and Lindberg trace this conception of authenticity to the “legacy of Romanticism and its notion of the artist as a creative genius” (2010, 471). Likewise, the “Authentic Inauthenticity” paradigm emerged in the 1980s, following the aesthetic developments of 1970s glam rock, which “focused on *play*, [and] whose claim to truth lay precisely in the exposition of artistic identities as constructions” (2010, 474). The emergence of “Authentic Inauthenticity” coincided with a postmodern sensibility that became ubiquitous in the 1980s, embodied by performers such as Madonna and David Bowie (2010, 474).

Weisethaunet and Lindberg’s analysis of authenticity offers a pluralistic approach to analyzing value attribution in popular music criticism. While the origins of each form of authenticity are products of specific historical conditions, they are also amenable to application in contemporary music criticism and are in dialogue with one another. Folkloric “Authenticity”, for example, can be used by popular music writers “to express the cultural values of *any* community” including “present strands [of rock music criticism] whose understanding of ‘authenticity’ is informed by identity politics, such as feminist...[and] hip-hop criticism” (2010, 470). “Authentic Inauthenticity”, likewise, is in dialogue with the

latter; it developed and emerged in reaction to traditional (i.e., romantic) notions of the “real” (2010, 474).

The authors caution that when examining authenticity one “should be prepared to meet a number of quite differing ideas and concepts” (2010, 465). The numerous conceptions they examine, however, need not be applied in a fragmentary manner. In “Reconsidering Rock” (2001), for example, Keir Keightley organizes rock’s “key structuring principles” into two primary categories of rock authenticity – namely, “romantic” and “modernist” authenticity (2001, 131-9).⁹ Keightley’s authenticity framework includes characteristics of folkloric “Authenticity” and “Authenticity” as self-expression in the category of romantic authenticity (2001, 137). Similarly, modernist authenticity (Keightley 2001, 137) subsumes characteristics of “Authentic Inauthenticity” and “Authenticity and the Changing Real”. Furthermore, Keightley contextualizes romantic and modernist authenticity within rock’s historical, social, economic, and cultural development from the late nineteenth century onward. As “key structuring principles of rock”, they “have remained stable in the last three decades of the twentieth century” (Keightley 2001, 139).

In “Between Rock and a Hard Place” (2002), Kembrew McLeod provides a detailed content analysis of (oft-gendered) adjectives employed in rock criticism publications, including “*Rolling Stone* (1971-99), *Crawdaddy!* (1971-78), *Creem* (1971-89), and *Spin* (1985-99)” (2002, 95). These adjectives include ‘aggressive intensity’, ‘violence’, ‘softness’, ‘rawness’, ‘slickness’, ‘blandness’, ‘simplicity’, ‘personal expression’, ‘seriousness’, ‘vapidity’, ‘traditionalism’, ‘authenticity’, ‘commercialism’, ‘originality’, ‘formulaic unoriginality’, and ‘sweet sentimentalism’ (2002, 97-107). Many of these adjectives surface

9. I provide a detailed overview and explanation of Keightley’s authenticity framework in Chapter 4.

in *Pitchfork* album reviews, both directly and indirectly depending on the context in which they are employed. McLeod, however, asserts that many of the discursive dimensions in his study have been shaped by “1960s authenticist ideology” (2002, 107), which illustrates the long-lasting effects of authenticity as a legitimizing construct in rock culture.

Among the “positive” dimensions, we find resonance with Keightley’s romantic authenticity (e.g., simplicity, personal expression, traditionalism, seriousness) and modernist authenticity (e.g., originality, seriousness). The negative dimensions (e.g., blandness, sweet sentimentalism) are those which rock culture has historically assigned to ‘pop’ artists (Keightley 2001, 109). While McLeod’s approach derives adjectival data from a large sample of reviews, the objectives of this thesis require a deeper contextual approach to analyzing evaluative practices in rock criticism. Keightley’s authenticity framework works best for my purposes; it facilitates analysis of the majority of characteristics explored in Weisethaunet and Lindberg (2010) and McLeod (2002). Other theoretical sources supplement Keightley’s framework, including insights from Andreas Huyssen, Simon Frith, Pierre Bourdieu, Matthew Bannister, Wendy Fonarow, Simon Reynolds, and others.

2.5 Value Dichotomies within Popular Music Culture

Regev’s study persuasively illustrates the existence of value hierarchies *within* popular music culture (1994). By employing parameters of traditional (high) art, rock critics – along with other constituents of the “production of meaning apparatus” (1994, 88) – enacted distinctions between “high” and “low” forms of popular music. Hibbett, however, asserts that there is still a significant gap in cultural studies research regarding value hierarchies within popular culture (2005, 57). He justifies the value of analyzing taste stratification in popular music as follows: “[T]he split between ‘high art’ and ‘popular’ or ‘mass’ culture...has formed the historical basis of Cultural Studies. In the reign of this massive binary, little attention has

been given to the complex processes and hierarchies within popular culture” (2005, 57).

Furthermore, in *Rock Criticism from the Beginning* (Lindberg et al. 2005), the authors argue that although the traditional distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture (e.g., high modernist vs. popular art) “is no more, high/low divisions remain” (26) (e.g., “alternative”/“mainstream”): “[T]he reproduction of value dichotomies continues,” the authors assert, “insisting that there *is* a difference, and that it *counts*” (2005, 24).

My research fits squarely within this “massive binary”, as I will be analyzing *Pitchfork*’s evaluation of mainstream artists’ albums. Most significantly, the site has yet to be explored in this fashion in the context of peer-reviewed media and popular music scholarship. The increase in valorized mainstream music in *Pitchfork* album reviews and news features suggests that there is an emerging value dichotomy within the field of indie music culture itself. Popular music artists, such as Kanye West and Drake, are valorized alongside producers in the experimental faction of indie, such as Actress, Tim Hecker, and Oneohtrix Point Never, for example. By focusing on *Pitchfork*’s evaluation of the former, we can gain insight into the exclusionary boundaries that exist between contemporary indie and mainstream popular taste.

3 CONTEXTUALIZING *PITCHFORK* AND INDIE MUSIC CULTURE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

This chapter examines technological, economic, and cultural developments in indie music culture, and the music industry more generally, that coincide with the rise of *Pitchfork*, 1996 to present. These analyses are divided into two larger sections. First, I examine *Pitchfork's* trajectory from a “subordinate” to a “dominant” position in the field of online indie music criticism. I plot this trajectory using theoretical attributes of John B. Thompson’s “structural” approach to cultural analysis (1990, 136-62), according to which the production, transmission, and reception of “*meaningful actions, objects, and expressions*” are analyzed in relation to historically and socially structured contexts (1990, 136). For each position, I analyze the ways in which *Pitchfork* ascribes value to indie music in relation to the site’s legitimizing power and cultural influence. This section concludes with an explication of the differences between print and digital media transmission that are relevant to this project. John B. Thompson’s framework for analyzing aspects of cultural transmission (1990, 163-71) grounds this analysis. This framework highlights the relatively high degree of accessibility and reproducibility of digital rather than print media. The advantages of digital media complement the digitization and online circulation of indie music, and hence facilitate *Pitchfork's* gradual ascendancy in the digital age.

Pitchfork's rise in cultural status and influence can best be understood in the context of technological, cultural, and economic transformations that have impacted indie music consumption and practice during the past decade. These transformations are important to know about because *Pitchfork*, during this process, becomes a powerful arbiter of cultural value in indie music culture. The second section discusses the proliferation of online file

sharing, and attendant changes in indie music access, distribution, and consumption. Increased access to previously guarded indie music knowledge partially undermines the exclusivity of connoisseurist practices and discourses in indie music culture (Wilson 2005a; Ott [2006] 2012b, under “Independence Goes Pop”). The emergence of “poptimism” in the context of online file sharing and music blogging prompts many music fans and critics to question the legitimacy of (indie) rock aesthetic judgment and musical taste (Wilson 2007, 12-4). Increased coverage of pop music styles in *Pitchfork* loosely coincide with the rise of popoptimism (see Schreiber 2003). Growth of online file sharing occurs in tandem with a dramatic decline in recorded music sales (Leyshon et al. 2005, 177-8) and corporate consolidation of American radio stations (Taylor 2012, 207). Denied revenue from recorded music sales and tightened restrictions on commercial radio and music video playlists, many major and indie label artists explore new avenues to monetize their work (Taylor 2012, 207-8; Meier 2013, 266). In this milieu, the stigma associated with “selling out” falters among factions of indie music culture (Leland 2001; Moran 2008). With both major and indie artists monetizing their music through similar corporate channels, the institutional demarcation lines between indie and mainstream practice become less clear. In the absence of income earned through recorded music sales, positive reception and regular coverage in *Pitchfork* becomes a key factor that helps facilitate commercial success and opportunities for some indie artists. *Pitchfork’s* legitimizing power in indie music culture also permits renegotiation of indie music taste boundaries, through inclusion of traditionally non-indie music.

3.1 Plotting the Trajectory of *Pitchfork*: From a Subordinate to a Dominant Position in the Field of Rock Music Criticism

This section contextualizes *Pitchfork’s* integral role in indie music culture in the digital age. I begin by explaining Thompson’s theoretical framework. It is then used to analyze *Pitchfork’s*

trajectory from a subordinate to a dominant position in the field of music criticism. Each position is qualified through examination of the site's distribution of economic and symbolic resources, and the way these resources are manifested in the site's operation. This section discusses the ways in which *Pitchfork's* ascendancy correlates with structural changes in the music industry and indie music culture, outlined in the second half of this chapter.

3.1.1 The Social Contextualization and Valorization of Symbolic Forms

In *Ideology and Modern Culture* (1990), John B. Thompson develops a framework for the cultural analysis of symbolic forms. This framework is grounded in a 'structural conception' of culture (1990, 136). Examples of symbolic forms include "linguistic expressions, gestures, actions, [and] works of art" (1990, 1). In this context, both a musical recording and written criticisms of it are examples of symbolic forms. An integral aspect of Thompson's structural conception of culture is his emphasis on the 'contextual' characteristic of symbolic forms; the "specific social-historical contexts and processes" that affect the production, circulation, and reception of symbolic forms (Thompson 1990, 145). Individuals and social institutions (e.g., *Pitchfork*) partake in the evaluation of and contestation over the value of symbolic forms; objects may be "praised or denounced, cherished or despised" by individuals and social institutions (Thompson 1990, 154-5), which Thompson defines as the "processes of valorization" (1990, 146).

Thompson explains that individuals and institutions possess varying degrees of symbolic and economic resources, and these, in turn, are involved in the processes of valorization (1990, 147-8). Symbolic resources include "cultural capital" (i.e., specialized knowledge and skills) and "symbolic capital" (i.e., "accumulated praise, prestige, and recognition") (Thompson 1990, 148), which both adhere to Bourdieu's general conception of the two (see Johnson 1993, 7). Thompson situates processes of valorization within "fields of

interaction”, domains of social practice comprised of “a space of positions” and “a set of trajectories” (1990, 147-8).¹⁰ A music recording, an artist, or a music writer may move between various positions within a field. Thompson distinguishes fields of interactions from social institutions. He asserts that “[s]ocial institutions can be seen as constellations of rules, resources and relations which are situated within, and at the same time create, fields of interaction” (1990, 149). Social institutions can also give “shape to pre-existing fields of interaction, and at the same time [create] a new set of [field] positions and possible trajectories” (Thompson 1990, 149). Social institutions occupy fields of interactions but are also distinct from individual agents’ actions that take place within a field (Thompson 1990, 149). Holistically, *Pitchfork* represents a social institution situated in a field of interaction – namely, the field of music criticism. As a social institution, *Pitchfork* is implicated in the process of creating new trajectories within the field of music criticism; this becomes markedly apparent, for example, in the displacement of print in favour of online music criticism in the mid-late 2000s.

Finally, fields of interaction and social institutions are characterized by “relatively stable asymmetries and differentials in terms of the distribution of, and access to, resources of various kinds, power, opportunities, and life chances”, which Thompson refers to as “social structure” (1990, 150). The positions and trajectories of artists and music writers are conditioned by structural factors such as race and gender, for example. Thus, social structure influences the activity of individuals occupying distinct positions and pursuing trajectories within fields of interactions and social institutions, which in sum constitute the contextual

10. Instead of Bourdieu’s term ‘habitus’ (see Johnson 1993, 4-6), Thompson uses the term “flexible schemata” to describe the implicit rules and conventions internalized by individuals that orient their actions in fields of interaction (1990, 148). Like Bourdieu, Thompson stresses that flexible schemata do not entirely determine individuals’ actions; they can be consciously or (more often) unconsciously modified in the processes of valorization in fields of interaction (1990, 148-9).

aspect of symbolic forms and their subjection to processes of valorization (Thompson 1990, 151-4).

The processes of valorization that participate in the generation of value or reputation of an artist or reviewer – i.e., the “complex processes of valuation, evaluation, and conflict” (Thompson 1990, 154) – involve two distinct forms: economic valorization and symbolic valorization. Economic valorization is the ascription of economic value to a symbolic form (1990, 155). Symbolic valorization, Thompson asserts, is “the process through which symbolic forms are ascribed a certain ‘symbolic value’ by the individuals who produce and receive them” (1990, 154). Symbolic value “is the value that objects have by virtue of the ways in which, and the extent to which, they are *esteemed by* the individuals who produce and receive them – that is, praised or denounced, cherished or despised by these individuals”, explains Thompson (1990, 154-5). *Pitchfork*, by trade, is in the business of symbolic valuation; in receiving symbolic forms (e.g., an album) the site may praise or denounce it. As *Pitchfork’s* significance in indie music criticism and culture grows, its evaluative impact increases. This process is concretized in the form of a written review, which is then published and circulated online. This review is also a symbolic form, which may be denounced or cherished by individuals who read it. This circular process of receiving, evaluating, and producing symbolic valuations of symbolic forms between *Pitchfork* and its readers illustrates the process of valorization that takes place in the context of online music criticism. As the position of an individual or a social institution within a field of interaction (and hence, their degree of and access to symbolic and economic resources) influences the perceived legitimacy of ascriptions of symbolic value to symbolic forms (Thompson 1990, 155), we can easily note that *Pitchfork’s* early reviews had less impact on perceptions of value in indie music culture than they would come to have.

Lastly, Thompson claims that participating individuals and institutions in fields of interaction may occupy three general positions: “Dominant”, “intermediate”, and “subordinate” (1990, 158). According to Thompson, each field position is loosely linked to three general strategies of symbolic valuation, which are characterized as tendencies rather than concrete rules; those occupying dominant field positions may typically, but not always, employ strategies of “distinction”, “derision”, and “condescension” in the process of symbolic valuation of symbolic forms (Thompson 1990, 158-9). An individual in a dominant position, for example, may distinguish him or herself by valuing classical music or by purchasing high art, which reflects their accumulated cultural capital and wealth (Thompson 1990, 158-9). Occupants of intermediate field positions may employ strategies of “moderation”, “pretension”, and “devaluation” in their evaluations (Thompson 1990, 158-160). For example, an individual in an intermediate position may have great knowledge of fashion but purchase their clothes from thrift stores; this allows them to showcase their cultural capital in the absence of economic capital, illustrating a strategy of moderation (Thompson 1990, 159). Finally, strategies of those in subordinate positions may include “practicality”, “respectful resignation”, and “rejection” (Thompson 1990, 160-161). An individual in a subordinate position may try to elevate him or herself by rejecting high-art forms associated with and appreciated by those in dominant positions, for example. This framework will be used to contextualize *Pitchfork’s* occupancy of subordinate, intermediate, and dominant positions in the field of rock music criticism from 1996 to present.

3.1.2 Subordinate Position

Early *Pitchfork* appears more like a “fanzine”, which is typically characterized as a small-scale, do-it-yourself publication that provides a forum by “which writers are freed from the commercial pressures of either the record or publishing business” (Frith 2002, 240). In the

absence of commercial pressures, a fanzine can also facilitate the construction of “new taste and ideological music communities” (Frith 2002, 240). Fanzines, however, tend to occupy “the bottom” of the music press hierarchy (Lindberg et al. 2005, 278). Prior to 2001, *Pitchfork* attracted fewer than 130,000 monthly visitors (Pitchfork Media 2001) and 17,000 unique daily visitors (Pitchfork Media 2002).¹¹ By contrast, the monthly circulation figures for *Rolling Stone* and *Spin* were 1,256,915 and 521,137 respectively during the second half of 1997 (Lindberg et al. 2005, 304). Moreover, almost all advertisers *Pitchfork* acquired during this period were small-scale independent record labels and shops.¹² In 2001, *Pitchfork* was charging companies between \$50 and \$550 to advertise on their website (Pitchfork Media 2001). In stark contrast to these rates, a full color one page advertisement in *Spin* circa 1999 cost \$39,925 and \$90,360 in *Rolling Stone* (Granatstein 1999, 6). As such, I am interpreting *Pitchfork*'s first five years of operation (1996-2000) as occupying a subordinate position in the field of rock music criticism.

Occupants of subordinate positions are generally “least endowed with [symbolic and economic] resources” (Thompson 1990, 160). Indeed, *Pitchfork* founder and CEO Ryan Schreiber initiated *Pitchfork* online rather than in print because of its relatively nominal publishing costs (Kot 2009, 117). During this period, Schreiber wrote many of the site's album reviews (Kot 2009, 119). Schreiber explains that he “gravitated toward pranksterism and snarkiness” because he “had no writing ability at all” (Kot 2009, 118). Mark Richardson,

11. These are the earliest figures to which I have access through the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine. We can safely assume that these numbers were lower prior to 2001.

12. *Pitchfork*'s “Ad Rates” page includes a listing of regular advertisers circa 2001: “Epitaph, Sub Pop, Warp, Insound, Merge, K, Mute, Temporary Residence, Kill Rock Stars, Darla, Revolver, DeSoto, Vagrant, Beggars Group, Mint, Polyvinyl, Emperor Norton, Tiger Style, File 13, Jetset, Lookout!, Bella Union, Slumberland, Perishable, Monitor, Hush, Fueled by Ramen, Hopeless, Some, Alternative Tentacles, Fat Wreck Chords, Lovitt, March, Badman, Big Top” (Pitchfork Media 2002).

