

popular
music



PEARL JAM AND PHILOSOPHY

Edited by
Stefano Marino & Andrea Schembari

B L O O M S B U R Y

Pearl Jam and Philosophy

Pearl Jam and Philosophy

Edited by Stefano Marino and Andrea Schembari

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
NEW YORK • LONDON • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
Bloomsbury Publishing Inc
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018, USA
50 Bedford Square, London, WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC and the Diana logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in the United States of America 2022
This edition published 2023

Copyright © Stefano Marino and Andrea Schembari, 2022

Each chapter copyright © by the contributor, 2022

Cover design: Louise Dugdale
Cover image © Pearl Jam perform at Lollapalooza 2007 in Grant Park, Chicago on August 5, 2007.
Photo by Kevin Mazur/WireImage via Getty

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

Bloomsbury Publishing Inc does not have any control over, or responsibility for, any third-party websites referred to or in this book. All internet addresses given in this book were correct at the time of going to press. The author and publisher regret any inconvenience caused if addresses have changed or sites have ceased to exist, but can accept no responsibility for any such changes.

Whilst every effort has been made to locate copyright holders the publishers would be grateful to hear from any person(s) not here acknowledged.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Marino, Stefano, 1976- editor. | Schembari, A. (Andrea), 1978-editor.
Title: Pearl Jam and philosophy / edited by Stefano Marino and Andrea Schembari.
Identifiers: LCCN 2021018353 (print) | LCCN 2021018354 (ebook) | ISBN 9781501362781 (hardback) | ISBN 9781501362798 (epub) | ISBN 9781501362804 (pdf) | ISBN 9781501362811
Subjects: LCSH: Pearl Jam (Musical group) | Music and philosophy. |
Rock music—Philosophy and aesthetics.
Classification: LCC ML421.P43 P4 2021 (print) | LCC ML421.P43 (ebook) |
DDC 782.42166092/2—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021018353>
LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2021018354>

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5013-6278-1
PB: 978-1-5013-8579-7
ePDF: 978-1-5013-6280-4
eBook: 978-1-5013-6279-8

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com
and sign up for our newsletters.

Contents

Foreword	<i>Theodore Gracyk</i>	vii
Introduction	<i>Stefano Marino and Andrea Schembari</i>	1
1	Contingency, (In)significance, and the All-Encompassing Trip: Pearl Jam and the Question of the Meaning of Life <i>Stefano Marino</i>	13
2	“Just Like Innocence”: Pearl Jam and the (Re)Discovery of Hope <i>Sam Morris</i>	43
3	Who’s the Elderly Band Behind the Counter in a Small Town? <i>Radu Uszkai and Mihail-Valentin Cernea</i>	61
4	Making a Choice When There Is No “Better Man” <i>Laura M. Bernhardt</i>	79
5	That’s Where We’re Living: Determinism and Free Will in “Unthought Known” <i>Enrico Terrone</i>	95
6	No Code Aesthetics <i>Alberto L. Siani</i>	109
7	Can Truth Be Found in the Wild? <i>Paolo Stellino</i>	123
8	“They Can Buy, But Can’t Put On My Clothes”: Pearl Jam, Grunge, and Subcultural Authenticity in a Postmodern Fashion Climate <i>Stephanie Kramer</i>	139
9	Pearl Jam’s Ghosts: The Ethical Claim Made From the Exiled Space(s) of Homelessness and War—An Aesthetic Response-Ability <i>Jacqueline Moulton</i>	165
10	Pearl Jam: Responsible Music or the Tragedy of Culture? <i>Cristina Parapar</i>	183
11	Pearl Jam/Nirvana: A Dialectical Vortex that Revolves Around the Void <i>Alessandro Alfieri</i>	205

12 The Tide on the Shell: Pearl Jam and the Aquatic Allegories of Existence <i>Andrea Schembari</i>	219
Notes on Contributors	239
Copyright Notices	243
Index	261

Foreword

Theodore Gracyk

The “summer of love” began on April 11, 1967, with the first appearance of poppies in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park.

Or was it, as some cultural historians contend, on April 14?

Actually, I’m making a joke there. Cultural phenomena are not born, nor do they die, on specific days, nor, for the most part, in specific years. They do not work that way. For the most part, their beginnings and endings are fuzzy phenomena.

The cultural phenomenon inextricably linked to Pearl Jam is grunge, which emerged in the late 1980s and then reached its cultural peak in 1990–92. After that, it became mainstream and its identity frayed. But just as the Grateful Dead remained relatively intact and musically vital for decades after the summer of love, so it is with Pearl Jam following the heyday of grunge. This collection of essays about Pearl Jam addresses them as a *living* concern. This is not a work of historical remembrance, as would be the case with a new book about Big Brother and the Holding Company, one of the few bands from the San Francisco scene of the 1960s still performing together. But in order to maintain that there’s a difference between such cases, Pearl Jam must be examined within a cultural context that is broader and more lasting than either grunge or post-punk alternative rock, which, I propose, is a case that’s easily made.