Pitchfork's current editor-in-chief, became a contributor in 1998 (Richardson 2011). He provides a similar retrospective assessment of the site's early years:

Pitchfork started small and snarky and funny. For most contributors, the initial brief was to write 300 words on a record and crack a few jokes and if there was a bit of musical insight along the way, all the better. So many-- but certainly not all-- of the site's earliest reviews are heavy on the shit-talking and light on the discussion of the music at hand. (Richardson 2011)

This derisive approach to music writing illustrates a subordinate symbolic valuation strategy that Thompson calls "rejection". Thompson explains that those in subordinate positions "may reject or ridicule the symbolic forms produced by individuals in superior positions [...] [to affirm] the value of their own...activities" (1990, 161). Although in the past this derisive rhetorical strategy figured prominently in British music publications (Lindberg et al. 2005, 341), it was uncommon in professional American music criticism in the mid-late 1990s. From this perspective, *Pitchfork* writers rejected dominant approaches to professional music writing, affirming their own methods without altering the "unequal distribution of [symbolic and economic] resources...in the field" (Thompson 1990, 161).

Another example of rejection is found in Ryan Schreiber's album review of Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* (2000). Schreiber opens the review with the following passage: "The Beatles claim it [*Pet Sounds*] inspired *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Some critics say it's better than anything the Beatles ever released. NME even called it 'The Best Album of All Time.' I guess I can see how someone might think that... *but I don't*" (2000; emphasis added). Schreiber acknowledges the canonical status attributed to *Pet Sounds* by groups (Beatles) and social institutions (*NME*) in dominant positions, but defensively rejects their shared belief. It is useful to compare the canonical status of *Pet Sounds*, upheld by dominant groups and institutions, to Bourdieu's concept of "symbolic violence". An act of symbolic violence can be found in

[t]he establishment of a canon in the guise of a universally valued cultural inheritance [...] [which] gains legitimacy by misrecognizing the underlying power relations they serve, in part, to guarantee the continued reproduction of the legitimacy of those who produce or defend the canon. (Johnson 1993, 20)

In this case, Schreiber is not “misrecognizing the underlying power relations” that the rock canon imposes on music listeners; his acknowledgment of *Pet Sounds*’ canonical status, however, demonstrates how it (and the rock canon more generally) imposes strong perceptions of value that *tend* to be misrecognized by many as “natural” fact. The legitimacy of *Pet Sounds* is sustained and advocated by dominant producers and defenders of the rock canon (in this case, the Beatles and *NME*); they assist in the reproduction of belief in the rock canon to secure their dominant position vis-à-vis emergent cultural institutions. In this way, “the power to name [and] the power to represent commonsense” – i.e., mechanisms of symbolic violence – enables elite groups to exert dominance over subordinate social groups (Harker et al. 1990, 13). Schreiber’s acknowledgment of *Pet Sounds*’ critical importance (i.e., a commonsense belief in rock culture) as a function of dominant groups’ endorsement illustrates *Pitchfork*’s dominated position. In other words, Schreiber’s rejection of *Pet Sounds* during this period does not undermine its canonical status. Rather, he acknowledges the power that dominant institutions possess.

Major rock print publications had established nominal online presence by the late 1990s. *Spin* launched its website on March 20, 1999 (Spin 1999), and *Rolling Stone* was publishing daily content as early as 1997 (Rolling Stone 1997). *Rolling Stone* and *Spin*, however, only provided limited content online. In 1997, for example, *Rolling Stone* published one daily album review and a brief cover story excerpt from the forthcoming print issue (Rolling Stone 1997). In order to read all featured content, readers had to subscribe to its print edition. In contrast, *Pitchfork* provided all content free of charge and on a daily basis. In

the first half of the decade, *Rolling Stone* and *Spin*'s monthly circulation figures were comparable to their respective mid-1990s figures (Lindberg et al. 2005, 304; Advertising Age 2013). Their nominal online presence allowed smaller web-based publications to corner the online indie and rock music criticism market.

In the mid-late 1990s, however, professional rock music criticism had established a strong online presence. *Addicted to Noise* (hereafter *AtN*) was a popular online rock publication that was launched in 1994 by Michael Goldberg, former associate editor and staff writer for *Rolling Stone* (vanHorn 2000). The site featured articles by revered rock critics Greil Marcus and Dave Marsh, among others (Lindberg et al. 2005, 327). *AtN*'s presence was unfortunately short-lived; in 1997, *AtN* merged with online music media company *SonicNet* (Flaska 2002). MTV Networks purchased *SonicNet* in 1999 (Flaska 2002) and ceased publication of *AtN* by 2000 (vanHorn 2000). Carl Wilson, esteemed music journalist and author, asserts that *Pitchfork*'s later success is partially due to *AtN*'s demise: "*Pitchfork* was in the right place at the right time when Addicted to Noise shut down [...] *AtN*...had as big an audience as *Pfork* does, if not bigger, and a broader one too, if still mainly indie-rock-centric" (2005b). With an absence of major online competitors, among other factors, *Pitchfork* was ready to claim an intermediate position.

3.1.3 Intermediate Position

I am interpreting *Pitchfork*'s shift to an intermediate position as coinciding with the publication of Brent DiCrescenzo's album review of Radiohead's *Kid A* in October 2, 2000, published only two months after *AtN* ceased operations. Ryan Schreiber and other commentators consider this review a pivotal moment in *Pitchfork* history (Kot 2009, 118-9; Beck 2011, 180-1). Notably, *Kid A* was rated a perfect 10 on *Pitchfork*'s ten-point scale. Schreiber explains the review's significance in this way:

It was a watershed moment for us... We got linked from all the Radiohead fan sites, which were really big. We got this huge flood of traffic, like five thousand people in a day checking out that one review. We had never seen anything like that. Web boards were talking about our review. (Kot 2009, 119)

Also, the release of *Kid A* coincided with the emergence of Napster and the “the Internet as a tool for distributing and discussing music” (Kot 2009, 118), developments that will be discussed later in this chapter.

During the site’s intermediate years, from approximately late 2000 to 2005, monthly circulation figures of prominent print publications outnumbered *Pitchfork’s* readership. 2004 circulation figures for *Rolling Stone* and *Spin* were 1,268,999 and 571,398 respectively (Advertising Age 2013). By June 2004, *Pitchfork* was promoting its website as “the web’s most popular and prolific site for daily indie-focused record reviews and music news”, reaching over 400,000 unique monthly visitors (Pitchfork Media 2004). Advertising rates also increased, with packages now ranging from \$100 to \$700 (Pitchfork Media 2004). Although the site’s number of unique monthly visitors was approaching *Spin’s* monthly circulation, *Pitchfork* still lacked the resources and power that would enable it to occupy a dominant position in the field of rock music criticism.¹³ Thompson argues that “[i]ntermediate positions within a field are those which offer access to one kind of capital but not another” (1990, 159). During this period, the cultural capital borne by *Pitchfork’s* growing roster of knowledgeable writers compensated for their relatively modest degree of power in the field (see Beck 2011, 181). Thompson asserts that this distribution of capital is characteristic of individuals or groups occupying intermediate positions in a field (1990,

13. We must also consider these figures in terms of total operating costs and the commercial scale of each publication. The costs of operating an online website are nominal in comparison to a widely distributed full color print magazine.

159). Thus, *Pitchfork's* distribution of relatively (high) symbolic and (low) economic resources characterizes their intermediate position during this period.

Strategies of symbolic valuation characteristic of intermediate position occupants – i.e., “devaluation” and “pretension” – are found in *Pitchfork's* music reviews and advertising pitches. Thompson argues that those in intermediate positions may employ a strategy of “devaluation” by “denounc[ing] the symbolic forms produced by dominant...groups in an attempt to elevate themselves above these positions” (Thompson 1990, 160). An advertisement sales pitch from January 2001 boasts that *Pitchfork* writers “genuinely care about music, unlike some of the big time playaz that're just in the business for the bling bling. If you have yet to read a *Pitchfork* review, you have yet to experience true honesty” (Pitchfork Media 2001).¹⁴ In this passage, *Pitchfork* denounces the symbolic forms produced by (some) writers working for music publications in dominant positions (i.e., “big time playaz”). Most importantly, questioning the integrity of these music writers illustrates *Pitchfork's* use of devaluation as a means to elevate their own position. In doing this, they present the site as unaffected by advertiser relations or commercial pressures. The following testimony from Jonathan Galkin of renowned indie label DFA illustrates the positive effects of this strategy:

A Lester Bangs–type critic¹⁵ doesn't exist anymore in America, because [major music] magazines don't really trash records anymore – they're way too dependent on that label's advertising dollars. Everything out there in print is sugar-coated, where I find that Pitchfork is just way more honest. (Frey 2004)

14. I initially encountered this passage in Richard Beck's essay, “5.4: Pitchfork, 1995-Present” (2011, 179).

15. Lester Bangs was a prolific rock critic primarily active during the 1970s. Steve Jones and Kevin Featherly describe Bangs' ethos in this way: “Bangs's main concern was always to keep the music aesthetically authentic, politics be damned, because, if the music became fake, there would be nothing left to grasp at to stem the tide of artificiality and hopelessness [...] If his ideas of what made music authentic were extreme and unapproachable, he still defended them with the passion and eloquence of a writer one would never think of finding in the pulp pages of an underground fanzine” (2002, 34-5).

Pitchfork's perceived honesty was thus partially predicated on their penchant for devaluation; *Pitchfork* writer Brent DiCrescenzo, for example, describes Moby's critically acclaimed album *Play* (*Pitchfork* Rating 5.0) as "fun and functional, yet disposable: *Play* is the condom of rock" (1999). By contrast, *Play* received a rating of 9 out of 10 in *Spin* (Aaron 1999, 125). Furthermore, *Pitchfork's* album review archive during this era primarily consisted of indie label releases.¹⁶ As one commentator points out, "*Pitchfork* didn't pretend to be comprehensive in its coverage of popular music like the bigger print magazines. It focused primarily in its first decade on left-of-center guitar-based rock: indie, alternative, cutting edge, or a little bit of all three" (Kot 2009, 120). *Pitchfork's* indie focus figures prominently in their November 2001 sales pitch to advertisers:

You know kids these days. Always running around buying things. But what are they buying? Shouldn't they be spending that cash on something important? Like CDs? From your record label? There are millions of people out there at this very second filling their checkbook ledgers with purchases of target-marketed mediocrity. At *Pitchfork*, we're trying to cure their temporary insanity by pointing them in the direction of something that will stay with them their whole lives. Something they can be proud of. Good music. Indie label music.

Since 1995, *Pitchfork* has been churning out four record reviews every weekday. *But unlike monster-media hype machines, we write about music with artistic integrity. And most of it's coming out on independent record labels.* (*Pitchfork Media* 2001; emphasis added)

This sales pitch exclusively addresses independent music labels. Most importantly, it illustrates the positive value *Pitchfork* ascribes to indie label music (i.e., "music with artistic integrity") through devaluation of popular music that large publications (i.e., "monster-media hype machines") tend to cover. In the previous chapter, I mentioned that mid-late 1990s indie

16. Major label artists were not entirely ignored, nor were non-indie-related musical styles excluded. There is a modest quantity of album reviews of past and present major label artists in classic rock (e.g., Jimi Hendrix, Kiss, Beatles, Bob Dylan) jazz (e.g., Albert Ayler, John Coltrane, Miles Davis), soul (e.g., Terry Callier, Roy Ayers), and hip-hop (e.g., Mos Def, Kanye West). The majority of albums reviews, however, pertain to indie-label artists – both indie rock and select electronic/experimental music styles – and some alternative rock bands on major labels (e.g., Radiohead, Bjork, Blur, Oasis, Everclear, etc.).

that emerged following the mainstreaming of alternative rock reinstated, to some extent, the value of institutional autonomy. In this passage, *Pitchfork* equates artistic integrity with indie label affiliation. Furthermore, this passage is an example of *Pitchfork* attempting to elevate its position by devaluing the integrity of popular music typically covered in mainstream rock publications.

Thompson explains that those “in intermediate positions may also be oriented towards dominant positions...appraising [symbolic forms] *as if* they were being appraised by the latter” (1990, 159). This strategy of symbolic valuation is called “pretension”, where individuals pretend “to be what they are not and [seek] thereby to assimilate themselves to positions superior to their own” (1990, 159). Brent DiCrescenzo’s review of Radiohead’s *Kid A* embodies pretension. For example he asserts in this now famous passage, “[t]he experience and emotions tied to listening to *Kid A* are like witnessing the stillborn birth of a child while simultaneously having the opportunity to see her play in the afterlife on Imax” (DiCrescenzo 2000). While adopting “the accent, vocabulary and speech mannerisms of dominant...groups” is one example by which pretension is employed (Thompson 1990, 159), DiCrescenzo’s extravagant writing style eschewed the rhetorical conventions of dominant rock publications circa 2000.¹⁷ Rather, he aims to surpass the latter by invoking grandiloquent, pseudo-intellectualized rhetoric. DiCrescenzo’s unconventional and grandiloquent rhetoric caught the attention of Radiohead fans, which garnered much attention for *Pitchfork* (Kot 2009, 118-9).

17. By comparison, *Rolling Stone*’s David Fricke 4/5 star review of *Kid A* is less opaque and more formal in tone: Fricke asserts, for example, that *Kid A* “is a kind of virtual rock in which the roots have been cut away, and the formal language — hook, riff, bridge — has been warped, liquefied and, in some songs, thrown out altogether” (2000).

As a catalyst for *Pitchfork's* transition to an intermediate position, the site's valorization of *Kid A* exemplifies the process of cross-valorization, which is "the use of symbolic value as a means of increasing...economic value" (Thompson 1990, 157). Cross-valorization, Thompson explains, is frequently employed by advertisers, for example, "when they use well-known film stars, pop stars...as a means of promoting particular products" (1990, 157). *Pitchfork's* symbolic valuation of *Kid A* increased the site's online presence through association with the high symbolic value of Radiohead (cf. Beck 2011, 180-1). The increase in traffic could then be used to attract new advertisers, and hence, result in a gradual increase in economic capital. Radiohead's high cultural capital in conjunction with DiCrescenzo's attention-grabbing grandiloquent rhetoric increased *Pitchfork's* potential to acquire economic resources (cf. Beck 2011, 180-1).

During this period, however, *Pitchfork* encountered yet another major competitor in the field of online indie music criticism – Travis Keller's indie criticism and gossip website, *Buddyhead*. *Pitchfork* shared a similar penchant for humour and sarcasm, however, *Buddyhead's* style and tone of criticism was far more "crass and intoxicating" (Broadley 2009). *Buddyhead's* "Gossip" section in particular generated much controversy, resulting in several cease-and-desist letters ordered by celebrity musicians and independent record labels.¹⁸ By the end of 2005, *Buddyhead* ceased operations as result of accumulated financial debt and an abrupt decline in readers (Broadley 2009). The decline in *Buddyhead's* readership may have resulted from a number of factors. By 2005, many *Pitchfork* writers produced long-form music reviews and essays, which eschewed juvenile tactics in favour of

18. Among those who sought legal action against *Buddyhead* include Courtney Love, Fred Durst, Axel Rose, Vagrant Records, and Drive Thru Records (Broadley 2009).

intellectualized rhetoric. *Buddyhead's* disdain for seriousness and overtly intellectual music writing is evidenced in a writer recruitment message posted on its website in 2004:

...finally we're asking for some help in the writing area [...] you better be able to at least kinda [sic] write. But we don't want any total geek type shit *like that one site is all about (and you know who we're talking about), so don't get too college student on us either. Just make it entertaining.* (Buddyhead 2004; emphasis added)

The expressions used to describe *Pitchfork's* pretentiousness¹⁹ (e.g., “total geek type shit”, “too college student”) works to underscore *Buddyhead's* penchant for tantalizing entertainment. I am suggesting here that *Buddyhead's* anti-intellectualist stance may have contributed to its diminished popularity; “snarkiness” and tabloid-styled gossip eventually loses its novelty (e.g., HipsterRunoff.com), especially considering the oft-attributed ‘seriousness’ of ardent rock music fans, indie or otherwise (see Keightley 2001, 130; Reynolds [1985] 1990, 467). In this case, “pretension” proved to be a winning strategy for *Pitchfork*.

Around the time of *Buddyhead's* demise, *Pitchfork* had garnered considerable media attention for its perceived ability to popularize indie bands and influence album sales (see Frey 2004; Kot 2005; Itzkoff 2006; Thomas 2006).²⁰ In some cases, an extremely positive or negative album review in *Pitchfork* could influence album sales. In 2004, for example, *Pitchfork* published a rave review of Arcade Fire's debut album *Funeral*, which received a rating of 9.7 out of 10. Martin Hall, executive of Arcade Fire's record label (Merge Records), attributes the jump in sales to *Pitchfork's* review of the album: “The degree to which it

19. As support for my presumption, please consider the following passages from a 2009 *LA Weekly* interview with Keller: “Ostensibly Buddyhead's biggest competition...Keller has described *Pitchfork* as ‘forever trapped by their pseudointellectualism’” (Broadley 2009). Keller also states, “[p]eople ask me to describe Buddyhead like, ‘Is it like Pitchfork?’ Well, yeah, if we were virgins and bed-wetters” (Broadley 2009).

20. Examples of media headlines during this period include “Pitchforkmedia.com Music Dudes Dictate Culture From Chicago” (Frey 2004), “Pitchfork E-zine Tells Indie Fans What's Hot and Not” (Kot 2005), and multiple articles entitled “The Pitchfork Effect” (Itzkoff 2006; Thomas 2006).

[*Funeral*] took off is unprecedented for any record on our label... After the Pitchfork review, it went out of print for about a week because we got so many orders for the record” (Kot 2005).²¹ On the other hand, an extremely negative review in *Pitchfork* thwarted album sales in some cases. An exceptional example is *Pitchfork*’s infamously derisive review of Travis Morrison’s *Travistan*, which received a rare 0.0 rating (Dahlen 2004). Jody Rosenfeld, co-founder of the label that released *Travistan* (Barsuk Records), reported to *Wired* magazine, “the effects of Dahlen’s review [of *Travistan* in *Pitchfork*] were immediate and disastrous. Several college radio stations that had initially been enthusiastic said they wouldn’t play it” (Itzkoff 2006). *Pitchfork* was now in position to confer or deny cultural value.