I don’t think I exaggerate too much if I say that Pearl Jam matters because it’s one of a handful of great rock bands active today. This is not to disparage the many rock musicians who still make great music alongside the diverse set of other genres that make up contemporary popular music. (No need for fans of The Strokes and Drive-By Truckers to send me angry emails for overlooking them!) I am, instead, making the point that much of what’s interesting in popular music in the early 2000s isn’t rock music.

The obvious question, then, is what I mean by rock music. I have no original proposal to make here, nor will I repeat the ideas that I’ve previously defended. Instead, I will borrow from a debate that was playing out in the rock press at the very time that Eddie Vedder was contributing his vocals to that famous demo tape made by Jeff Ament, Stone Gossard, and Mike McCready. Because,

ironically, Pearl Jam formed at just the moment when the American rock press plunged into a self-examination of the “rockism” of both their favored music and their critical standards for praising that music. The term and the debate had originated in the United Kingdom in the second half of the 1980s, but only gained international attention and wide American usage around 1990, when Robert Christgau wrote a long essay about rockism for the *Village Voice*. Soon after, Christgau included Pearl Jam in a list of alternative rock bands who were clearly rockist.

Using the broadest of strokes, we might represent rockism as a core set of values extracted from the most revered rock bands of the 1960s: (1) Good rock music is more than disposable ear candy. (2) It cannot be produced by musicians whose primary motivation is commercial success. (3) It reflects and expresses the progressive values of the musicians who make it. (4) It also reflects the values of its audience. (5) Through a process of mutual recognition between musicians and fans, it functions as a unifying, progressive public gesture. (6) There should be guitars.

For the rockist, the intertwined assumptions that rock musicians can only engage in personal disclosure while remaining indifferent to commercial success meant that the musicians wrote and performed their own music. Thus, the Beatles were a rock band, but the Monkees (who didn’t write their material and who sang over tracks they didn’t perform) were pure pop. And even if Janis Joplin wrote few of the songs that made her famous, it was clear enough that she was pouring out her personal torment in the face of systemic misogyny. In retrospect, rockism confirms Frank Zappa’s view that the Shaggs were one of the all-time great rock bands.

The point of identifying rockism was to identify, and then defend, an alternative set of values: those of the sheer joy of the dance track, the radio-friendly single, the gaudy video. In short, to open the door to the possibility that the Monkees merit just as much critical attention as the Beatles, and that the collected works of Metallica are no more interesting than the latest Taylor Swift single. To presume otherwise is “rockist” snobbery that sneers at most of the music that most people like (and, generally, under-values genres favored by everyone who isn’t an American white heterosexual male). In short, rockism values artists within popular music who behave like the great artists of aesthetic modernism, and the point of putting a name to it is to reassert the value of popularity and entertainment in popular music. The critical purpose of identifying rockism was to announce that rock bands and rock musicians were

no longer the central figures in popular music. Given the timing of events, the major grunge bands look like the last gasp of rockism.

Although the term wasn't in Kurt Cobain's vocabulary, he famously endorsed rockism when he posed for *Rolling Stone* magazine while wearing a shirt that read "Corporate Magazines Still Suck." But he also showed the narrow-mindedness that can come with rockism when he publicly dismissed Pearl Jam as "careerists."

Why do I review all of these points? Because philosophers have long discussed the core set of values that characterize rockism, but under another name: romanticism. Remove the assumption that we're talking about late twentieth-century popular music and what we have left is a recycling of nineteenth-century romanticism.

Although I was writing a little too early to use the term "rockism," I challenged its distortions of rock history in my first book, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (1996). I emphasized the harm done by bringing the clichés of romanticism into popular music criticism. Romanticism was an important cultural movement within nineteenth-century philosophy and art, but, just like rockism, it encouraged a narrowly elitist disdain for much of what was good and most popular in the art of that era.

At this point, I'll take a page from the work of a contemporary philosopher of art, Jenefer Robinson, who argues that romanticism's deficits as a *general* account of art shouldn't lead us to think that romanticism *never* functions to explain the importance of select artworks and artists. In other words, it is a mistake to over-generalize romanticism and to think it tells us something about all art, but it's also a mistake to think that it doesn't apply to any art.

And so it is with rockism as an updating of romanticism: rockism gets us the wrong results when applied to most popular music. Yet rockism was the guiding philosophy of grunge. We can then go one of two ways with this insight.