Although it is difficult to empirically measure *Pitchfork*’s influence on album sales, the media coverage cited above contributed to the belief in *Pitchfork*’s power to confer value. By the mid 2000s, *Pitchfork* was widely acknowledged by many as a principle arbiter of indie music taste, and hence a preeminent producer of cultural and artistic value in indie music culture. The media hype surrounding *Pitchfork*’s legitimizing power during this period, however, shows how the site was altering the “shape [of] pre-existing fields of interaction, and at the same time creat[ing] a new set of [field] positions and possible trajectories” (Thompson 1990, 149). *Pitchfork*, as an online music publication, was beginning to exert significant influence on perceptions of value in indie music culture, and lending legitimacy to web-based music criticism. Furthermore, by August 2003 *Pitchfork* introduced a track review section entitled “We are the World”, which would feature coverage of “both indie rock and international commercial pop spheres” (Schreiber 2003). As the site

21. Also, Dan Houglund, floor manager of New York City record store *Other Music*, argues that “Without Pitchfork, I can’t imagine that all the hype around the Arcade Fire would have happened... It’s totally Pitchfork; it’s not even worth speculating about” (Frey 2004).

forged new positions in the field of online music criticism, its coverage began to gradually expand outside of the domain of indie rock. This coincided with the recruitment of professional personnel to help operate the site; between 2003 and 2004, Ryan Schreiber hired Chris Kaskie “from *The Onion* sales team to handle business operations”, and Scott Plagenhoef, “a local music and sports writer”, as managing editor (Joseph 2008). With the addition of Kaskie, the site began to offer advertising options to big companies (see Pitchfork Media 2006). From 2001 to 2006 *Pitchfork*’s traffic grew from 30,000 to 150,000 daily visits (Itzkoff 2006). At this juncture, *Pitchfork* was primed to claim a dominant position in the field of music criticism (with respect to both print and digital).

3.1.4 Dominant Position

After the slew of mid-decade media hype surrounding *Pitchfork*’s legitimizing power in indie music, the site began to figure prominently in the field of music criticism at large. In addition to its accumulated symbolic resources, the site began to generate relatively substantial profit; by 2008, the site was generating an estimated \$5 million annually (Joseph 2008). Although exact figures are unavailable, *Pitchfork*’s advertising director stated in 2008 that annual revenue had increased 70% each year since 2004 (Joseph 2008). The site expanded its online operation in 2008 with the launch of *Pitchfork.tv* – a curated online music video platform (Joseph 2008). This section examines *Pitchfork*’s transformation into a dominant position. During this period, *Pitchfork*’s readership base surpasses prominent music blogs, online music criticism websites, and major print publications. The site’s growing economic and cultural power is reflected in the inauguration of the *Pitchfork Music Festival*, which functions as a conduit for capital conversion. This section concludes with an assessment of *Pitchfork*’s cultural power in indie music culture. Discussion of *Pitchfork*’s strategies of

symbolic valuation is omitted from this section, for it is the central focus of the following chapter.

Countless online music publications and blogs emerged since 2000. Comparing *Pitchfork's* number of unique monthly visitors (hereafter UMV) to other prominent indie, alternative, and rock music websites and print publications, however, illustrates its ascendancy in field: *Stereogum* “reaches over 700,000” UMV (Buzzmedia 2012b); *Spin*, which ceased its print edition in December 2012 (Spin 2012) and was sold to *Buzzmedia* for an undisclosed sum (Bercovici 2012), “reaches nearly 700,000” UMV (Buzzmedia 2012a); *PopMatters* reaches over 1 million UMV (PopMatters 2013); *FACT*, over 385,000 UMV; *Drowned in Sound*, over 320,000 (netimparative 2010); *Rolling Stone's* 2010 monthly print circulation rate base was 1,450,000 (Audit Bureau of Circulations 2011).²² *Pitchfork*, by contrast, currently reaches 3.5 million unique monthly visitors (Pitchfork 2012). Assuming these metrics are in fact accurate, *Pitchfork* currently has unparalleled reach in the field of online and print music criticism.

Thompson explains that those “who occupy dominant positions within a field of interaction are those who are positively endowed with...resources or capital of various kinds”, namely symbolic and economic capital (1990, 158). In the mid-late 2000s, *Pitchfork's* endowment of symbolic and economic resources characterized its dominant position in field of music criticism. Evidence of *Pitchfork's* growing economic resources is the inauguration of the *Pitchfork Music Festival* in Union Park, Chicago, July 2006 (Pitchfork Staff 2006). This event attracted 36,000 fans and featured performances by 41

22. The 2010 figures for *Drowned in Sound* and *Rolling Stone* are the most recent I could acquire.

bands (Pitchfork Staff 2006). The festival proved to be a successful venture, as the 2007 festival attracted 60,000 attendees over its three-day duration (Joseph 2008).

The *Pitchfork Music Festival* allows the site to generate profit from the bands and albums it endorses. For example, of the forty-six acts that performed at the 2012 *Pitchfork Music Festival* in Chicago, twenty-six (56.5%) had released albums that received *Pitchfork's* “Best New Music” designation; fourteen (30.4%) released albums rated 8.0 or higher; four (8.7%) received album ratings below 8.0, and the remaining two groups (4.3%) had yet to release full-length albums by that point (Pitchfork Music Festival 2012a). Thus, 40 of the 46 artists (86.9%) were highly acclaimed in *Pitchfork* prior to the festival. In this way, *Pitchfork's* critical investments serve as strategies of capital conversion – in this case, it is a very direct, “in house” conversion – “whereby individuals seek to convert one kind of capital [e.g., symbolic, cultural] into another [e.g., economic]” (Thompson 1990, 157). *Pitchfork's* high symbolic value has also attracted numerous corporate sponsors eager for “authentic” associative value (see Holt 2004, 89): Heineken, Intel, Purina, vitaminwater, Urban Outfitters, and Acura are among the many corporate sponsors of the 2012 *Pitchfork Music Festival* (Pitchfork Music Festival 2012b).

Pitchfork's engagement with corporate advertisers is not exceptional. By the latter part of the decade, the presence of corporate advertisements had become commonplace in online indie music websites that attracted a large number of visitors.²³ *Pitchfork's* cultural status remains strong despite its increased engagement with corporate advertisers. For example, in a *National Public Radio* (hereafter *NPR*) roundtable discussion, Carrie

23. See, for example, *Gorilla vs. Bear*, *PopMatters*, *Spin*, and *Stereogum*, all of which have either partnered with or were purchased by *Buzzmedia* – an ad solutions media corporation. Illustrative of the commercialization of indie music culture, *Buzzmedia* refers to these publications as “brands” on its website.

Brownstein of indie band Sleater-Kinney speaks with high-profile independent record label owners and managers, including Maggie Vail and Portia Sabin (Kill Rock Stars); Gerard Cosloy (Matador); Mac McCaughan (Merge Records); Robb Nansel (Saddle Creek); and Chris Swanson and Darius Van Arman (Jagjaguwar) (Brownstein 2009). The roster of each label includes bands that have attained high ratings or “Best New Music” designations, (or both) in *Pitchfork*. In this discussion, participants address the perceived effect of *Pitchfork* reviews on album sales circa 2009:

Carrie Brownstein: Aside from putting out good music, what's the single most effective thing a label can do to get people to buy their music?

Gerard Cosloy: Not sure what the single most efficient thing would be (other than, you know, the Pitchfork 9.1), but getting people excited is never easy to quantify or predict.

Carrie Brownstein: Does a Pitchfork 9.1 help?

Maggie Vail: Absolutely.

Gerard Cosloy: Sadly, yes. A Pitchfork 9.1 is more influential to the audience and the retailers than a Rolling Stone or New York Times review.

Carrie Brownstein: What does a Pitchfork 4.5 do?

Portia Sabin: A 4.5 can kill a record. Unfortunately.

Mac McCaughan: Agree on the Pitchfork thing, though I do think that a 9.1 helps more than an average number hurts. (Brownstein 2009)

The above testimony from these prominent indie label representatives suggests that near the decade's end, *Pitchfork's* assessment of indie albums continued to influence perceptions of value.²⁴ This assessment is not exceptional; one commentator, for example, notes “[i]ndie labels such as Merge and XL scored their first-ever Billboard No. 1s this year, courtesy of Pitchfork discoveries Arcade Fire and Vampire Weekend, respectively” (Barker 2010, 40). Barker also asserts that “Pitchfork’s record reviews and elusive ‘best new music’ designations can be the difference between obscurity and notoriety for a budding band” (2010, 40). By the end of the past decade, *Pitchfork* became one of the principle dominant

24. I acknowledge the tremendous difficulty of establishing direct causality.

forces in indie music criticism and culture. Its coverage of commercial pop and rap, too, began to grow throughout the decade, showing how the site's influence in indie culture endowed them with the power to alter expectations of what could be included within the purview of indie taste and value.

3.2 Cultural Transmission of Symbolic Forms: Technical Differences between Print and Digital Media

What role does media form play in *Pitchfork's* rise? The media process by which *Pitchfork* album reviews are transmitted to receivers is paramount to understanding the site's ascendancy in indie music culture. This section will examine aspects of content dissemination pertaining to *Pitchfork's* online, rather than print, operation. This analysis provides context for the ways in which indie music has proliferated through music criticism and blogging in an online context.

Thompson's theoretical framework accounts for the ways in which symbolic forms are transmitted via media institutions, a process he refers to as "aspects of cultural transmission" (1990, 164-171). A primary aspect of cultural transmission is the technical medium of transmission, or the "material components with which...a symbolic form is produced and transmitted" (Thompson 1990, 165). In contextualizing the differences between print and digital media, I focus on two specific attributes of transmission, namely "fixation" and "reproduction" (Thompson 1990, 165-6). The fixation of a symbolic form corresponds to a specific technical medium. Different technical media allow for varying degrees of access and preservation. In the early-mid 2000s, before most print publications provided free or paid access to digitized back issues, online publications facilitated greater

accessibility to past and current published content.²⁵ Unlike digital fixation, acquiring current and back issues of print magazines requires patience and a substantially greater economic investment; access is also not guaranteed, as one may require specialized status in order to access microfilm archives for discontinued issues, for example. Digital fixation also compliments the accelerated pace of the internet culture; indie music fans eager to download new music, for example, can consult *Pitchfork* for an extensive list of current and past music recommendations, rather than wait for a print magazine to arrive in the mail. Indeed, Schreiber notes that

[i]t was a huge advantage being on the Net, being able to weigh in instantly on an important album to people who grew up using computers. By the time a [print] publishing cycle happens now, the Internet is already done with the story. (Kot 2009, 119)

Print fixation simply cannot keep up with the accelerated pace of online digital transmission.

The readiness of digital fixation enables real-time publishing and can be done with substantially fewer economic and material resources relative to print media. Chris Ott, former *Pitchfork* contributor, explains that during the site's formative years Ryan Schreiber understood the importance of providing content daily at a time when major monthly music publications remained offline (2012a, 1:00-1:48). With an influx of daily content, prospective readers could readily integrate *Pitchfork* into their daily online routine. Digital fixation also stores larger quantities of content at a fraction of the cost of print media. Hence, by early 2006, *Pitchfork* had amassed an archive of over 7000 album reviews (Kot 2009, 118). Unlike print media, album reviews can be accessed in any sequence irrespective of when they were

25. For the purposes of this analysis, I shall not discuss issues pertaining to the digital divide. Suffice it to say that *Pitchfork* readers are by and large equipped with the necessary material resources; according to *Pitchfork's* 2010 media kit, 85% of its readers are over the age of 21; 87% have college or graduate-level education; and the average household income of its readers is \$50K (Pitchfork 2010).

originally published. Lastly, while print media may theoretically provide a greater degree of preservation, the unrestricted access digital fixation provides is of greater significance in context of online music consumption. Unlike print media, digital fixation facilitates removal or revision of content. In fact, *Pitchfork* has since removed from its archive several album reviews published prior to 2000 (see Beck 2011, 176).²⁶ Although access to deleted content is technically available,²⁷ the digital fixation of *Pitchfork* permits a high degree of impression management (Dunn and Forrin 2007, 468)²⁸ unattainable in print media; once a print issue is published and distributed, it cannot be revised retrospectively.

In addition to fixation, technical media enable varying degrees of reproduction (Thompson 1990, 167). Print media are highly reproducible. A print publication, for example, can press any number of copies in relation to the number of expected readers. Copyright issues notwithstanding, the contents of print media can further be photocopied and distributed among individuals. Digital media, however, yield a significantly greater degree of reproducibility. A hyperlink to an album review or the actual text itself can be copied and uploaded onto a message board, personal website, or instant messaging service. In this respect, digital music reviews can be instantaneously distributed across geographically disparate locales. Thus, online circulation of music reviews enables online music websites to potentially capture a wider audience. Of greater significance, however, is the digital reproducibility of recorded music. The proliferation of unrestricted online file sharing in conjunction with the storage capacity of digital media allows past and present recorded music

26. In addition album reviews, news features (formerly “newswire”), interviews, and track reviews (formerly entitled “we are the world”) published between mid 1990s and early-mid 2000s no longer appear on the site.

27. Access is available through the Wayback Machine at the Internet Archive, for example.

28. According to Elizabeth W. Dunn and Noah Forrin, “[i]mpression management refers to the activity of controlling information to steer others' opinions in the service of personal or social goals” (2007, 468).

to circulate relatively freely. In this way, online specialty music publications and online file sharing were especially complementary during the early 2000s.

3.3 Online File Sharing and the Circulation of Indie Music

Pitchfork's shift from a subordinate to an intermediate position occurred amidst significant technological changes in the distribution of recorded music. Integral to this period is the rise of peer-to-peer (hereafter P2P) online file sharing of music media. A P2P file-sharing network is an online software application that enables uploading and downloading of digital media content (e.g., compressed digital music files, namely MP3s). Napster, launched in 1999 by creator Shawn Fanning, became the most popular and widely used P2P file-sharing network, reaching 60 million users by June 2001 (Leyshon 2003, 549; Hong 2013, 299). After the Recording Industry of America's litigation against Napster, other file sharing services became popular including Audiogalaxy, Morpheus, KaZaA, BearShare and Lime Wire (Abowitz 2001, 29). The proliferation of online file sharing gave rise to a market for portable MP3 playback devices (David 2010, 4). In 2001, Apple launched the iPod (Wikstrom 2009, 66), which has since become an immensely popular portable music listening device. This combination of accessibility and portability of digital music bolstered the practical value of the MP3 format, undermining to some extent the necessity of physical music media (namely, the compact disc format).

In 2001, recorded music sales began to decline after "15 years of steady growth" (Leyshon et al. 2005, 177-8). Many record company executives and music industry personnel attributed declining sales to the proliferation of digital music downloading via online P2P file-sharing networks (Leyshon et al. 2005, 179; Wikstrom 2009, 64). Digital media scholar Patrik Wikstrom asserts, however, that it is "extremely difficult to establish a casual link between online [file sharing] and declining industry sales" (Wikstrom 2009, 64). However,

online file sharing at the very least “changed the dynamics of distribution and cost [...] between the music industry and consumers” (Scharf 2011, 806). Most importantly, online file sharing undermined record companies’ longstanding control over the distribution of recorded music (Scharf 2011, 807). The proliferation of online file sharing and the decline of recorded music sales altered the monetization mechanisms of the music industry and traditional modes of music consumption. In the following sections, I outline how these changes affected the practices of indie music listeners, record companies, and artists.

Online file sharing provides music listeners with an expansive and inexpensive means to audition and discover new music (Hong 2013, 300). Prior to P2P file sharing, avid music listeners required ample disposable income and physical access to recorded music; fans of relatively obscure music required specialized knowledge of specialty mail order distributors to acquire music that was commonly neglected by large commercial retailers (this was especially the case for those living in smaller cities or towns.). Moreover, online consumption of indie music meant not having to potentially confront exclusionary social barriers, i.e., elitist social practices and connoisseurist knowledge of ardent collectors, commonplace within pre-internet indie music scenes and record stores (Ott [2006] 2012b, under “Independence Goes Pop”).²⁹ In other words, insider knowledge of esoteric and obscure indie rock music loses some of its exclusionary power in the digital age (see Wilson 2005a, Rogers 2008, 640). By the early 2000s, those who could afford or attain internet access had new options to research and acquire music, with no additional costs other than time. With the increased online availability of freely downloadable music, ardent music fans could guide and filter their selection of content by consulting music websites. For indie and

29. Also, see Straw (1997, 5-10) for examples of gendered social codes that characterize record collector culture.

alternative rock fans *Pitchfork* served as an exemplary source for musical discovery during the first phase of internet music criticism, circa 1999 (Hearsum 2013, 114).

In discussing the reasons for *Pitchfork's* online success, Carl Wilson explains, “indie rock and the Internet have a common base constituency, geeky middle-class white kids on their computers. So it makes sense that the biggest Internet effect on music would first be on indie rock” (2005b). Martin Hall of prominent indie label Merge Records offers a similar characterization of *Pitchfork's* demographic: “Their audience is the college-age consumer, people sitting at their computers most of the day, people eighteen to thirty” (Kot 2009, 120). Whether or not these generalized depictions of *Pitchfork's* demographic are entirely accurate, Wilson is correct in asserting that the internet had a profound effect on indie music culture. With greater access to obscure indie albums, indie listeners could consult a source such as *Pitchfork* and audition nearly any album stored in the site’s review archive via P2P file sharing networks. The combination of a free online music resource and digital music access stands in stark contrast to prior constraints, such as geographical limitations of recorded music access and the limited availability of physical indie label media.

In contrast to the drastic measures employed by major record labels in response to online file sharing (Leyshon et al. 2005, 178; Leyshon 2003, 547), many indie record labels responded differently. Dean Hudson of Sub Pop Records, for example, states that while the label does not embrace file-sharing, they do not try to stop it, and that they “have done really well [commercially] with the things [albums] that have been shared the most” online (Martens 2005, 30). Nate Krenkel, manager of indie group Bright Eyes and Team Love indie label affiliate, expresses delight that “fans are out there sharing songs by our bands and spreading the word” (Martens 2005, 30). Lastly, Bettina Richards of Thrill Jockey Records embraces online file sharing, acknowledging the benefits it provides in terms of exposure

and, to some extent, sales (Martens 2005, 30). Given that many small-scale indie labels formerly had limited national and/or international distribution, online file sharing facilitated indie music exposure, surpassing former physical distribution constraints. Greater access to digital music online – especially, indie label and other specialty music – meant that those inclined to track down a song they heard in a television program or commercial could more easily do so.

3.4 The Emergence of “Poptimism”

In the early-mid 2000s the proliferation of online file sharing, discussion forums, and music blogging coincided with a reassessment of rock music values among a segment of popular music critics and fans. In *Let’s Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste* (2007), Carl Wilson explains the rise of poptimism and the gradual restructuring of popular music taste as follows:

A new generation moved into positions of critical influence, and many cared more about hip-hop or electronica or Latin music than about rock, mainstream or otherwise. They mounted a wholesale critique against the syndrome of measuring all popular music by the norms of rock culture – “rockism,” often set against “pop-ism” or “poptimism.” Online music blogs and discussion forums sped up the circulation of such trends of opinion. (2007, 12)

Wilson discusses the stages of revisionism that occur, for example, when previously disparaged pop styles (e.g., disco) become fashionable retrospectively in rock culture (2007, 13). As a corrective to this fallacy, poptimists raise the following questions: “Why [does] pop music have to get old before getting fair shake? Why [does] it have to be a ‘guilty’ pleasure?” (2007, 13). Poptimism was in part a reaction to the mainstreaming of “underground” alternative rock in the 1990s, where critical (i.e., rock) and general (i.e., chart pop) tastes were needlessly demarcated, despite the mainstream status of both (Wilson 2007,

13). This division of musical value “wasn’t sustainable”, explains Wilson, “[a]nd the ‘underground’ thing...bec[ame] a rut of its own” (2007, 13-4).

In 2005, Wilson criticized *Pitchfork* for being both too closed-minded toward pop music (2005a) and for not embracing the growing commercial success of indie music (2005b). *Pitchfork* certainly privileged indie rock during the early-mid 2000s, but it was not entirely averse to pop music styles. Openness toward pop and dance aesthetics can be found in *Pitchfork* as early as 2003. For example, *Pitchfork* critic Rob Mitchum interrogates the rigidity of indie rock social codes and aesthetic judgment in an album review of Junior Senior’s *D-D-Don’t Don’t Stop the Beat*:

I was once just like you. At shows, I would concentrate on remaining as still as possible, allowing only a tapping foot or nodding head to express any enthusiasm I had for the performer. When confronted with commercial radio, I would sneer and mime symptoms of illness, bemoaning the factory-produced facelessness of pop music. My head was full of a taxonomy categorizing all artists I came across as ‘authentic’ or ‘contrived,’ as judged by their biography, label affiliation, and oh yeah, occasionally, their music.

For years, I saw absolutely nothing wrong with this behavior, considering my musical health robust, even vibrant. But after an appointment with the vaunted Dr. People, I realized I was suffering from a rare illness: Indie Guilt Syndrome. (2003)

This passage reveals Mitchum’s reflexive awareness of indie rock clichés and standards of aesthetic judgment. He evokes popmistic sentiment in his caricature of indie rock connoisseurist practices and its rules of exclusion. *Pitchfork*’s engagement with chart-pop, however, only fully emerges after the initial mid-decade popmistic phase.³⁰ Despite the initial rise of popmistic, *Pitchfork* continued to valorize indie variants of pop styles, which demonstrates Wilson’s assertion that “[h]owever attenuated, though, the gap between critical

30. In 2008, for example, *Pitchfork*’s Scott Plagenhoef stated that “[w]hen it comes to pop-minded performers”, the site’s readers appear to favour “underground” or “mainstream artists who get oddly dicked-around [sic] by their [major] record labels” (2008b).

acclaim and popular success never goes away” (2007, 14). Poptimism, however, has had a residual influence on the aesthetics of recent indie pop music (see Zoladz 2012b).

3.5 Commodification of Indie Music in the 21st Century

Alternative musicians, once shielded by the cocoon of their modest ambitions, suddenly face a new field of opportunity and of ethical quandary.

– John Leland, “Selling Out Isn’t What It Used To Be” (2001)

The emergence of P2P file sharing may not account for the decline of recorded music sales in itself (see Leyshon et al. 2005, 181-5). In fact, one study suggests that between June 1999 and July 2001, only approximately 20% of the decline in recorded music sales might be attributed to online file sharing via Napster (Hong 2013, 299). Nonetheless, album sales have steadily declined in the past decade by approximately 45% between 2000 and 2008 (Freedom du Lac 2009). In many cases, recorded music sales are no longer a primary revenue source for popular music artists (Moran 2008). Furthermore, the passage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act resulted in unprecedented consolidation of radio broadcasting ownership: “[B]y 2000, 75 different companies that had been operating independently in 1995 were consolidated into just three, led by Clear Channel Communication which owned over 1200 stations” (Croteau and Hoynes 2006, 92). In 2002, The Future of Music Coalition conducted a study entitled “Radio Deregulation: Has it Served Citizens and Musicians?” which demonstrated that radio consolidation had “resulted in format homogeneity, not diversity in programming” (2003). Even established indie groups, such as Grizzly Bear and Wilco, have expressed how difficult it has become to receive commercial radio airplay (Abebe 2012; J. Cohen 2007).

Denied revenue from recorded music sales and access to commercial radio play, many major and indie label artists had to explore (and continue to explore) alternate modes of monetizing their music. Artist-brand partnerships (Meier 2013, 191-5) and music

placement in corporate advertisements (Taylor 2012, 203-229) have become increasingly common approaches.³¹ In *The Sounds of Capitalism* (2012) Timothy Taylor asserts, “[t]he consolidation of [radio] playlists and decline in videos aired by MTV has meant that the old stigma about allowing one’s music to be used in commercials evaporated almost overnight” (207). For indie musicians in particular, increased willingness to participate in commercialized contexts has in many respects displaced the stigma of selling out, traditionally central to indie music culture. With few alternative options available, the traditional criteria of “selling out” has become in many cases the standard template by which indie artists and star performers now earn income. Media and popular music scholar Leslie Meier summarizes this transformation in the following passage:

Perhaps the most central factor in the demise of the discourse of selling out is the ‘crisis’ of popular music’s commodity form inaugurated by digital distribution and P2P file sharing. When records were profitable, merchandising and licensing revenue remained ancillary, whereas in an increasingly post-CD marketplace, these commodities and rights have moved from the periphery to the centre. (Meier 2013, 266)

With previously ancillary modes of music monetization becoming increasingly central, the act of “selling out” in itself does not undermine musicians’ perceived artistic integrity relative to years past (cf. Bannister 2006a, 81). In other words, most artists have very few options to monetize and preserve the relative autonomy of their music as alternative channels of monetization are now replacing the longstanding centrality of recorded music as the industry’s core commodity (Meier 2013, 135-147). Since the gradual erosion of alternative/indie rock’s anti-commercial ideals since the 1990s is documented elsewhere (see

31. In fact, Leslie Meier argues that the ‘artist-brand’ has replaced the compact disc as the core commodity in popular music (2013, 135-47), which in many cases applies to indie artists: “The artist-brand paradigm also guides the marketing of unsigned and independent artists and informs A&R decisions made at the earliest stages of talent recruitment” (Meier 2013, 136).

Hesmondhalgh 1999; Ott [2006] 2012b, under “Independence Goes Pop”; Moore 2007, 10-11), a few recent examples will suffice here as illustration of the emergent pragmatism underlying the licensing of indie music to advertisers.

The emergence of indie music in advertisements has its roots in 1960s counterculture ethos. In *The Conquest of Cool* (1997) Thomas Frank argues that by the mid-1960s ‘hipness’, ‘cool’, unconformity, and rebellion emerged as definitive values in the advertising industry. Prior to 1990s, however, the baby boomer demographic primarily occupied dominant positions at advertising agencies (Taylor 2012, 209, 233); ‘cool’ to this demographic sometimes corresponded to the music of their youth (Taylor 2012, 209), namely 1960s “counterculture” rock music. In the 1990s, however, “a younger generation of workers in advertising began to assume positions of authority” and contemporary alternative music began to appear more frequently in advertisements (Taylor 2012, 208-9). By the late 1990s, many advertising agencies actively sought contemporary alternative music for advertisement placements (Leland 2001 48-9; Taylor 2012, 210-6). During this period, for example, Volkswagen advertisements featured the music of British alternative dance and rock groups Hurricane #1, Stereolab, the Orb, Spiritualized, and Fluke (Taylor 2012, 213). A generational shift in advertising executives in conjunction with the aforementioned technological and industrial changes produced conditions sufficient for indie musicians’ engagement with corporate advertisers. The next few examples illustrate the pragmatist underpinning of indie musicians’ involvement in corporate advertising.

In “Selling Out Isn’t What it Used to Be” (2001), John Leland interviews Robert Schneider and Hilarie Sidney of indie band Apples in Stereo about their song placement in a Sony advertisement. Sidney was initially skeptical about the offer; she recalled her negative feelings toward Pavement, her favourite indie band, when they become popular among a

larger audience (Leland 2001, 48). Ultimately, however, practical concerns mitigated this tension. At the time, both Schneider and Sidney supplemented their modest music income with temporary jobs (Leland 2001, 50). Apples in Stereo accepted Sony's modest offer of \$18,000 – a sum of money that surpassed the band's annual music-related income at the time (Leland 2001, 48), but was obviously not enough to sustain the group in the long run. The Walkmen are another indie group that shares a pragmatic perspective toward music placement in corporate advertisements. In 2003, their song “We’ve Been Had” was featured in a Saturn Ion commercial. In an interview with *Advertising Age*, band member Peter Bauer stated that “we needed to take the money” (Moran 2008); “[I]ike many emerging artists on small, independent labels,” Moran explains, “the [Walkmen’s] decision was made out financial necessity” (2008). In both cases, satisfying material needs outweighed the pressure to retain “indie credibility”.

Significantly, *Pitchfork’s* favourable assessment of indie bands has in some cases informed music supervisors’ song selections for television and film: According to one commentator, “‘Scott Pilgrim vs. the World,’ ‘Where the Wild Things Are,’ ‘Greenberg,’ and the ‘Twilight’ series grounded their entire soundtracks around what’s now largely known as the ‘Pitchfork aesthetic’” (Barker 2010, 40). *Pitchfork’s* Ryan Schreiber admits that “[t]here’s definitely been a lot of overlap in the last few years between the music that we cover and music that’s been used in film and TV soundtracks” (Barker 2010, 40). Schreiber speculates that this phenomenon may be attributed to individuals in music supervision jobs that listened to indie rock in their youth and, via anecdotal inference, “people working in film and TV that...read Pitchfork” (Barker 2010, 40). *Pitchfork* is thus implicated in the processes of both symbolic *and* economic valuation of indie music. The aforementioned blockbuster films function as a potential conduit for mass exposure of indie music and, most

significantly, provide evidence of industry-insider consecration of *Pitchfork*. In some cases, positive reception in *Pitchfork* can help bolster the number of commercial opportunities for acclaimed artists. In the absence of recorded music sales, positive recognition in *Pitchfork* comes to represent part of a means for securing a living for aspiring and ambitious indie artists. At present, “regular coverage in *Pitchfork*” ranks #2 on *Billboard*’s “Maximum Exposure” list for indie artists (Billboard 2012).³²

With commercial radio out of reach to several indie bands, and MTV’s prioritization of programs over music videos (Taylor 2013, 207), corporate advertising has become increasingly commonplace in indie music culture. In the final analysis, the benefits to corporations may often outweigh those to musicians (Meier 2013, 268-9); the former save money by propositioning affordable indie bands (relative to star performers), and acquire symbolic value through “authentic” association (Holt 2004, 89). Like mainstream popular music, indie has become thoroughly integrated into corporate strategy, offering varying degrees of exposure and income to musicians. As indie bands typically receive nominal payments, no single ad placement is likely to endow them with enough economic capital to be able to opt out of further participation in commercial contexts (see L. Pelly 2013); to keep afloat, ongoing participation may be necessary to avoid having to work an alternate day job, thus intensifying the need for positive recognition in *Pitchfork* among other factors. Most significantly, the structural changes affecting the monetization of music have significantly undermined the discourse of “selling out” in indie music culture. With both major and indie artists monetizing their music through corporate channels, the demarcation lines between the two spheres have become less distinct relative to years past.

32. #1 on the list is “Prerelease ‘First Listen’ Album Stream on NPR [National Public Radio] Music” (Billboard 2012).

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter examined *Pitchfork's* trajectory from a subordinate to a dominant position in the field of music criticism and the site's role in developing an online field of music criticism. The rise of *Pitchfork* coincided with the proliferation of online file sharing, the decline of recorded music sales, and increased restrictions on commercial radio and music video airplay. These technological, cultural, and economic transformations have impacted to some extent the exclusionary function of connoisseurist practices in indie music culture, instigated a selective openness toward contemporaneous popular music outside the rigid constructs of indie taste, and produced conditions that impel indie musicians' engagement with corporate advertisers. *Pitchfork's* trajectory – from a small-scale indie rock-centric publication that attracted business from small-scale indie labels, to a large institution capable of attracting multi-million dollar corporate sponsors – illustrates the escalating centrality of corporate involvement in indie music culture. Indie artists' loss of other means to secure a living endows *Pitchfork* with even greater power. In other words, *Pitchfork* has become an integral component in the production of value in indie music culture; in some cases, positive reception and regular coverage in *Pitchfork* has propelled indie artists' cultural visibility and commercial success. Along with this power to legitimize new artists, *Pitchfork's* ascendancy in the field of online music criticism also endows them with the power to influence and alter the scope of indie taste and value to some extent.

Many indie artists acknowledge the precariousness of pursuing a music career in the 21st century and tacitly accept corporate omnipresence in indie music culture. Corporate engagement is unavoidable once an indie artist reaches a certain level of popularity, even for those who do not directly participate in artist-brand partnerships. Dustin Payseur of indie group Beach Fossils recently shared his thoughts on the topic:

Sometimes when you're playing a show and there are brands and logos swirling around you, or you do an interview and there's this product placement, it feels so silly, it feels like a game, you feel like a puppet. It's so lame. But at the same time, it's funding what you're doing. That kind of stuff is paying for you to continue to live this way and make music. It's a really conflicting sort of thing [...]

It's such a huge part of what everyone's doing. But no one ever talks about it.
(L. Pelly 2013)

Payseur's statement suggests that commercial imperatives have become commonplace and mostly unchallenged in a culture that once prided itself as being relatively independent from the former. Both indie and mainstream artists' direct and indirect adherence to corporate interests renders devaluation on the basis of anti-commercial principles contradictory in the 21st century. With former criteria of "selling out" having lost some of its saliency, and many instances of both indie and mainstream artists earning various amounts of income through large-scale corporate institutions, we may now ask the following questions: How are these recent technological, economic, and cultural transformations in indie music culture manifested and reflected in the aesthetic valuation of mainstream music in *Pitchfork*? And, most importantly, how do these transformations alter the boundaries between indie and mainstream musical *taste*? I explore these issues in the following chapter.

4 EXPLORING THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN MAINSTREAM AND INDIE MUSICAL TASTE IN *PITCHFORK*

This chapter examines *Pitchfork's* evaluation of mainstream music – a sphere of popular music production and consumption that past indie music cultures often rejected. Analysis of *Pitchfork* album reviews of mainstream artists will attempt to show how indie aesthetic values and musical taste have shifted in the contexts specified in the previous chapter; namely, the emergence of online file sharing and “poptimism”, which challenged the rigidity and exclusivity of indie ‘rock’ aesthetic values; and the decline in recorded music sales, whereby corporate engagement is relatively more common in indie music culture, obfuscating longstanding demarcation lines between indie and mainstream commercial practices and related notions of artistic value.

To accomplish this task, I consulted all *Pitchfork* reviews of top selling albums that appear in the top 20 of the *Billboard* 200 Year-End Chart from 2006 to 2011; these years represent *Pitchfork's* dominant position in the field of online music criticism. My initial analysis of these album reviews was conducted with the use of Keir Keightley’s authenticity framework (2001, 137). Key findings and evidence are presented in this chapter to show that *Pitchfork* writers tend to positively value modernist conceptions of rock authenticity in album reviews of mainstream popular music. This chapter begins with an explanation of Keightley’s authenticity framework. Discussion of *Pitchfork's* evaluation strategies is presented in two sections: 1) Tradition v. Progress, and 2) Directness v. Indirectness. These sections examine *Pitchfork's* evaluation of aesthetic and expressive dimensions in reviews of mainstream albums. These analyses illustrate *Pitchfork's* selective embrace of modernist musical aesthetics and ‘indirect’ expressivity in mainstream pop music. Romantic

conceptions of ‘directness’ and ‘sincerity’, however, hold much value in reviews of male rap albums.

The second half of this chapter discusses key findings from these analyses.

Pitchfork’s selective valorization of African American musical forms and artists represents a notable change in indie music taste and aesthetic value; this finding departs from practices of past indie cultures in the mid 1980s and 1990s, which according to extant accounts more or less excluded African American musical forms and artists (Reynolds [1986] 1989, 246-7; Hesmondhalgh 1999, 52; Bannister 2006a, 88). I discuss my findings in the context of historical accounts of past indie music cultures to show how recent changes in aesthetic and cultural values inform the valorization of African American musical forms in *Pitchfork*.