We can say that Cobain was right about Pearl Jam. If their supposed careerism was contrary to the grunge scene, that would just mean that after Pearl Jam arose from the ashes of Mother Love Bone, they left grunge behind.

However, that's not the path that I want to follow. As anyone who loves the band knows, their legal challenge of Ticketmaster for price-gouging fans was one of many public actions that mere "careerists" would never have undertaken. And "careerists" wouldn't have channeled a chunk of their profits into their own non-profit charity, the Vitalogy Foundation.

And now I want to go the final step, and say that although rockism shouldn't be applied to all of popular music, in Pearl Jam's case, it fits. Pearl Jam's greatness is best measured by the values of rockism. And they're one of the few remaining rock bands to proudly wave that flag.

Personally, one of my favorite episodes in Pearl Jam's career is their brief association with Neil Young, who is arguably the *other* great remaining embodiment of rockism. Ironically, Pearl Jam's contribution to Young's *Mirror Ball* yielded more interest in that album than any that Young had released in over twenty years, and it was one the last of Young's albums to go "gold" in sales. In hindsight, it was probably his last uniformly good album.

In the end, what do I mean by saying that we should value Pearl Jam, like Young, as exponents of rockism? We could do much worse than highlight dignity, commitment, and playing in the moment. I do not pull those three values out of thin air. When Eddie Vedder gave the 1995 induction speech for Neil Young's entry into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Vedder said that Pearl Jam learned a lot from Young. And then Vedder reeled off those three values: "dignity, commitment, and playing in the moment." Today, twenty-five years later, as I survey Pearl Jam's continuing body of work, I find that they provide a pretty good summary of that career.

Popular music is diverse. Rock's time at center stage has waned. But there are still plenty of music fans who respond to rock music, and to rockist values. For us, Pearl Jam is one of the last great rock bands.

Introduction

Stefano Marino and Andrea Schembari

Picture this frame, imagine this scene, a real *immagine in cornice* (to freely use the title of the live-concert film documenting Pearl Jam's 2006 Italian tour): it is June 24, 2017, and the two editors of the present book are at the Eddie Vedder concert in Firenze. While having a conversation and drinking a few beers in the middle of the crowd at about twenty meters from the main stage, waiting for the concert of our long-time favorite songwriter and singer to begin, we realize that, as academic scholars of philosophy and literature, we have published many articles and books on various topics but we have never written anything about the rock band that, especially in our youth, "changed" or even "saved" our life: Pearl Jam. In saying this, what we are referring to is something comparable to what has been famously claimed by (among others) Wim Wenders, Lou Reed, or Eddie Vedder himself about the way in which certain musical experiences can veritably change your life, and can especially support you and help you when you go through times of trouble. "My life was saved by rock 'n' roll," was famously stated by Wim Wenders.¹ In fact, as Wenders once recalled:

The next thing that arrived was rock 'n' roll when I was around 10 or 12 years old. I had not been interested in music so much before because the German songs my mother listened to on the radio didn't interest me at all. But when rock 'n' roll arrived I realized that this was the best music in the world . . . I bought all these records, but because my parents hated this rock 'n' roll I had to keep my records at a friend's place. But if you have to defend something that you like, it makes you to like it even more. And what I like most is that all these interests were really mine. My parents hated the comic strips, they hated rock 'n' roll, and

¹ Wim Wenders, quoted in *The Cinema of Wim Wenders: Image, Narrative, and the Postmodern Condition*, Roger F. Cook and Gerd Gemünden (eds) (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997), 219n.

when they found out what movies I was going to they also were against that. So everything I loved I had to defend.²

It is possible to compare these quotations by Wim Wenders to a legendary song by Lou Reed precisely entitled “Rock ’n’ Roll” (from the Velvet Underground’s 1970 album *Loaded*), which famously sings of a girl named Jenny whose life “was saved by rock ’n’ roll” because “[d]espite all the amputations / We could dance to a rock ’n’ roll station.” And, again, it is possible to compare these words by Wim Wenders and Lou Reed to Eddie Vedder’s emotional statements in his Foreword to the book *Join Together (With The Band)* about The Who:

I believe that music can save a life. And I have proof . . . For myself, every invite to play with The Who turned into some of life’s most galvanized moments. This goes back to what was written earlier about music not only having restorative properties but life-saving capabilities. For I am an example. I am proof. Somehow through my worst trials and tribulations, when there was no one to turn to and a troubled adolescence had me drowning alone at sea, their music came along like a Coast Guard ship with a searchlight beacon and pulled me out of numerous desperate predicaments that would have been otherwise unsurvivable. Their music and words infused strength enough in me to combat the complete powerlessness I was feeling at the time and set me on course towards a life beyond one’s imagination or dreams. Am I grateful? Yes. With every cell in my body and neuron and synapse firing in my brain? Affirmative. Every second of every day? Absolutely. With that being said, you can imagine it was overwhelming the first few times meeting with them. Yet something incredible happened. Due to their generosity, friendship, and acceptance, suddenly I grew up beyond the fucked up elements of the past and was empowered and able to move beyond it all. It was still part of the story, but no longer defined me.³