While positive reception of particular rap artists may appear to have progressive implications compared to the “whiteness” of previous indie rock formations (Hesmondhalgh 1999, 38, 52; Bannister 2006a, 88), the devaluation of gendered stylistic conventions and female expressivity does not bode well for women’s place in the critical hierarchy. Lastly, commercial rock albums are devalued for their imitative form and perceived commercial, rather than artistic, intent; this particular finding is consistent with longstanding indie (and post-punk) cultural values (Azerrad 2001, 10; Reynolds 2005, 1; Bannister 2006b, 64).

The final section examines Bourdieuan theorizations of indie aesthetic judgment.

Despite mainstream artists receiving recognition in indie music contexts (and vice versa), I argue that the embodied cultural capital of indie music aesthetes sustains difference between indie and mainstream musical taste. *Pitchfork’s* valorization of mainstream artists provides context in this theoretical discussion. Lastly, this section argues that *Pitchfork* stands to represent a “hip” middlebrow cultural class, as its aesthetic concerns and popularity as a rock criticism institution are analogous to previous “overground underground” rock publications.

4.1 Romantic and Modernist Authenticity

In “Reconsidering Rock” (2001), Keir Keightley frames his analysis of rock culture in terms of a 1950s-derived “mass society critique”. He argues that rock represents a social formation primarily concerned with the differentiation of taste, namely distinguishing in popular music the “good” from the “bad”. By claiming the “good” as its own, Keightley argues, “Rock culture asserts its superiority over the ‘mass’” (2001, 132). Keightley’s account suggests that rock was never “oppositional” toward mass culture: “What is truly at stake in rock culture is the differentiation of taste, not an affiliation with forms of cultural action” (2001, 129). Thus, rock represents a sphere of “mainstream music that is (or ought to be, or must be) taken seriously” (Keightley, 2001, 128). As a part of mass culture,³³ rock audiences distinguish their musical taste(s) from the “alienated” sphere of popular music known as “pop” (Keightley 2001, 128). “Pop”, Keightley argues, is “understood as a catch-all category, into which rock dumps adult easy listening, bubblegum, teenybop, and sell-outs, frauds and musical trifles more generally”, and thus “isn’t ‘taken seriously’” (2001, 128). Pop ideology, according to Simon Frith, “is not driven by any significant ambition except profit and commercial reward [...] it is essentially conservative” (2001, 96). These aesthetic and ideological conceptions of pop are important to keep in mind in this analysis; many albums in this study that represent ‘essential’ rock sounds are in fact negatively valued in *Pitchfork* precisely for their perceived conservativeness and commercial intent, which in turn puts into question the personal authenticity of these artists (i.e., are they being ‘true’ to their art or simply pandering to established conventions in pursuit of economic profit?).

33. Although I am examining indie rather than mainstream rock music culture, Keightley maintains that indie is a segment of rock culture differing only in terms of scale; he asserts, “Indie rock is defined by its concern for scale of consumer capitalism, rather than by its radical rejection of an economic system” (2001, 129).

Rock discourse differentiates rock from pop primarily through the attribution of what Keightley calls “romantic” and “modernist” authenticity; rock fans may perceive and ascribe characteristics of romantic and modernist authenticity to certain performers to justify their “privileged” status as ‘rock’ artists (2001, 131-9). According to Keightley, Romanticism and Modernism “are two complementary but distinct historical movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries”; they each encompass “conceptions of authenticity, autonomy, and authorship” (2001, 135). Romantic and modernist conceptions of artistic and cultural value were adopted by rock culture in attempts to resist threats of alienation that were identified by the mass society critique of the early-mid 20th century (Keightley 2001, 132-5). Broadly construed, romantic authenticity emphasizes direct communication between author and audience, and “sincere unmediated expression of inner experience” (Keightley 2001, 136). Modernist authenticity, by contrast, is typically embodied “at the aesthetic level”; its values include “experimentation, innovation, development, change” and an uncompromising commitment to artistic integrity (Keightley 2001, 136). The primary characteristics of romantic and modernist authenticity to which I refer frequently in this chapter are listed in the following table:

3.1 Characteristics of Romantic and Modernist Authenticity

<i>Romantic authenticity tends to be found more in</i>	<i>Modernist authenticity tends to be found more in</i>
tradition and continuity with the past	experimentation and progress
roots	avant gardes
sense of community	status of artist
populism	elitism
belief in a core or essential rock sound	openness regarding rock sounds
folk, blues, country, rock’n’roll styles	classical, art music, soul, pop styles
gradual stylistic change	radical or sudden stylistic change
sincerity, directness	irony, sarcasm, obliqueness
‘liveness’	‘recorded-ness’
‘natural’ sounds	‘shocking’ sounds
	celebrating technology

Source: “Reconsidering Rock” (Keightley 2001, 137).

“[W]hile most genres will line up on one side or the other of the above table,” Keightley notes, “rock’s internal complexity makes it difficult to label individual genres or artists as completely and exclusively ‘Romantic’ or ‘Modernist’” (2001, 138). There are cases, however, when an artist’s perceived embodiment of one form of authenticity is emphasized in critical evaluation (see Keightley 2001, 137-9). Keightley cautions that we ought not to consider these characteristics as absolutes; rather, we should approach modernist and romantic authenticity as tendencies (2001, 136). Lastly, authenticity is not an inherent quality in an object itself; rather, “it is a value, a quality we ascribe to perceived relationships between music, socio-industrial practices, and listeners or audiences”, according to Keightley (2001, 131). In a *Pitchfork* album review, for example, a writer may ascribe value to an artist whose musical style eschews current popular music trends. In this way, perceptions of authenticity correspond to and interact with surrounding musical practices external to the artist’s music under review. The following analysis of *Pitchfork* album reviews is situated within Keightley’s theoretical framework.

4.2 Evaluation of Aesthetic Dimensions: Tradition v. Progress

This following section examines *Pitchfork*’s negative assessment of artists its writers identify as ‘rock’, namely Mumford & Sons, Kings of Leon, and Coldplay, and legacy performers U2 and Metallica. These artists represent, to varying degrees, commitment to rock’s past and a “belief in core or essential rock sound[s]” (Keightley 2001, 137) – e.g., country or ‘essential’ rock styles. Assertions in these album reviews tend to demonstrate *Pitchfork*’s suspicion toward continuity of core rock conventions in mainstream contexts; continuity with familiar rock styles is often construed as conservatism, which *Pitchfork* writers see as engineered for commercial gain, or unoriginal and imitative, or both. In these examples, *Pitchfork* writers

tend to value musical elements that extend beyond core rock sounds, illustrating a modernist bias in aesthetic evaluation. The modernist tendency that emerges in these reviews reveals a rejection of romantic values that previously defined certain indie music cultures and historical continuity of the rejection of commercial rock more generally.

4.2.1 Tradition, Continuity, and ‘Essential’ Rock Sounds

Artists that are perceived as motivated exclusively by commercial aspirations tend to be negatively valued in *Pitchfork*. Writer Stephen Deusner argues in his review of Mumford & Sons’ *Sigh No More* (*Pitchfork* Rating 2.1) that the band’s particular blend of rock and country and overt display of quaint traditionalism are rooted in commercial intentions.³⁴ Their apparent “exaggerated earnestness *on consignment* from the Avett Brothers [and]...rock ‘real’-ness that built the Kings of Leon brand” (Deusner 2010; emphasis added) further extends to negative commercial connotations; Deusner asserts, “[i]t’s not spot-the-influence if they’re pushing them on you with a *salesman’s insistence*” (2010; emphasis added). Deusner’s critique of Mumford & Sons’ predictability and commercial intent evoke aspects of Adorno’s theorization and critique of popular music as standardized and profit-orientated ([1941] 1990, 305-7). This connection demonstrates how the modernist concerns of Adornian thought still continue to pervade aspects of rock music discourse and ideology (Bannister 2006b, 29; Frith 1996, 69). Void of artistic ambition, *Sigh No More* is written off as inauthentic and of almost zero value.

Pitchfork writers tend to reject artists’ imitation or self-imitation of familiar “classic” rock styles. Writer Ian Cohen scrutinizes Kings of Leon’s apparent use of familiar classic

34. Deusner, for example, asserts that the band name “Mumford & Sons” represents “a play at quaint family businesses run by real people in real small towns, trades passed down through generations: both independent (yes, as in indie) and commercial. It’s a shallow cry of authenticity, but this West London quartet really does sound more like a business than a band” (2010).

rock narratives on *Only By the Night* (*Pitchfork* Rating 3.8); he asserts, “[a]fter years spent building a career on the enduringly romanticized Stillwater archetype, Kings of Leon have laterally shifted from one *easily understood linear narrative* (festival band) to another (arena rock band)” (2008; emphasis added). Moreover, the lead singer of the group allegedly employs caricatured rock tropes; for example, Cohen refers to the lead singer’s “typical mix of stock [rock] characterization [and] open misogyny” (I. Cohen 2008), which undermine the group’s value. These rock reiterations contribute to Kings of Leon’s negative reception. Furthermore, Metallica and U2’s latter day attempts at self-imitation are met with lukewarm critical reception. Writer Cosmo Lee asserts that Metallica’s “Self-plagiarization [sic]” on *Death Magnetic* (*Pitchfork* Rating 4.9) “tries mightily to recapture Metallica’s former glory”, but falls short (2008). Lee attributes *Death Magnetic*’s ‘return to form’ impetus to producer Rick Rubin’s “intent...[to attract] rich, fortysomething rockers to recall themselves as hungry, twentysomething metallers [sic]” (2008). Perceived commercial intent is posited as the impetus for what amounts to a ‘bad’ album. Lastly, U2’s former modernist penchant for sonic experimentation and aesthetic revisionism is apparently lacking on *No Line on the Horizon* (*Pitchfork* Rating 4.2). Following a lengthy exegesis of U2’s career and artistic accolades, *Pitchfork* writer Ryan Dombal states that U2’s “ballyhooed experimentation is either terribly misguided or hidden underneath a wash of shameless U2-isms [...] *Horizon* is clearly playing not to lose -- it’s a defensive gesture, and a rather pitiful one at that” (2009). Perceived re-hashing of familiar rock sounds is negatively valued in these cases.

These album reviews evoke Simon Frith’s assertion that rock music fans often “[equate] bad music with imitative music” (1996, 69). In this form of devaluation,

a record or artist is dismissed for sounding like someone else (or...for sounding just like their earlier records or songs). The critical assumption is that this reflects a cynical or pathetic production decision; it is not just an accident or coincidence. (Frith 1996, 69)

While rejection of imitative music may be a common critical assumption in rock music culture, we ought not to assume its ubiquity. These late-career Metallica and U2 albums, for example, are highly acclaimed in *Rolling Stone* magazine – the last major critical organ of the baby boomer rock-era – because they demonstrate a “return to form”; Metallica’s *Death Magnetic* is rated 4/5 stars (Hiatt 2008) and U2’s *No Line on the Horizon*, 5/5 stars (Fricke 2009). This contrast in critical reception shows how the romantic and modernist strata of rock authenticity are diverging in the contemporary moment. In these examples, it appears indie culture (as depicted by *Pitchfork*) has adopted rock’s modernist impulse. *Rolling Stone*, as an illustrative foil, praises continuity of ‘essential’ rock sounds, which corresponds to the romantic stratum of rock authenticity. Unlike *Pitchfork*, *Rolling Stone*’s Brian Hiatt praises Metallica for returning to their roots on *Death Magnetic*; he asserts, “[j]ust as U2 re-embraced their essential U2-ness post-Pop, this album is Metallica becoming Metallica again — specifically, the epic, speed-obsessed version from the band’s template-setting trilogy of mid-Eighties albums” (2008). The rift in critical reception between *Rolling Stone* and *Pitchfork* suggests that rock’s key structuring principles appear to be diverging in ongoing struggles to preserve the belief that certain popular music forms constitute art. *Rolling Stone* continues to value rock populism and gradual stylistic change, while *Pitchfork* valorizes those works it perceives as innovative to retain distance from the ‘conservative’ sphere of mainstream rock.

Even within these album reviews of rock artists, *Pitchfork* writers tend to advocate experimentation and openness regarding rock sounds. In Ryan Dombal’s review of

Coldplay's *Viva la Vida or Death and All His Friends* (*Pitchfork* Rating 6.9), he is most enthusiastic when discussing the “semi-surprises” that appear on the album; these include Coldplay's perceived employment of *Scary Monsters*-era David Bowie “mutant funk” and “exotic percussion” reminiscent of latter day Peter Gabriel recordings (Dombal 2008b).³⁵ Similarly, Cohen asserts that Kings of Leon “could have turned an artistic corner” on *Only By the Night*, but instead they continue to rely on either clichéd and/or misogynist rock tropes (I. Cohen 2008). Even in evaluating archetypical ‘rock’ albums, *Pitchfork* writers tend to privilege modernist conceptions of rock authenticity.

The next two subsections examine the value *Pitchfork* writers ascribe to artists that are perceived as demonstrating “openness regarding rock sounds” (Keightley 2001, 137) – e.g., pop, rap, and R&B styles. There is strong relationship between perceived innovation/stylistic eclecticism and positive reception in *Pitchfork*. In relation to rock romanticism, these artists represent modernist tendencies toward “experimentation and progress” and “art music, soul, [and] pop styles” (Keightley 2001, 137). This analysis aims to demonstrate *Pitchfork's* strong bias toward modernist authenticity in the valorization of the aesthetic dimensions of mainstream music.

4.2.2 Modernist Conceptions of Progress and Artistic Integrity

In this sample, *Pitchfork* writers tend to favour musical elements characteristic of modernist conceptions of rock authenticity, even when perceived in works formerly devalued in indie music culture. Higher ratings are assigned to albums that writers perceive as exhibiting experimentation and progress and technological embrace; many of these albums employ

35. These are among less obvious reference points relative to other major albums produced by Bowie and Gabriel.

African American musical forms. Lower ratings are found in reviews of pop and crossover pop (e.g., pop-R&B) albums; value may be denied when writers perceive the presence of gendered commercial pop conventions (e.g., albums by Beyoncé, Gwen Stefani, Nicki Minaj).³⁶ This section examines these evaluative tendencies in *Pitchfork*, which reveals a greater acceptance of and appreciation for commercial pop, R&B, and rap musical styles; embrace of these musical forms is relatively novel in indie music culture.

In the case of “Best New Music” awardees, *Pitchfork* writers tend to highlight what they perceive as artists’ penchant for experimentation and progress in statements that emphasize the modernist’s “first commitment [which] is less to reaching an audience than to being true to [his or her] own artistic integrity” (Keightley 2001, 136). This rhetorical strategy appears frequently in Kanye West albums reviews.³⁷ Ryan Dombal, for example, describes West’s *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (*Pitchfork* Rating 10) as “a blast of surreal pop excess that few artists are capable of creating, or even willing to attempt” (Dombal 2010b). In his review of *808s and Heartbreak* (*Pitchfork* Rating 7.6), Scott Plagenhoef frames West in a similar fashion, with additional emphasis on his uncompromising artistic ambition:

West is endowed... with a sense of purpose and drive that pushes him... to put on events rather than shows, to valorize art along with commerce at a time when major labels are circling the wagon and becoming stifflingly conservative, and to break out of his comfort zone when he wants to create a record as uncomfortable as [the album] *808s [and Heartbreak]*. (2008a)³⁸

36. Low ratings are also assigned for reasons pertaining to artists’ diminished technical skill (e.g., Lil Wayne’s *Tha Carter IV*, and Eminem and Jay-Z albums in this sample) and dated production values (namely Jay-Z’s albums in this sample).

37. Kanye West’s *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* and *Late Registration* are the highest rated albums in this sample (10 and 9.5, respectively).

38. Note how West’s valorization of commerce is counterbalanced by his perceived artistic ambition. West’s mainstream commercial success does not negatively impact Plagenhoef’s assessment.

West's apparent pursuit of artistic self-realization is articulated as a primary objective that informs, in this case, his choice to make an album defying public expectations. Ryan Dombal's review of Lil Wayne's *Tha Carter III* (*Pitchfork* Rating 8.7) also demonstrates this pattern. He praises Lil Wayne for preserving his artful idiosyncrasies on this commercial release; Dombal asserts, "[i]nstead of hiding his bootleg-bred quirks in anticipation of the big-budget spotlight, he distills the myriad metaphors, convulsing flows, and vein-splitting emotions into a commercially gratifying package that's as weird as it wants to be" (2008c). Like Kanye West, Lil Wayne does not suppress his idiosyncrasies and artful ambition to appease commercial popular music listeners.

These favourable reviews are evidence of significant change in indie aesthetic values; these polished studio-produced albums stand in stark contrast to "[i]ndie's eschewing of the technological" and penchant for nostalgia and past-orientated musical forms (Fonarow 2006, 44-9). For example, statements in these *Pitchfork* reviews often contain specific 'progressive' musical references or more general claims about an artist's progressive aesthetic. Examples of the former strategy include Plagenhoef's embrace of Lady Gaga's celebration of technology and openness regarding rock sounds in *The Fame Monster* (*Pitchfork* Rating 7.8): He asserts that the album "comes across like futurist pop music"; "[its] whooshing synths, jarring rhythms, and stratospheric choruses [...] [sound] designed to just take over a listener, to force them to pay attention the way Gaga's image seems to have done to people" (Plagenhoef 2010a). Similarly, Justin Timberlake's *FutureSex/LoveSounds* (*Pitchfork* Rating 8.1) is favourably compared to "the polished funk-pop of *Purple Rain*" and "the grandiose

excess of Prince's last 20 years” (Finney 2006b).³⁹ The Prince influence, however, is not framed as mere revivalism; rather, this influence is filtered through producer Timbaland’s “rubbery synthetic funk” and “pseudo-crunk blare” (Finney 2006b). Lil Wayne’s *Tha Carter III* is praised for its “eclectic unpredictability”, “musical open-mindedness”, and “extraterrestrial fetishism” (which is a stylistic allusion to the “P-Funk worshipping”⁴⁰ qualities of revered hip-hop group Outkast) (Dombal 2008c). Examples of the latter strategy include writer Mark Pytlik’s assessment of Gwen Stefani’s *The Sweet Escape* (*Pitchfork* Rating 6.5); he asserts, “the pockets of brilliance here are compelling enough to warrant holding out hope that Stefani’s best as a *boundary-pushing* pop singer still lies ahead” (2006; emphasis added). These “pockets of brilliance”, according to Pytlik, include “gusty musical choices” that attempt to “win you over with oddity” (2006). The middling 6.5 rating, however, accounts for Stefani’s “insipid” ‘feminized’ pop songs, which I discuss in the following section.

4.2.3 Gendered Pop Stylistic Conventions

In this sample, *Pitchfork* writers tend to devalue the perceived presence of ‘feminized’ pop stylistic conventions. These analyses suggest that modernist conceptions of innovation and progress are commonly associated with ‘masculine’ stylistic conventions. Norma Coates argues that “discursive and stylistic segregation of ‘rock’ and ‘pop’” enacts a gendered hierarchy of meaning and value in rock culture. In this framework, rock is generally equated with authenticity and masculinity, while pop represents artifice and femininity” (1997, 52).

39. Keightley offers a reading of Prince that emphasizes his tendencies toward modernist authenticity (2001, 138).

40. ‘P-Funk’ refers conjunctively to the George Clinton’s 1970s futurist psychedelic funk projects, Funkadelic and Parliament.

These gendered constructs tend to appear in *Pitchfork* writers' evaluation of albums by Beyoncé, Nicki Minaj, and Gwen Stefani. In these cases, 'feminized' pop conventions are written off as either pandering to mainstream generic conventions or simply as 'bad' pop. However, the perceived innovative qualities of these artists are positively valued. The following examples illustrate these contentions.

In his album review of *I Am...Sasha Fierce* (*Pitchfork* Rating 5.2), Ryan Dombal derisively rejects Beyoncé's songs that embody 'feminized' pop stylistic conventions; for example, he asserts, "there's lots of wispy nonsense seemingly dug out of Celine Dion's scrap pile" (2008a). Similarly, Tim Finney states that Beyoncé's *B'Day* (*Pitchfork* Rating 7.2) "is a success" because, "Beyoncé delivers precisely what many listeners have always wanted from her: a short, tight, and energetic set that's *heavy on upbeat numbers and funk affectations*, and *light on the balladry and melisma*" (2006a; emphasis added). In some examples, masculine stylistic conventions are perceived more favorably. Nicki Minaj's *Pink Friday* (*Pitchfork* Rating 6.5), for example, is devalued for its emphasis on "singing instead of rapping" (Plagenhoef 2010b). Plagenhoef privileges Nicki Minaj's 'masculine' characteristics, for example her "swagger" and "ferocity", which figured prominently on her early mixtapes but are apparently absent on this album (2010b); instead, *Pink Friday* "lean[s] on [conventions] that have worked in the marketplace" (Plagenhoef 2010b). In this case, he is referring to Minaj's emphasis on "singing", and the album's perceived use of commonplace mainstream R&B conventions. Lastly, Mark Pytlik's assessment of Gwen Stefani's *The Sweet Escape* (*Pitchfork* Rating 6.5) employs a similar strategy. He describes the album in the following way: "One step forward, three steps sideways, one step back, *The Sweet Escape* continues in Stefani's proud tradition of being caught somewhere between the vanguard and the insipid" (2006). Two of the "insipid" album tracks, according to Pytlik, "exhume the ghosts of S Club

[7] and Debbie Gibson” (2006) – both of which are commercially successful pop music acts of the late 1990s and 1980s respectively, and predominately associated with a teenage female demographic. By contrast, Lady Gaga’s *The Fame Monster* eschews these ‘feminized’ pop conventions and is received more favorably.

In this sample, *Pitchfork* writers tend to value aesthetic elements characteristic of modernist conceptions of rock authenticity. Essential ‘rock’ sounds and ‘feminized’ pop styles are construed as conservative, pandering, and lacking artistic ambition. These musical qualities are negatively characterized as ‘pop’ in *Pitchfork* (see Frith 2001, 96). Musical elements characterizing openness regarding rock sounds, experimentation, progress, and celebration of technology are typically assigned greater value.

4.3 Evaluation of Expressive Dimensions: Directness v. Indirectness

This section examines *Pitchfork*’s evaluation of ‘direct’ and ‘sincere’ expression characteristic of romantic authenticity, and ‘indirectness’ associated with modernist authenticity. In the context of this sample, these analyses aim to show that *Pitchfork* writers tend to more readily recognize and value sincerity and directness in male rap artists. A modernist bias in the evaluation of pop (male and female artists) and female pop-R&B artists tends to favour indirectness.

4.3.1 Directness and Rap

Directness and sincerity are central values in *Pitchfork*’s evaluation of artists’ its writers categorize as rap or hip-hop. Both Kanye West and Drake, for example, are highly valorized for their ‘direct’ and ‘sincere’ expressivity; they convey in autobiographical fashion their insecurity, doubt, and decadence as members of mainstream celebrity culture. They are perceived as introspective artists that, to use Plagenhoef’s expression, “valorize both art and

commerce” (2008a). Lil Wayne, too, is valorized in terms of personal authenticity. However, writers place greater emphasis on his vocal technique and musical aesthetics. The following analysis is thus centered on Kanye West and Drake.

With the exception of Radiohead, Kanye West is the most critically acclaimed contemporary mainstream artist in *Pitchfork*. All of his solo studio albums, with the exception of *808s and Heartbreak*, have received *Pitchfork*'s coveted “Best New Music” designation. His most recent album *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* is one of the few new releases (i.e., non-reissue) to receive a perfect 10 quantitative rating in *Pitchfork*. Writers tend to highlight the following qualities in most Kanye West reviews: First, every review emphasizes West's personal authenticity (i.e., directness, sincerity) and the role it plays in informing his artful musical ideas. Second, West's music is valorized for its modernist characteristics, namely that it pushes the aesthetic boundaries of mainstream hip-hop and pop conventions. Thus, personal and modernist authenticities tend to operate dialectically in Kanye West album reviews. The allegedly innovative and artful characteristics of West's music, for example, are frequently argued to be manifestations of his unabashedly egocentric and divisive persona (and vice versa).

Kanye West's apparent unabashed honesty is emphasized as an integral element in *Pitchfork*. In his review of *Late Registration* (*Pitchfork* Rating 9.5), *Pitchfork* writer Sean Fennessey explains West's esteemed status in popular culture in the following way:

Those who claim Kanye West's antics hinder his work are missing the point. His self-importance is obvious, but the arrogance that comes pre-packaged with his insecurity is what makes West the most interesting hip-hop figure of the past five years. That's the reason he landed on ‘Oprah’ and the cover of *Time* Magazine last week, rather than 50 Cent or Nelly or Slug. It's not sales; it's souls. (2005)

In other words, West's ‘insecurity’ remains publicly visible, which produces belief in his ‘realness’ as a music producer implicated in mainstream celebrity culture. In another album

review, Plagenhoef echoes this belief; he asserts, “[h]e’s [Kanye West] someone as driven by ego as he is plagued by doubt – in other words, *a wholly human pop star*” (2008a; emphasis added). These claims illustrate *Pitchfork*’s commitment to the belief in Kanye West’s sincerity – not only in his music but also in the way he engages in popular culture more generally. Eschewing strict characterizations of modernist art (cf. Huyssen 1984, 53-4), *Pitchfork* writers perceive emotional expression as inherently valuable in West’s music and public persona. In this way, Kanye is valued for balancing the sincerity of romantic authenticity and the innovativeness of modernist authenticity. This balance, according to Keightley, has historically held much value in rock culture; he asserts, “Rock culture tends to regard as most innovative those rock artists who deploy Romantic and Modernist authenticity more or less equally” (2001, 139).

A similar pattern of critical evaluation is found in Ryan Dombal’s review of Drake’s *Thank Me Later* (*Pitchfork* Rating 8.4). Drake’s self-centeredness is construed as integral to the album’s value. His “dramatically exposed selfishness is unique to hip-hop”, according to Dombal (2010a). Like Kanye West, Drake is perceived as conveying the woes and compromises (both personal and romantic) associated with being a mainstream celebrity; he’s rich and famous, but also ‘real’.

By contrast, Lil Wayne’s *Tha Carter III* (*Pitchfork* Rating: 8.7) is cited as “his most personal” album (Dombal 2008c). The ‘realness’ conveyed by Lil Wayne, however, contrasts Kanye West and Drake. Dombal asserts, for example, that a particular track “has the rapper [Lil Wayne] looking all the way back to age 12, when he accidentally shot himself with a .44 Magnum while toying with the gun in a mirror”, which “add[s] even more gravitas to his grizzled, elastic timbre” (2008c). Although in each case positive value is assigned in terms of directness, the thematic differences between Kanye West/Drake and Lil Wayne evoke a

similar dichotomy noted by Simon Reynolds with respect to the jungle music scene, circa 1995. In this music scene, according to Reynolds, two models of blackness were represented: “elegant urbanity” and “ruffneck tribalism” ([1998] 2006, 79). Reynolds notes that a “covert class struggle” underpinned this dichotomy, namely “upwardly mobile gentrification versus ghettocentricity” ([1998] 2006, 79). Despite being assigned similar value, *Pitchfork* writers tend to pay closer attention to the personal dimensions of Kanye West and Drake in these reviews. It may be that the “elegant urbanity” represented by these artists is more amenable to a predominately college-educated, middle to upper class indie demographic (see Pitchfork 2010). Consider, for example, Dombal’s closing statement in his review of Drake’s *Thank Me Later*:

He [Drake] grew up in an affluent Toronto suburb and was graced with everything but a functional pair of parents, who split when he was three. Like Kanye West before him, Drake vies for superstardom while embracing his non-drug-dealing, non-violent, non-dire history -- one that connects with most rap fans in a completely reasonable way. And, suddenly, all that "I" turns into a lot of "we." (2010a)

Variance of emphasis notwithstanding, the expressive dimensions of Kanye West, Drake, and Lil Wayne are construed as sincere and direct, and factor positively into their critical assessments. In these examples, *Pitchfork* writers tend to positively value perceptions of honesty, artistic ambition, and artists’ refusal to adhere to established mainstream musical conventions; these perceived qualities counterbalance the widespread popularity and commercial successes of these artists, unlike commercial rock performers. These examples heavily contrast the interpretative frameworks *Pitchfork* writers tend to employ in their assessment of ‘pop’ artists.

4.3.2 Indirectness and Pop

In *Pitchfork* album reviews, directness and sincerity is commonly devalued in relation to the generic contexts in which, and through which, these qualities are encountered. This tendency

is most prevalent in album reviews of artists that *Pitchfork* writers categorize as ‘pop’, namely albums by Justin Timberlake, Lady Gaga, Rihanna, and Beyoncé.⁴¹ Given that all pop artists in this sample are female, with the exception of Justin Timberlake, *Pitchfork*’s valorization of indirectness has an implicitly gendered dimension. Since valorization is often predicated upon the extent to which pop artists distance themselves from direct and personal expression, direct expression articulated in the form of ‘feminized’ pop conventions (i.e., what some *Pitchfork* writers describe as “balladry” or “wispy nonsense”) is often devalued. This section explores the claims found in *Pitchfork* reviews that illustrate this bias.

The positive value *Pitchfork* ascribes in album reviews of “pop icons” Lady Gaga and Justin Timberlake (Plagenhoef 2010a; Finney 2006b) evokes gendered criteria of Modernist high-art as explained by Andreas Huyssen. He argues that (male) artists and theorists of the high modernist period (i.e., late 19th – mid 20th Century) negatively associated femininity with mass culture (1986, 44-62). However, Huyssen asserts that this gendered dichotomy is not overly central in present contexts (1986, 62). Despite this claim, instances of gendered modernist discourse appear in some of these reviews. However, it is ironic that the modernist quality of ‘indirectness’ perceived in female artists, for example, corresponds to positive evaluation in some cases (e.g., Rihanna, Lady Gaga). Huyssen also explains that “the uses high art makes of certain forms of mass culture (and vice versa) have increasingly blurred the boundaries between the two” since the advent of Postmodernity (1986, 59). As such, we see in the contemporary moment traces of modernist high art characteristics deployed in mass culture forms, such as Lady Gaga’s music and image and Timberlake’s aestheticization of melodramatic pop gestures.

41. *Pitchfork* writers primarily discuss aesthetic rather than expressive dimensions in Sade, Nicki Minaj, and Gwen Stefani album reviews.

Huyssen claims that modernist art insists upon “the repudiation of likeness and verisimilitude, the exorcism of any demand for realism of whatever kind” (1986, 53). In Scott Plagenhoef’s review of *The Fame Monster* (*Pitchfork* Rating: 7.8), Lady Gaga is lauded for her chameleonic image:

[She] suppress[es] her vanity...making herself a slippery figure. She's still largely unknowable and also almost unrecognizable from moment to moment, as she contorts, disguises, masks and maims her face and body like a Matthew Barney or David Cronenberg creation. (2010a)

In other words, Lady Gaga eschews the appearance of being ‘true’ or ‘real’ by inhabiting various guises and personae. Huyssen also claims that modernist art involves “the erasure of subjectivity and authorial voice” (1986, 53), which corresponds to Plagenhoef’s observation that “we know next to nothing about her [Lady Gaga’s] personal life [...] the twists and turns of her private life don't inform her art” (2010a). It is the very absence of personal expression that partially informs Plagenhoef’s positive evaluation of Lady Gaga. In relation to the aforementioned passages, Plagenhoef evokes Lawrence Grossberg’s concept of “authentic inauthenticity” (1992, 224-7) at the conclusion of the review; he asserts, “[b]ut all of a sudden, for a brief time at least, she's [Lady Gaga] the only *real* pop star around” (2010a). In this way, Lady Gaga is perceived as a “real” pop star, for her “claim to truth [lies] precisely in the exposition of artistic identities as constructions” (Weisethaunet and Lindberg 2010, 474). She accrues value by eschewing male-defined notions of direct and sincere personal expression (cf. Coates 1997, 52-3; Kruse 2002, 136-7).

Similar processes are located in Tim Finney’s album review of Justin Timberlake’s *FutureSex/LoveSounds* (2006b). Finney asserts that Timberlake’s “unselfconscious (or, rather, hyper-selfconscious) reveling in melodramatic gestures is among the album's attractions” (2006b). This quality, however, is positively valued as a dramatic gesture in

itself, as an aesthetic effect devoid of sincere personal expression. The parenthetical inclusion of Timberlake's possible "hyper-selfconscious[ness]" evokes Huyssen's assertion that Modernist art tends to be "self-referential, self-conscious, frequently ironic, ambiguous" (1986, 53). Indeed, Finney's assertion that Timberlake's dramatic gestures could be either unselfconscious or "hyper-selfconscious" highlights the overall ambiguity of the gesture. "Pop icons" Lady Gaga and Justin Timberlake receive the highest quantitative ratings (7.8 and 8.1 of out 10, respectively) of all pop artists (as defined by *Pitchfork*) in this sample. These cases show to some extent the primacy of modernist indirectness in *Pitchfork's* positive assessment of mainstream pop artists.

The value of indirectness becomes increasingly complex in the case of female pop artists who *Pitchfork* also categorize as either R&B or hip-hop. For example, competing genre and gender expectations in the evaluation of female pop-R&B artists problematizes the value of 'directness'. In Tim Finney's review of Beyoncé's *B'Day* (*Pitchfork* Rating 7.2), for example, he praises the album for its emphasis on soul and funk musical qualities (2006a). His 'pop' expectations of Beyoncé, however, undermine the value of 'directness' and 'sincerity' she apparently embodies in this soul/R&B context. According to Finney, she apparently "sounds too *real*" on *B'Day* (2006a); "[h]aving voluntarily stepped down from her pedestal," Finney asserts, "she now struggles to inspire the same sense of awe: Her songs emote as intensely as before, but their emotions are all too human" (2006a). On her 2005 album *I Am...Sasha Fierce* (*Pitchfork* Rating 5.2), Ryan Dombal's genre expectations contradict Finney's. Beyoncé employs a dual persona on this double album; "Beyoncé Knowles" and her fictitious alter ego "Sasha Fierce" (Dombal 2008a). Unlike 'pop' artist Lady Gaga, Beyoncé's oblique use of multiple subjectivities is perceived as opportunistic, a "gimmick [that] is now a tired and, more often than not, hapless pop theme" (Dombal

2008a). Conflicting expectations between the indirectness of ‘pop’ and the directness of ‘R&B’ appear to complicate *Pitchfork* writers’ evaluation of Beyoncé.

By contrast, Rihanna’s “lightweight R&B formula” (Dombal 2010c) permits easier identification with pop artifice, thus reducing ambiguity of genre expectations. As a result, the absence of overtly ‘direct’ and ‘sincere’ expression on her album *Loud* (*Pitchfork* Rating 7.6) corresponds to positive evaluation, evidenced in the following passage:

[W]hile that cathartic album [entitled *Rated R*, *Pitchfork* Rating 6.1] provided an outlet for her [Rihanna’s] frustrations and allowed her to claim some artistic bona fides, the actual songs were often plodding and weighed down by overwrought melodrama. Not so on *Loud*, which has the 22-year-old... doling out effervescent pop like it was her birthright. (Dombal 2010c)

Identification of indirectness in pop styles, and in particular female artists, suggests that gendered assumptions of expressivity inform male writers’ judgment of artistic value in these cases. In this sample, the absence of expressivity in female artists corresponds to higher ratings.

4.4 Discussion of Key Findings

At the aesthetic level, *Pitchfork* writers unequivocally value modernist over romantic tendencies. They tend to positively value modernist tendencies such as openness regarding rock sounds, experimentation, progress, and African American musical forms and pop styles. Albums that are perceived to exhibit continuity of ‘essential’ rock sounds or ‘feminized’ commercial pop conventions are often devalued. At the expressive level, romantic conceptions of ‘directness’ and ‘sincerity’ specifically in male rap albums is highly valued; this is the only recurring tendency of romantic authenticity positively valued in this sample. *Pitchfork* writers tend to positively value modernist conceptions of ‘indirectness’ in the evaluation of pop artists. Overall, *Pitchfork* reviews of mainstream popular music albums

illustrate a bias toward modernist conceptions of rock authenticity. I discuss the implications of these findings below.