For us, the two editors of the present book, in our more or less troubled teens spent in a city like Siracusa, in Sicily, that was thousands miles away from Seattle where many exciting things were happening in the musical scene, it was especially Pearl Jam that displayed those “restorative properties” and “life-saving capabilities” that Vedder, in his personal experience, found in the music of The Who, and that many people probably found in Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Bruce Springsteen, Patti Smith, The Clash, R.E.M., U2, Nick Cave, Sonic Youth, Fugazi,

² Wim Wenders, “Everything I Loved I Had to Defend,” *The Talks*, January 29, 2014.

³ Eddie Vedder, “Foreword,” in William Snyder and Eddie Vedder, *Join Together (With the Band)* (Chicago: Press Syndication Group, 2018), 86.

Tori Amos, Radiohead, and still other artists and bands. In a sense, this is probably comparable to what Neil Young meant when he sang in “After the Gold Rush”: “There was a band playin’ in my head / And I felt like getting high”—clearly referring here to a concept of ‘getting high’ as broadly, plainly and, so to speak, soberly understood as indicating great passion, thrill, euphoria, exaltation, excitement, and enthusiasm. Although this may probably seem overemphatic to readers who are not familiar with this kind of experience, we must admit that such words as: “Restless soul / Enjoy your youth . . . / All that’s sacred comes from youth”;⁴ or: “Troubled souls unite / We got ourselves tonight . . . / We will find a way, we will find our place . . . / Delight in your youth”;⁵ or: “I listen for the voice inside my head . . . / Help me from myself”;⁶ or: “I’ll ride the wave / Where it takes me / I’ll hold the pain / Release me”;⁷ these words really had the power of a “profane revelation” and “redemption”⁸ for us and our friends in that far “small town” community of Pearl Jam fans in the mid-1990s.⁹ In the typical age of nonconformity and, often, of rebellion against all forms of authority, the powerful and protean sound of the band, and the peculiar timbre of Vedder’s voice, took over the voices of fathers, mothers, teachers. For many of us this meant channeling energies and hopes into music, writing, and every sort of artistic expression; or it even just stimulated the capacity of introspection, necessary to give shape and name to one’s personality. From a certain point of view, especially in some difficult periods of our youth, Pearl Jam somehow “saved” our lives.

So, let us return to the abovementioned picture, to our specific and unique *immagine in cornice*. As we said, we were at the Eddie Vedder concert in Firenze and we suddenly had this kind of “illumination,” as it were: that is, we looked at each other and realized that one fine day we would have had to plan and publish

⁴ Pearl Jam, “Not for You,” in *Vitalogy* (1994).

⁵ Pearl Jam, “Leash,” in *Vs.* (1993).

⁶ Pearl Jam, “State of Love and Trust,” in *Rearviewmirror: Greatest Hits 1991–2003* (2004).

⁷ Pearl Jam, “Release,” in *Ten* (1991).

⁸ On the philosophical concept of “profane redemption” applied to an interpretation of the experience of rock music (more specifically, Fugazi), see Colin J. Campbell’s essay “Carry My Body: ‘Profane Redemption’ and Fugazi,” in *Adorno and Popular Music: A Constellation of Perspectives*, Colin J. Campbell, Samir Gandesha, and Stefano Marino (eds) (Milano-Udine: Mimesis International, 2019), 105–22.

⁹ Luca Aiello, Antonio Bordone, Daniele Casciana, Emiliano Colomasi, Carmelo Copani, Luigi Di Pasquale, Fabio Farrugia, Piero Fillioley, Rosanna Garufi, Chris Iemulo, Gabriele Leonti, Alessandra Limer, Francesco Maione, Marco Midolo, Luisa Miano, Livia Mignosa, Ennio Muscolino, Alessia Navantieri, Valeria Nucifora, Andrea Romano, Bruno Scalia, Emanuele Siracusa, Gabriele Siracusa, Marco Venuti, Simone Venuti, etc.: Yes, we mean you!

a book on our favorite band, Pearl Jam. More precisely, as academic scholars working in the fields of philosophy and literature, and specifically interested in the various ways in which philosophical thinking can profitably intersect with popular culture (including rock music¹⁰), we instantly agreed that our book would have had to deal with the “philosophy of Pearl Jam.” As the refrain of “Even Flow” correctly and, so to speak, very philosophically claims, sometimes “[t]houghts arrive like butterflies,”¹¹ and that afternoon, a few hours before Eddie Vedder went on stage and enchanted the audience with (among other masterpieces) one of the most unforgettable and moving versions ever of “Black,” the “butterfly-thought” that arrived in our minds was the intuition about the book that we are happy to present now. It was in that precise moment that the very idea about *Pearl Jam and Philosophy* took shape in our minds, thanks to the inspiration favored by the indeed unique atmosphere of that outstanding concert (as massive and crowded as it was comforting and intimate), and it is a great pleasure for us to remember that moment now in introducing our newly published book to the readers.

Pearl Jam, finally inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in April 2017, have undoubtedly established themselves as one of the greatest rock bands of all time. They are the only “survivors” of the first and glorious wave of so-called grunge bands (after the tragic deaths of lead members of the other bands of that awesome period: Kurt Cobain of Nirvana, Layne Staley of Alice in Chains, Chris Cornell of Soundgarden). They have an outstanding discography that includes such now classic titles of rock music as *Ten* (1991), *Vs.* (1993), *Vitalogy* (1994), *No Code* (1996), *Yield* (1998), *Binaural* (2000), *Riot Act* (2002), *Pearl Jam* (2006), *Backspacer* (2009), *Lightning Bolt* (2013), and finally *Gigaton* (2020), plus hundreds of other songs published in collections, B-sides, live recordings, etc. Added to this are a few important side-projects of the band’s members, including Temple of the Dog, Mad Season, Three Fish, Brad, and most notably, Eddie Vedder’s solo career, including the original soundtrack for Sean Penn’s film *Into the Wild* (2007). They have a long-lasting and stable line-up that the community of Pearl Jam fans perceive as something resembling a kind of “family,” and they

¹⁰ On this topic, see for instance Theodore Gracyk’s important trilogy of philosophical books on the aesthetics of rock music: *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001), and *Listening to Popular Music: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Led Zeppelin* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

¹¹ Pearl Jam, “Even Flow,” in *Ten* (1991).

have played a now legendary series of world tours with very long and deeply emotional concerts whose track-lists ranged from early songs to recent hits and also included covers from Neil Young, The Who, John Lennon, Tom Petty, and many others. Beside the millions of records sold throughout the decades, one of the factors that have contributed to conferring on them a unique profile and status in the broad realm of contemporary rock music is their capacity to create a real and genuine sense of community with their fans, a genuine atmosphere of intersubjective recognition that one can immediately feel at their concerts and immediately associate with them whenever listening to their music. This sense of community, similar to ones surrounding artists like Bruce Springsteen or Neil Young, is rare in the rock and roll business.

With the present volume on the “philosophy of Pearl Jam,” published in 2021 on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of Pearl Jam’s legendary debut album *Ten*, it was our aim to collect contributions from academic scholars who shared with us a real interest in philosophy and literature, and at the same time a genuine passion for Pearl Jam. While there are of course many books on Pearl Jam, to our knowledge they are mostly biographies or historical reconstructions of the grunge era in general or collections of their lyrics (with or without comment and interpretation¹²): no book has been published yet which addresses Pearl Jam’s music, lyrics, social context, activities, and engagement from a philosophical point of view. As academic scholars and at the same time long-standing Pearl Jam fans, we believe that there is good reason for a band of this magnitude, longevity, and significance to be a case study within the expanding literature on philosophy and popular culture. Within academic writing, Pearl Jam are surprisingly under-represented, and with this volume we aim to realize a timely application of critical analysis to the music and lyrics of an iconic rock band worthy of the treatment that has already succeeded in relation to comparable artists such as Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, U2, Metallica, Radiohead, and many more. The general scope of the book is to investigate, interpret and decipher the philosophical contents and meanings (at various levels: existential, spiritual, ethical, political, purely aesthetic, etc.) that are present in the production

¹² See, for example, Ronen Givony, *Not For You: Pearl Jam and the Present Tense* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020); Jann Wenner (ed.), *Pearl Jam: The Ultimate Guide to Their Music & Legend* (New York: Rolling Stone, 2017); Thomas E. Harkins and Bernard M. Corbett, *Pearl Jam FAQ: All That’s Left to Know About Seattle’s Most Enduring Band* (Milwaukee: Backbeat Books, an imprint of Hal Leonard Corporation, 2016); Luca Villa and Daria Moretti, *Pearl Jam Evolution* (Tricase: Youcanprint, 2016); Simone Dotto, *Pearl Jam. Still Alive. Testi commentati* (Roma: Arcana, 2014); Kim Neely, *Five Against One: The Pearl Jam Story* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998).

of Pearl Jam, perhaps the greatest rock band of recent decades, celebrating thirty years of recording and live activity in 2021. From this point of view, the book aims to originally and uniquely unite a genuine passion and enthusiasm for Pearl Jam's music with a rigorous and in-depth capacity of philosophical and also literary analysis, thus proving to be potentially important for both Pearl Jam fans who are also interested in good books and new ideas and also for readers of philosophical books at all levels who are also interested in good music and contemporary popular culture.