4.4.1 Modernist Authenticity and African American Musical Forms

A notable finding in this analysis is the positive value ascribed to African American musical forms. It is useful at this juncture to briefly outline the historical relationship between indie music culture and the latter. According to extant accounts of American and British indie music cultures of the mid-1980s and 1990s, African American musical forms and artists were often excluded (Reynolds [1986] 1989, 247; Hesmondhalgh 1999, 52; Straw [1991] 2005, 472; Bannister 2006a, 88). Contemporaneous aesthetic values in indie music often contrasted those it perceived as inherent in rap, R&B, and especially dance music (Fonarow 2006, 69-76). Exclusion is partially attributed to the values that underpinned the DIY ethos in past indie music cultures. Matthew Bannister explains that the DIY ethos in mid-to-late 1980s indie rock forestalled threats to its autonomy by enacting binary divisions between aesthetic purity/impurity and naturalness/deviance (2006b, 64-5). The purity and naturalness associated with indie music aesthetics opposed the impurity of contemporaneous commercial rock (and its “rockist” machismo) and pop (Bannister 2006b, 64). Simon Reynolds originally developed this conception of ‘purity’ to describe mid-1980s UK indie music practice and culture ([1986] 1989, 248-55).⁴² Musical forms that deviated from these values were often excluded. “Perhaps the most obvious marker of deviance”, Bannister suggests, “was ‘black’ musical influences” (2006b, 65). According to Bannister, “[i]ndie rejected dance music’s

42. For Reynolds, ‘purity’ in mid-1980s UK indie music culture was embodied through an embrace of childhood, naivety, innocence, androgyny, and 1960s music culture ([1986] 1989, 248-55).

emphasis on the body, which seemed complicit with the ‘work hard play hard’ New Right ethos” of the 1980s and “[r]ap was viewed with suspicion” (2006b, 65).

North American indie (i.e., alternative rock) music culture shared a similar oppositional stance toward African American musical forms during this period; Will Straw asserts, “African American musical forms [represented] technological innovation and stylistic change against which [alternative/indie music culture] ha[d] come to define itself against” ([1991] 2005, 472).⁴³ According to Straw, the “rock classicism” that characterized alternative rock music contrasted “the observable overlap of dance-music culture with... the turbulent space of Top 40 radio” ([1991] 2005, 476). To use Keightley’s terminology, indie/alternative rock culture valued markers of romantic authenticity, while African American musical forms represented characteristics of modernist authenticity. Indeed, Reynolds asserts that mid-1980s UK indie music was “anti-modern”, resistant toward “progress/com-plexifi-cation/technicism” in favour of tradition; their “[b]acks [were] turned defiantly to the future” ([1986] 1989, 255). More recently, Fonarow asserts that indie music listeners and artists tend to oppose electronic instrumentation (a tendency she refers to as “technophobia”), such as synthesizers, digital samplers, drum machines, and so on (2006, 46).⁴⁴

My analyses suggest that these exclusionary mechanisms now operate somewhat differently. In this sample of *Pitchfork* album reviews, positive value is highly correlated with technological embrace and African American musical forms. As such, *Pitchfork*’s favourable assessment of these musical forms and aesthetics eschews past exclusionary

43. I must give credit to Matthew Bannister (2006b, 65) for bringing this passage to my attention.

44. Fonarow does note a few exceptions to indie “technophobia”, which mostly pertain to the electronic instruments used in contemporary lo-fi and electronic indie (2006, 43).

constructs in indie culture. Chapter 3 explained how the relative autonomy of indie music culture and practice has faltered to some degree over the past decade; its commodification in and increased dependence upon corporate sponsorship and artist-brand partnerships compensate for the lack of revenue in recorded music sales. During this period of economic and cultural change, *Pitchfork* favourites Arcade Fire and Bon Iver garnered mainstream music industry recognition (Caramanica 2011). These groups represent a “romantic” indie rock faction, for their respective use of traditional ‘rock’ and ‘folk’ musical styles. Their popularity outside the confines of indie music culture impacts the degree to which romantic aesthetics formerly associated with indie culture’s DIY ethos can sustain difference from mainstream taste. Moreover, the proliferation of electronic music and the rise of “poptimism” during the past decade appear to have had lasting effects in contemporary indie music practice (see Zoladz 2012b). As the traditional rock faction of indie music culture (e.g., Bon Iver, Arcade Fire, and The Black Keys) continues to garner mainstream recognition, indie culture’s “technophobia” and anti-modernist ideals can no longer signify difference from popular taste.

There are many other factors that have contributed to the gradual rise of rap in indie music culture. Wendy Fonarow explains that in the past decade particular rap artists have become popular in the UK (2006, 57). She attributes the budding popularity of American rap music in UK indie culture to its “perceived ‘realness’ and radical form” – citing Kanye West as an example (2006, 57). Her assertion is consistent with my findings; in this sample, *Pitchfork* writers tend to valorize rap albums in terms of romantic conceptions of sincerity and directness (i.e., ‘realness’) and modernist musical aesthetics (i.e., ‘radical form’). Indie culture’s initial engagement with rap, however, has a more extensive history.

In the mid-late 1990s, “[a]n independent-spirited and resolutely anti-commercial underground hip-hop movement” emerged in reaction to its mainstream counterpart (Leask 2008). This movement was similar in some respects to the indie-label music that emerged in reaction to 1990s mainstream alternative rock (Hibbett 2005, 58; Abebe 2010; Beck 2011, 182-3). Through a shared ethos, the parallel movements initiated a dialogue, for example, in the form of indie-rap labels such as Anticon (Reeves 2007). Indie hip-hop artist Open Mike Eagle asserts that during this period “the audience [for independent hip hop] became very white. The music started to kind of separate itself from the everyday black experience, and the people who were looking for this kind of adventurous rap music were white people” (Meyer 2011). Mos Def and Talib Kweli, among others, emerged from this indie rap movement (Leask 2008). Consistent with Open Mike Eagle’s assertions, Mos Def garnered high praise in *Pitchfork* as early as 1999 (see Goldman 1999). These parallel underground movements in indie and rap music culture facilitated future crossover. In 2004, Kanye West arrived on the scene; his perceived artistic ambition and “nerd-superstar rap archetype” (Dombal 2010b) proved to be especially resonant with a predominately white indie music audience. Between 2005 and 2006, *Pitchfork* began its transition toward a dominant position in online indie music criticism, which coincided with an increase in rap and pop music coverage.

Fonarow asserts, however, that the coverage of non-indie musical forms in the indie music press is merely a strategy that “justif[ies] to the community that the press really has surveyed all forms of music and to assert indie as the arbiters of artistic value” (2006, 58). Regional and temporal differences notwithstanding,⁴⁵ *Pitchfork* has increased its coverage of

45. In *Empire of Dirt* (2006) Fonarow specifically examines British indie music.

African American rap and R&B artists in recent years (e.g., Frank Ocean, A\$AP Rocky, Danny Brown, Kendrick Lamar, and Azealia Banks are frequently featured on the site at present). *Pitchfork's* top two albums of 2012 are produced by African American rap and R&B artists Kendrick Lamar and Frank Ocean (Pitchfork Staff 2012). Relative to years past, African American musical forms are becoming increasingly commonplace in indie music culture, which counterbalances its traditional rock constituency that has gained wider mainstream recognition. It would be a stretch, however, to assert that *Pitchfork* presents comprehensive coverage of rap and R&B. The selectivity of its coverage in these contexts evokes tendencies of past rock (rather than indie) music cultures. For example, in Regev's discussion of 1960s and 70s rock critics' consecration of albums as "masterpieces", he states that "the most distinguished contributions of [African American] music to the classic corpus of rock include" particular albums by Otis Redding, James Brown, The Temptations, Marvin Gaye, and Stevie Wonder (1994, 94). In this way, we see evidence of contemporary indie culture reiterating valuation tendencies of past rock cultures.

4.4.2 Modernist Authenticity and Gender

Since indirectness is prevalent in the valorization of female mainstream artists, we ought to consider *how* 'directness' and 'sincerity' are defined in (indie) rock discourse. First, however, it is useful to discuss Robin James' conceptualization of the "robo-diva" figure in popular R&B (a construct that James, coincidentally, develops from Tom Breihan's review of Rihanna's *Good Girl Gone Bad* in *Pitchfork!*). James argues, "the Robo-Diva figure challenges entrenched aesthetic norms and gender-race politics by asserting her black femininity and technological prowess" (2008, 403). The robo-diva – which Beyoncé and Rihanna are said to have embodied in particular performances (Robin 2008, 410-7) – rejects Western art notions of expressivity and personal authenticity through technological adoption

and embrace (2008, 417-8). Robin's argument partially explains why some (male) music writers may not positively value or identify qualities of male-defined directness and sincerity in the case of Beyoncé and Rihanna. In *Pitchfork*, however, Rihanna and Beyoncé are still received less favorably in comparison to male rap artists who foreground romantic (male-centric) conceptions of 'directness' in their music. This disparity reminds us that by and large, men have created and controlled the parameters of meaning and value in rock discourses (Kruse 2002, 134). Male empathy with female conceptions of directness, whether it is in a rock, pop, or R&B context, substantially lacks historical precedent.

Over the past year, some *Pitchfork* writers have articulated a reflexive awareness of the gendered notions of value its writers employ. In an article entitled "You Masculine You" (2012), *Pitchfork* editor-in-chief Mark Richardson discusses issues that pertain to male identification with female music producers. He states, for example, that male music writers had a more difficult time identifying with a recent album produced by female indie sensation Grimes (aka Claire Boucher). By contrast, younger female music writers loved the album; they were "identifying with its concerns and feeling like it spoke to them about their lives, even when they couldn't quite make out Boucher's words" (Richardson 2012). The lack of clarity of Boucher's words need not undermine her artistic value if music writers eschew valuation predicated upon male-centric notions of 'directness' and 'sincerity'. Lindsay Zoladz's review of Grimes' *Visions* in *Pitchfork* (*Pitchfork* Rating 8.5) demonstrates this approach.⁴⁶ Modernist conceptions of authenticity almost exclusively serve the basis of valorization in this review; Zoladz positively values the music's celebration of digital technology and post-humanism, and its balance between pop aesthetics and sonic

46. *Visions* received *Pitchfork*'s "Best New Music" designation (Zoladz 2012a).

experimentation (2012a). The lack of clarity in Boucher's words diminishes the potential for listeners to evaluate her music in terms of literal, expressive meaning – evoking shades of Robin James' post-humanist argument. The music in itself becomes the object of analysis.

Pitchfork's recent addition of female contributors and staff writers in 2011-12 has coincided with a visible increase in coverage of female artists. Although it is too early to tell, we may see the positive value associated with male-defined constructs of 'directness' and 'sincerity' dwindle through an embrace of modernist authenticity. For example, the modernist impetus that characterized the post-punk movement – i.e., the "punk vanguard" – "challenged the suggestion that music works as an emotional code", according to Simon Frith (1981, 160-1). Post-punk, like current strains of indie practice, engaged with popular contemporaneous African American musical forms such as disco (Reynolds 2005, 1). Indeed, David Hesmondhalgh contends "women found important spaces within punk and post-punk for new forms of expression" (1997, 269). Nonetheless, indie music culture, like post-punk, still tends to privilege male producers. Consider, for example, the number of albums in 2012 that received *Pitchfork's* "Best New Music" designation.⁴⁷ Of these 50 albums, 38 (76%) consist of male solo artists or groups; 7 (14%) consist of female solo artists or groups; and the remaining 5 (10%) are mixed-gender groups (Pitchfork 2013a). These numbers are heavily skewed toward male artists, demonstrating that there is still much work ahead despite *Pitchfork's* concerted efforts. While my findings show that modernist characteristics of female pop are privileged over commercial 'rock', directness in male rap still holds greater

47. The "Best New Music" designation is arguably the only marker of distinction *Pitchfork* assigns at present that enables albums from getting lost or forgotten in the sea of cultural overproduction that characterizes popular music in the digital age (see Barker 2010, 40).

value. Male-defined conceptions of ‘directness’ and ‘realness’ appear to remain central in rock authenticity discourses under the aegis of rap in indie music culture.

4.4.3 ‘Rock’ Remains Pop and ‘Pop’ Becomes Rock

In this sample, *Pitchfork* writers tend to perceive commercial ‘rock’ albums as more or less inauthentic. Indeed, the preservationist aesthetic qualities of Mumford & Sons, Kings of Leon, and latter day Metallica and U2 albums are construed, like ‘pop’, as either safe (Keightley 2001, 109), conservative, and/or profit driven (Frith 2001, 96). This finding is consistent with previous accounts which frame indie music culture as oppositional toward contemporaneous commercial rock music (Azerrad 2001, 10; Bannister 2006b, 64). The most significant change in the context of *Pitchfork*, however, is that some pop albums rank even higher than many indie albums. Despite their centrality in mainstream contexts, positively perceived value of modernist indirectness and technological embrace in pop albums (e.g., Justin Timberlake, Rihanna, Lady Gaga) suggests a degree of change in contemporary indie aesthetic values, which makes this a significant finding in relation to *Pitchfork*’s early indie-centric coverage. This is especially important since *Pitchfork* appears more influential than *Rolling Stone* and *Spin* (see Brownstein 2009).

This tendency, however, is not without precedent in the history of rock criticism. In the late 1970s punk split into two segments, one realist/populist and the other high-brow/vanguard (Frith 1981, 160; Lindberg et al. 2005, 229). Following this split was the emergence of the “New Pop” movement and the rise of British “style bibles”; the latter placed greater emphasis on image and design and “theoretically-informed” rhetorical

strategies in popular music criticism (Lindberg et al. 2005, 228-30).⁴⁸ By the mid-1980s, the “age of style” allowed for greater acceptance of and engagement with chart-pop in the music press (Lindberg et al. 2005, 230). Michael Jackson and Madonna, for example, appeared on the cover of *The Wire* and *Spin* in 1991 and 1985 respectively (Lindberg et al 2005, 230). In comparison, *Pitchfork* writers compare Justin Timberlake and Lady Gaga to the former and latter (Finney 2006b; Plagenhoef 2010a). By the 1990s, however, tendencies of New Pop criticism had waned; according to Lindberg et al. rock music critics learned from New Pop criticism that “aesthetics can be applied to other things than rock (in this case pop) and that the authentic and the artificial were not in fact separable” (2005, 259). This is an important lesson that *Pitchfork* advantageously deploys.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, *Pitchfork* gradually began to cover mainstream pop artists by mid-decade. The “poptimist” trend that circulated discursively in online music forums frames the backdrop of this collective shift in musical taste (see Wilson 2007, 12-4). In *Pitchfork*, however, openness toward pop and dance musical styles appear to have emerged from its writers’ increased reflexive awareness of the narrow rules governing indie musical taste (see Mitchum 2003). This reflexive awareness of indie rock social and aesthetic conventions (i.e., elitist posturing, aversion to dance music and pleasure) parallels in some respects the disillusionment music critics and audiences experienced after the demise and subsequent splitting of punk in the late 1970s; by 1980, “the mainstream-subculture opposition already felt dated” (Lindberg et al. 2005, 226).⁴⁹ By comparison, Nitsuh Abebe

48. Unlike *Pitchfork* writers, New Pop critics sometimes employed post-structuralist/postmodernist theories in their music writing (Lindberg et al 2005, 230).

49. Indeed, the “datedness” of the mainstream-subculture split circa 1980 parallels Carl Wilson’s claims regarding the futility of preserving a mainstream-underground (indie) dichotomy in the digital age (Wilson 2005a; Wilson 2007, 13-4).

notes that a strand of “allegedly polite and earnest” indie pop became “really, really popular [in the past decade]. It became the kind of thing an average American teenager might casually listen to without feeling there was too much meaningful or different about that choice” (2010). In this way, modernist aestheticization of chart-pop and rap counterbalances the “mainstream, populist indie” (Abebe 2010) that has moved into a more general category of popular music taste (and hence, has lost much of its symbolic power of representing difference from mainstream taste).⁵⁰ In comparison to the latter, chart-pop and rap are more amenable to modernist rock aesthetic valuation. Despite the blurring of boundaries between mainstream and indie music, *Pitchfork* stands to represent the “vanguard” faction of the populist (mainstream)/progressive (indie) divide through its selective valorization and aestheticization of popular music formerly restricted from the field.

4.5 *Pitchfork* and Indie Aesthetic Judgment

This section discusses how contemporary indie musical taste preserves its distinctiveness from popular taste, despite the overlap in objects of consumption between indie and mainstream music listeners. This section argues that indie and popular taste remain distinct through the manner by which aesthetic judgment is employed, rather than the cultural category a particular taste object is associated with. In this way, the embodied form of indie cultural capital displaces its objectified form in the absence of clearly defined boundaries of cultural consumption. Thus, *Pitchfork* retains its status as a “fully fledged indie institution” (Lobato and Fletcher 2012, 116) despite valorizing and promoting certain mainstream artists.

50. For example, Abebe asserts, “if [during the past decade] you followed a certain variety of ‘middlebrow’ media, or even just watched the bands showing up on late-night shows, you’d quite possibly hear *more* about indie acts than platinum-selling rappers or country acts” (2010).

During the site's first decade of operation, *Pitchfork's* cultural capital often corresponded to a "restricted" sphere of music, namely indie rock music and particular strands of experimental and electronic music released on independent record labels (see Pitchfork Media 2001). This canon of musical styles and recordings represented objectified forms of cultural capital. In the presence of clearly defined boundaries between indie and mainstream music production, indie music listeners could be more easily identified on the basis of taste objects alone (i.e., the particular indie-related albums one listens to). There is greater interaction between objects of mainstream and indie taste at present. As I mentioned in the literature review, many studies have not thoroughly explored the capacity of indie (sub)cultural capital to aestheticize objects external to the field. In the absence of clearly defined boundaries between indie and mainstream music, indie musical taste manifests itself primarily in the manner by which musical objects are discursively valorized rather than the cultural category that is typically associated with a particular musical form or artist.