This is the first book, to our knowledge, to investigate from a philosophical point of view the music, the life, and the activities of Pearl Jam, combining in a systematic and rigorous way historical reconstructions, original philosophical and also literary interpretations, and genuine passion for their music. While not all Pearl Jam songs can be considered strictly "philosophical" as far as the subjects and contents of the lyrics are concerned, many of them indeed can, inasmuch as they deal with important topics of various kind that have attracted the attention of Western and also non-Western philosophers for centuries, and inasmuch as they actually raise profound questions and then search for answers, although sometimes having to admit (in a very philosophical fashion, indeed): "Questions rise and answers fall, . . . / Insurmountable";¹³ or: "The questions linger overhead."¹⁴ The topics and keys of interpretation that readers of *Pearl Jam and Philosophy* will find in the contributions offered by Alessandro Alferi, Laura M. Bernhardt, Mihail-Valentin Cernea and Radu Uszkai, Theodore Gracyk, Stephanie Kramer, Sam Morris, Jacqueline Moulton, Cristina Parapar, Alberto L. Siani, Paolo Stellino, Enrico Terrone, and ourselves, include (but are not limited to): the answerable/unanswerable character of the fundamental human questions about meaning in life and history; the critique of existing society and of modernity; the sense of individuality and the search for authenticity; the sense of community and the importance of "being-with-others"; the nature of ethics and the importance of political commitment and engagement in society; the meaning and significance of love and friendship; resistance, resilience, and the struggle to resist to conformism and pressures; individuality, subjectivity, personal identity, and the question concerning free will; the existence or not of progress in human history; the mystery of death and the finiteness of the human

¹³ Pearl Jam, "Love Boat Captain," in *Riot Act* (2002).

¹⁴ Pearl Jam, "Thumbing My Way," in *Riot Act* (2002).

condition; spirituality and the human being's (often problematic) openness to the divine; the relationship with mass society, the culture industry, the star system, and fashion; the relation between Pearl Jam and other musicians and bands of the "grunge" movement or style, especially Nirvana.

Added to this, central issues in Pearl Jam songs and also in their choices and behavior towards the music industry also concern the condition of the artist in late capitalist society: the fight against censorship; the struggle to develop more democratic attitude and values; the adoption of a "straight edge" philosophy and lifestyle; and the attempt to be in the society and in the culture industry but without being passively subjugated to it. Finally, many of their extra-musical activities, such as their commitment to politics, ecology, education, feminism, and human rights are also worthy of being included in the list of the topics that deserve being paid attention to in the context of an inquiry into the "philosophy of Pearl Jam." In fact, these extra-musical parts of the life of the band have contributed in many ways and have played a huge role throughout the decades in defining the band's identity and the unique sense of community that, as noted above, is so strong and deeply rooted among Pearl Jam fans.

Finally, from a methodological point of view, we would like to explain to the readers of *Pearl Jam and Philosophy* that the aim of our essays is to offer different interpretations of what we may call the "philosophy of Pearl Jam" or, more precisely (and less emphatically), of some philosophical aspects and implications that are present in many of Pearl Jam's songs. In the contributions collected in the present book the authors have thus intentionally adopted an interpretive approach that, while it aims to be faithful to the lyrics of Pearl Jam songs, the "spirit" of their music, and the history of the band, nevertheless ventures an attempt at drawing explicit comparisons between rock songs and philosophical writings, sometimes deviating from the *mens auctoris*, i.e., the original meaning that the authors appear to have intended. Of course, this might raise some questions of literary hermeneutics and validity in interpretation, but it was not our intention, as authors of this book and philosophical interpreters of the songs of Pearl Jam, to specifically examine these problems here.¹⁵ So, our aim in the contributions collected in the present book is not that of presenting the contents of the songs of Pearl Jam, from *Ten* (1991) to *Gigaton* (2020), as if they formed a

¹⁵ See Maurizio Ferraris, *Storia dell'ermeneutica* (Milano: Bompiani, 1988), 361–87.

sort of complete philosophical system, which would be obviously silly and would easily fall prey to an objection of “overinterpretation.”¹⁶ Nevertheless, all authors have attempted to identify and bring to light a certain philosophical spirit that, in our view, is present in many Pearl Jam songs. In lieu of the search for systematic unity and absolute coherence, which would be out of place in the case of a philosophical interpretation of the lyrics of rock songs (not to mention the verses of a poem, or the figures of a novel), what we have tried to construct is rather something like a figure, in which certain concepts “enter ... into a constellation.”¹⁷ In doing this, some of the authors of *Pearl Jam and Philosophy* have been especially inspired by the conception of philosophical interpretation offered by Theodor W. Adorno, which relies, among other things, on the important role played by “exact fantasy” and which understands interpretation as the authentic methodology of philosophy, in contrast to “the idea of science [which] is research”: “[t]he point of interpretive philosophy,” as Adorno argues, “is to construct keys, before which reality springs open.”¹⁸

The lyrics of many of Pearl Jam songs are philosophically and also literarily rich, i.e., with profound concepts and meanings, rich in metaphors and in references to the things and events that can make a life meaningful or meaningless, worthy of being lived or not. With the present book it is thus our aim to bring together the contributions of some distinguished academic scholars able to cut in a unique way across different topics, contents, questions, and approaches, contributing to the idea that, on the one side, popular music can be (and indeed should be) a subject of great interest for philosophy today, while on the other side, philosophy can be (and indeed should be) of great interest for all listeners of popular music and for fans of single artists or bands. In fact, rigorous and at the same time original philosophical interpretations can shed light on aspects and dimensions of certain songs or certain live performances or certain music events that otherwise, i.e., without an accurate and adequate interpretation, would remain unintelligible or obscure even to the most passionate and careful “aficionados.”

* * *

¹⁶ See Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, “The Actuality of Philosophy,” *Telos* 31 (1977): 126, 130–1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 126, 130–1.

We would like to thank Leah and Rachel, our editors at Bloomsbury, for their patience and enthusiasm in bringing our idea to life, Alessandra Limer for her precious help in finding the right image for the book cover, and Karen Pals for her kind and generous assistance. We are also grateful to our group of authors, who honored us with their participation, professionalism, and competence. Stefano Marino would like to dedicate this book to his mom Enrica and his dad Giuseppe, who taught him to love music in his childhood, supported and encouraged him to play drums and form a rock band in his teens, and tolerated some of his excesses and “teenage angst” during his sometimes troubled youth. Andrea Schembari would like to dedicate the volume to his mother Pina (even though in 1996 she prevented him from leaving for Rome to attend what should have been his first Pearl Jam concert), and his father Paolo: their cheerful and delicate humming the songs of their youth at home still accompanies him at present, and it reminds him where his love for words in music comes from. Together, we would also like to thank all our dearest friends and colleagues scattered between Sicily, Bologna, and Szczecin, who enthusiastically encouraged, followed and helped us in the creation of the volume: their names cannot all appear here, but they are well established in our thoughts.

Bibliography

- Adorno, Theodor W. “The Actuality of Philosophy,” translated by Benjamin Snow. *Telos* 31 (1977): 120–33.
- Campbell, Colin J. “Carry My Body: ‘Profane Redemption’ and Fugazi.” In *Adorno and Popular Music: A Constellation of Perspectives*, edited by Colin J. Campbell, Samir Gandesha, and Stefano Marino, 105–22. Milano-Udine: Mimesis International, 2019.
- Cook, Roger F. and Gerd Gemünden (eds). *The Cinema of Wim Wenders: Image, Narrative, and the Postmodern Condition*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997.
- Dotto, Simone. *Pearl Jam. Still Alive. Testi commentati*. Roma: Arcana, 2014.
- Eco, Umberto. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, edited by Stefan Collini. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Ferraris, Maurizio. *Storia dell’ermeneutica*. Milano: Bompiani, 1988.
- Givony, Ronen. *Not For You: Pearl Jam and the Present Tense*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.
- Gracyk, Theodore. *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996.

- Gracyk, Theodore. *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001.
- Gracyk, Theodore. *Listening to Popular Music: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Led Zeppelin*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007.
- Harkins, Thomas E. and Bernard M. Corbett. *Pearl Jam FAQ: All That's Left to Know About Seattle's Most Enduring Band*. Milwaukee: Backbeat Books, an imprint of Hal Leonard Corporation, 2016.
- Neely, Kim. *Five Against One: The Pearl Jam Story*. New York: Penguin Books, 1998.
- Vedder, Eddie. "Foreword." In William Snyder and Eddie Vedder, *Join Together (With the Band)*, 86. Chicago: Press Syndication Group, 2018.
- Villa, Luca, and Daria Moretti. *Pearl Jam Evolution*. Tricase: Youcanprint, 2016.
- Wenders, Wim. "Everything I Loved I Had to Defend." *The Talks*, January 29, 2014. Available online: <http://the-talks.com/interview/wim-wenders> (accessed March 26, 2021).
- Wenner, Jann (ed.). *Pearl Jam: The Ultimate Guide to Their Music & Legend*. New York: Rolling Stone, 2017.