To unpack this claim, we must first examine the function of objectified and embodied forms of cultural capital in the contemporary moment. In response to critics of Bourdieu's theory of tastes, Douglas Holt asserts,

[o]bjectified cultural capital can operate effectively only within a stable cultural hierarchy. Thus, as cultural hierarchies have dramatically blurred in advanced capitalist societies, objectified forms of cultural capital has become a relatively weak mechanism for exclusionary class boundaries. ([1998] 2000, 220)

In the digital age, the boundary has blurred between indie and mainstream music consumption, as certain indie groups have achieved mass media exposure; in the early-mid 2000s, for example, indie music groups Death Cab For Cutie and the Shins were featured in popular television programs (e.g., *The O.C.*) and films (e.g., *Garden State*) (Wilson 2005a; Beck 2011, 183). Once *Pitchfork* established greater cultural presence between 2004 and

2006, its “isolationist indie ideology” became vulnerable to criticism (Wilson 2005a; Beck 2011, 187). By applying indie aesthetic judgment to mainstream musical forms, *Pitchfork* could (theoretically) preserve its distinctiveness from mainstream taste and deter elitist accusations.⁵¹

Cultural capital in the absence of clearly defined taste boundaries manifests itself primarily in its embodied, rather than objectified, form (Holt [1998] 2000, 220-1). Holt emphasizes the distinctive power that Bourdieu ascribes to embodied cultural capital in the following passage:

Rather than accruing distinction from pecuniary rarity or from elite consensus, Bourdieu argues that cultural capital secures the respect of others through the consumption of objects that are *ideationally difficult* and so can only be consumed by those few who have acquired the ability to do so [...] Thus, status boundaries are reproduced simply through *expressing* one’s tastes. ([1998] 2000, 218-19; emphasis added)

In other words, unlike the privileged position of former high culture elites (to which Hibbett compares the social formation of indie music listeners (2005, 57)), multiple individuals of differing socio-economic backgrounds may enjoy various examples of indie music for entirely different reasons. A *Pitchfork* writer, for example, may ascribe artistic value to a mainstream album grounded in modernist conceptions of rock authenticity, whereas a casual music listener may simply like the same album because it “has a good beat”. It is thus the manner of evaluation, rather than the cultural category of the object itself, that reveals the difference between indie and mainstream taste. Bourdieu comments on the distinctive capacity of cultural elites to aestheticize popular objects in the following passage:

[N]othing more rigorously distinguishes the different classes than the disposition objectively demanded by the legitimate consumption of legitimate works, the aptitude for taking a specifically aesthetic point of view on objects already constituted

51. I am not suggesting that this was *Pitchfork’s* intent.

aesthetically...and even the rarer capacity to constitute aesthetically objects that are ordinary or even 'common'...or to apply the principles of a 'pure' aesthetic in the most everyday choices of everyday life (Bourdieu 1984, 40; emphasis added).

Although, as Holt similarly points out, this claim specifically pertains to a highly stratified, hierarchical division between “high” and “low” culture and economic and social class, the underlying relationship is analogously coherent. In relation to Bourdieu’s claim, objects of mainstream popular music would be construed as ‘common’ relative to lesser-known (or relationally ‘obscure’) indie-related music. If we accept Bourdieu’s claim, then *Pitchfork*’s aestheticization of ‘common’ or ‘ordinary’ music amplifies their distinct position vis-à-vis mainstream taste; in this act, the site illustrates its capacity of constituting aesthetically “ordinary” objects of popular consumption.

Pitchfork’s decision to cover and in some cases positively value mainstream popular music also illustrates a degree of populist embrace. Indeed, Bernard Gendron argues that the “art/pop dialectic of indie pop exemplifies well the populist elitism now so much in fashion among ‘hip’ highbrows and middlebrows” (2002, 327). Gendron, however, posits an interesting distinction between “hip” highbrows and middlebrows in the following passage:

There is, in fact, considerable overlap between the likings of ‘hip’ highbrows and middlebrows, the major difference being in the discursive takes and aesthetic dispositions each group brings to bear on the same musical items – the difference, say, between the discourses of academic cultural studies and those of the *Village Voice*. (2002, 327)

Similar to Gendron (2002, 326-7), I have argued that indie taste remains distinct from mainstream taste through the manner in which aesthetic judgments are employed by its listeners. It is difficult, however, to make the case that *Pitchfork* represents the “discursive takes and aesthetic dispositions” of “hip” highbrows. In fact, *Pitchfork*’s staff is largely comprised of music writers who also contribute to “middlebrow” newspapers, such as the *Village Voice*, *LA Weekly*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *The Guardian*, and commercial rock and

entertainment publications such as *Spin*, *Rolling Stone*, *Uncut*, and *GQ* (Pitchfork 2013b). Gendron further asserts that “‘Hip’ highbrows are simultaneously populist and elitist, populist in the music they choose to like but elitist in the somewhat inaccessible theoretical discourse through which they express these likings” (2002, 327). While *Pitchfork’s* audience largely consists of college-educated individuals,⁵² theoretical and academic discourses tend not to figure prominently in its music reviews. These qualifications suggest that there are some limitations to theorizing indie aesthetic judgment as analogous to high art culture (see Hibbett 2005, 57), or even Gendron’s “hip” highbrow category.

In light of these theoretical concessions, it is useful to qualify *Pitchfork’s* position in the history of rock music criticism. The bias of *Pitchfork* writers toward valorizing popular musical forms through modernist conceptions of rock authenticity more closely resembles properties of former “overground underground” rock music formations, represented by publications such as *Spin* in the late-1980s and early 1990s (Lindberg et al. 2005, 312-4). The following passage from Simon Frith’s *Performing Rites* (1996) provides evidence for this suggested continuity:

[T]hemes that haunted modernist writers and critics at the beginning of the century (their “high” cultural concern to be true to their art, to disdain mere entertainment, to resist market forces; their longing for a “sensitive minority”...) still haunt popular music. What needs stressing though, is that it is not just critics who hold these views, but also the readership for whom they write (and which they help define): music magazines like *Melody Maker* or *Rolling Stone* in the late ’60s and early ’70s, like *New Musical Express* in the mid to late ’70s, like *Spin* in the ’80s, were aimed at consumers who equally defined themselves against the “mainstream” of commercial taste, wherever that might lie [...] [Among music critics and audiences] the most interesting aesthetic distinctions *aren’t those between the high and the low, but those between the select and the mainstream, the radical and the conservative.* (1996, 66-7; emphasis added)

52. According to *Pitchfork’s* 2010 Media Kit, 87% of its readers have college or graduate-level education (Pitchfork 2010).

While rock culture evokes “‘high’ cultural concerns”, ethical criteria (e.g., “to resist market forces”) are manifested in aesthetic judgments (e.g., valuing radical musical forms), which eschews the purely formalistic concerns of high culture and hence the practice of distinguishing between ‘high’ and ‘low’. Indie aesthetic judgment, while often concerned with form, still contains an ethical dimension. Recall, for example, Stephen Deusner’s scathing review of Mumford & Sons’ *Sigh No More* (2010). Deusner perceives its aesthetic as dishonest because it sounds and looks like an album motivated by economic rather than artistic aspirations (2010). By contrast, the ‘pure’ aesthetic of high art aesthetic judgment perceives “a bracketing of form in favour of ‘human’ content...[as] barbarism par excellence” (Bourdieu 1984, 44). Indie, like rock, falls somewhere between the two extremes, often resulting in a form of aesthetic judgment that denotes or implies an ethical standpoint (see Keightley 2001, 111; Frith 1996, 72).

Lastly, Frith’s phrase “wherever that might lie” (1996, 66) is of utmost importance in this case; the boundary between indie and mainstream taste is variably permeable. Frith is not suggesting that alternative music publications and its readers disavow any or all commercially successful music. Rather, rock music publications distinguish between the “artful” and the “conservative”, which can be located and justified in music produced at any level of commercial scale. In this way, *Pitchfork’s* representation of indie aesthetic judgment evokes a ‘rock’ or “hip” middlebrow discourse; the site’s primacy and popularity in the world of rock criticism is sufficiently comparable to past “overground underground” music publications.

4.6 Conclusion

This chapter presented an analysis of *Pitchfork’s* valuation strategies in reviews of mainstream popular music albums. This analysis showed that *Pitchfork* writers tend to

positively value modernist conceptions of rock authenticity at the aesthetic level. These qualities include openness regarding rock sounds, sonic experimentation, innovation, and perceived commitment to one's artistic integrity. At the expressive level, *Pitchfork* writers tend to positively value modernist 'indirectness' in pop styles and romantic conceptions of 'sincerity' and 'directness' in male rap albums. Commercial rock albums occupy the bottom of the critical hierarchy, illustrating continuity with the values of past indie music cultures.

Key findings were then analyzed in relation to historical accounts of indie music culture and rock criticism. *Pitchfork's* valorization of male rap inverts historical exclusionary boundaries in indie music culture. The potentially progressive implications, however, are undermined by the devaluation of gendered conceptions of female expressivity. The following section examined the progressive potential in positively valuing modernist conceptions of indirectness in the evaluation of female artists; the positive value ascribed to male-centric conceptions of 'sincerity' and 'directness', however, limits the extent to which female artists can accrue value in *Pitchfork*. The final section argued that positive value assigned to mainstream 'pop' relative to 'rock' evokes tendencies found in 1980s New Pop criticism; rock aesthetic criteria are employed in the aestheticization of 'non-rock' music which counterbalances the mainstream recognition of the traditional rock faction of indie music culture.

This final section examined Bourdieuan theorizations of indie aesthetic judgment. Despite the overlap in objects of music consumption between indie and mainstream cultural classes, this section argued that the embodied form of indie cultural capital sustains difference between indie and mainstream taste. This section also suggested that *Pitchfork's* evaluation of mainstream albums evokes 'rock' rather than high art or theoretical discourse. In this way, *Pitchfork's* aesthetic judgments more aptly represent the discourse and aesthetic

dispositions of a “hip” middlebrow cultural class. The site’s centrality and popularity in indie music culture evokes the cultural status and modernist aesthetic concerns of past “overground underground” rock music publications.

5 CONCLUSION

The arguments presented in this thesis pertain to general valuation strategies *Pitchfork* writers tend to employ in album reviews of top-selling mainstream artists. This sample of 24 album reviews is admittedly modest; only 27 albums appearing in the *Billboard* 200 Year-End Chart (2006-2011) are reviewed in *Pitchfork*. While the low quantity of reviews reflects *Pitchfork's* dedication to indie music coverage, we can nonetheless establish general claims about the site's relationship with mainstream popular music culture. At any rate, we must interpret these results as evaluative tendencies and not concrete rules that apply to all cases.

The central research question presented in the introductory chapter asked “how does *Pitchfork* manage longstanding boundaries (and even antagonisms) between indie and mainstream music cultures while looking favourably (albeit selectively) on both indie and mainstream music?” This thesis argued that *Pitchfork* manages these boundaries by positively valuing, in many cases, modernist tendencies of rock authenticity in evaluating mainstream albums. In other words, *Pitchfork* tends to favour works perceived as artistically ambitious and innovative, and deny value to artists perceived as aesthetically “conservative”. As particular indie artists became popular among a larger audience over the past decade, the taste objects of indie aesthetes would lose their ability to signify difference from popular taste. In this context, the distinguishing capacity of indie (sub)cultural capital in its embodied form reveals itself most clearly in the absence of distinct boundaries between indie and popular music consumption. *Pitchfork* could thus preserve its indie status while simultaneously valorizing particular popular music artists.

At this juncture we may ask, how did *Pitchfork* come to see mainstream music as even capable of achieving modernist rock authenticity? Indie scholar Wendy Fonarow claims

that despite the romantic and backward-looking tendencies of (British) indie music, “the indie community nevertheless emphatically believes that it is a domain of artistic innovation and originality” (2006, 50). In other words, a modernist impetus underscores indie culture’s relation to the mainstream, despite historically privileged markers of romantic authenticity characterizing indie music aesthetics. With an increased exchange between taste objects of opposing cultural classes, the underlying modernist ethos of indie aesthetic judgment emerges to the fore; indie music culture retains its distinctiveness in representing itself as the “vanguard” of contemporary popular music. In particular, the modernist tendencies of African American and pop musical styles could stand to represent indie culture’s relational difference from other spheres of “conservative” mainstream taste, such as traditional rock, country, and adult contemporary.

The economic, technological, and cultural context of 1980s and 1990s popular music culture stands in stark contrast to contemporary conditions. Prior to the rapid decline in recorded music sales, major record labels had greater influence on popular music consumption. The corporate music industry, and its immense cultural and economic power, became an object of “legitimate opposition” for indie artists of the 1980s (Ott [2006] 2012b, under “Independence Goes Pop”). Rejecting and devaluing mass taste and mainstream musical practice, past indie music cultures enacted distancing or distinguishing mechanisms which included DIY ethics, upholding and positively valuing institutional autonomy, practices and discourses of connoisseurship, and the construction of an indie rock canon. These practices were most effective in a pre-internet world and began to falter as the digital age ensued. The proliferation of online file sharing, the emergence of “poptimism”, and the commodification of indie music through corporate advertising – among other factors –

affected the extent to which these exclusionary mechanisms could continue to sustain difference from mainstream taste and practice.

During this process *Pitchfork* became a powerful arbiter of artistic and cultural value in indie music culture. The site developed legitimizing power to bestow “indie” credibility on a variety of small- and large-scale artists. With the romantic stratum of indie rock receiving greater mainstream recognition, *Pitchfork* has responded favourably (albeit selectively) to African American and pop musical forms – both mainstream and peripheral. The expressive qualities of ‘directness’ and ‘sincerity’ and modernist aesthetic qualities are most positively valued in the case of male rap artists – illustrating, in this context, a preferred balance between romantic and modernist conceptions of rock authenticity. In evaluating pop artists, *Pitchfork* writers tend to positively value modernist ‘indirectness’ and aesthetic experimentation, embrace of technology, and openness regarding rock sounds. Female artists, however, still have difficulty accruing value in *Pitchfork*, which preserves to some extent the gendered hierarchy historically prevalent in rock music cultures. *Pitchfork’s* concerted efforts to increase coverage of female artists and its number of female writers is commended and duly noted in this thesis. Lastly, *Pitchfork* writers tend to devalue commercial rock artists for their perceived imitative form, stylistic predictability, and commercial rather than artistic aspirations. This particular finding is consistent with previous indie rock exclusionary practices.

These analyses offer insight into recent stylistic transformations that underscore contemporary indie music production. Many indie artists currently eschew guitar-based musical forms in favour of pop and R&B stylistic conventions. *Pitchfork* writer Carrie Batten recently published an article about emergent “fissures” between indie and mainstream pop styles (2012). In this article, record producer Ariel Rechtshaid states, “I turn on the radio and

it sounds like MGMT or Arcade Fire, but it isn't. So it's like, 'OK, that's pretty much been done now. What's next?'" (Battan 2012). Rechtshaid is referring to the impetus driving indie artists toward pop rather than guitar-based musical styles; as indie rock sounds (e.g., MGMT and Arcade Fire) have become commonplace in mainstream contexts, many indie artists are now incorporating pop-oriented styles that sound both retro and contemporary. The current wave of indie stars, such as Grimes, the Weeknd, Aluna George, James Blake, Rhye, Sky Ferreira and others, variously assimilate R&B, electronic, pop, and dance stylistic elements in their music, eschewing guitar-based conventions altogether. Furthermore, certain indie artists are now openly praising and collaborating with contemporary pop, R&B, and rap stars; for example, the XX recently expressed their admiration for Beyoncé, who they consider to be “one of [their] favourite artists of all time” (J. Pelly 2013); “electronic bedroom producer” Hudson Mohawke is contributing to Kanye West’s forthcoming album (Goble 2013). *Pitchfork’s* selective valorization of popular music styles over the past six years both anticipates and reflects recent renegotiations of aesthetic value in indie music practice.

Recent changes in indie aesthetic and commercial values constitute a significant finding in this thesis. As discussed in Chapter 2, past indie rock movements erred toward assimilating musical influences from bygone eras to sustain difference from contemporary mainstream music styles; by contrast, my findings suggest a developing relationship between a segment of indie and mainstream artists and musical styles. As we have seen, however, the key structuring principles of rock, namely modernist and romantic authenticity, remain present in renegotiations of artistic value between indie and mainstream music practice and culture. By incorporating rap and pop musical influences, segments of contemporary indie music culture are beginning to shed its former penchant for romanticism.

The collapse of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture in advanced capitalist societies fragmented many cultural formations and much consumption. While this thesis explored the boundary between indie and mainstream popular music taste, other related cultural boundaries warrant similar investigation. For example, many indie artists are now using digital recording software to create complex and layered works that exhibit an experimental or leftfield musical sensibility. A comparative discourse analysis of album reviews in *The Wire* and *Pitchfork*, for example, could provide insight into the changing practices and values in contemporary avant-indie factions. Several ambient, drone, and experimental electronic music artists are positively valued in both publications, such as Fennesz, Tim Hecker, Oneohtrix Point Never, Actress, Laurel Halo, and others. Exploring the boundary between these respective cultural spheres would be a useful contribution to popular music scholarship, and in particular indie-related research.

Analysis of taste boundaries between opposing or complementary music cultures is an ongoing endeavour, as new genres, antagonisms, and alliances emerge. The evaluative patterns observed in this thesis will no doubt change as certain styles become outdated and replaced. Above all else, I hope women will receive stronger representation in the popular music press. There are countless solo female artists producing novel and creative works with digital recording technologies. Although many female artists receive coverage in *Pitchfork*, it was disappointing to discover that the site continues to privilege male artists. John B. Thompson notes, “all action and interaction involves the implementation of social conditions which are characteristic of the fields within which they take place” (1990, 150). In this way, taste boundaries enacted by rock music publications reflect the gender inequality historically prevalent in rock music culture and criticism (see Kruse 2002, 134; Regev 1994, 94). However, distinctive practices can also potentially give shape to new values and practices in

a field; *Pitchfork's* recent addition of female writers has coincided with increases in female music coverage. Stronger and more positive representation of women in *Pitchfork* can contribute to improved places and musical institutions in indie music culture. Perhaps positive change will prevail as music writers continue to examine and challenge the assumptions and values informing their practice.

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