Sources

All lyrics of Pearl Jam and Eddie Vedder songs quoted in this book are based either on the versions available on the band's official website (<https://pearljam.com/music/songs>) or on album liner notes.

Pearl Jam

Studio Albums

- Ten* (Epic Records, 1991).
- VS.* (Epic Records, 1993).
- Vitalogy* (Epic Records, 1994).
- No Code* (Epic Records, 1996).
- Yield* (Epic Records, 1998).
- Binaural* (Epic Records, 2000).
- Riot Act* (Epic Records, 2002).
- Pearl Jam* (J Records, 2006).
- Backspacer* (Monkeywrench Records, 2009).
- Lightning Bolt* (Monkeywrench Records, 2013).
- Gigaton* (Monkeywrench Records, 2020).

Compilations

Lost Dogs (Epic Records, 2003).

Rearviewmirror (Greatest Hits 1991–2003) (Epic Records, 2004).

Pearl Jam Twenty (Columbia Records, 2011).

Eddie Vedder

Into the Wild (J Records, 2006).

Contingency, (In)significance, and the All-Encompassing Trip: Pearl Jam and the Question of the Meaning of Life

Stefano Marino

For Valeria, with love: for our Pearl Jam concert in Milano, June 22, 2000.

For Emi and Simo, with friendship: for the hundreds of times that we listened together to “State of Love and Trust.”

Introduction: Interpretations and constellations

As has already been explained in the final paragraphs of the Introduction to this book, the essays collected in the present volume—including this essay—aim to offer interpretations of what we may call the “philosophy of Pearl Jam.” And, as has already been said, a philosophical enterprise of this kind should not be understood as the search for systematic unity and absolute coherence in the lyrics of the songs of Pearl Jam from *Ten* to *Gigaton*, but rather as the attempt to construct something like a figure in which certain concepts enter into a *constellation* (following here some insights on philosophical interpretation provided by Theodor W. Adorno). In the specific case of the present contribution on the “philosophy of Pearl Jam,” the constellation that I will try to construct is formed by such concepts as contingency, (in)significance, the question of the meaning of life, and the idea of the all-encompassing. This conceptual constellation orbits around the question concerning questioning itself, and we will see that it ultimately leads in the direction of a way of thinking that promises a post-metaphysical rehabilitation of the dimension of time: what Eddie Vedder and Pearl Jam, according to my interpretation, have invoked in their music as the present tense.

The all-encompassing trip: Existential, historical, and metaphysical implications

“Are we getting something out of this all-encompassing trip?”¹ This is the looming question posed by Pearl Jam in “Present Tense,” perhaps the most explicitly philosophical song in a catalogue that is abundant with songs rich in philosophical questions. In fact, in a previous song, “Garden,” Pearl Jam had suggested precisely that their intention was not to question the meaning of human existence as such. My interpretation of the lines “I don’t question / Our existence / I just question / Our modern needs”² is that they limit themselves to questioning the needs and values of human beings who live in increasingly reified and commodified societies, ones that favor the adoption of an unnatural and artificial way of life: namely, in societies in which apparently (and needlessly) it has become harder to “find an approach and a way to live.”³

However, what apparently emerges from the third line of “Present Tense” is a broader and more ambitious proposition than a simple question concerning our modern needs. It is a more totalizing question (“I don’t know anything, I question everything,”⁴ as Pearl Jam also sing in a recent song) and, above all, it is a genuinely existential question, i.e., something that directly questions our existence and dares to pose the very question of the meaning of life. We could venture a philosophical comparison here: first, to relate the fundamental question of “Present Tense” to Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, with its radical way of formulating “the question of the meaning of being” by starting from the “guiding look at being [that] grows out of the average understanding of being in which we are always already involved and *which ultimately belongs to the essential constitution of Da-sein itself*.”⁵ And second, to connect the more limited question of “Garden” to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, with its less radical and more “urbanized” version of philosophical hermeneutics, one that shifts attention from the question of the meaning of being in all its vastness to the more limited question concerning the significance of the humanist

¹ Pearl Jam, “Present Tense,” in *No Code* (1996).

² Pearl Jam, “Garden,” in *Ten* (1991).

³ Pearl Jam, “Present Tense.”

⁴ Pearl Jam, “Superblood Wolfmoon,” in *Gigaton* (2020).

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996, §2), 3, 6.

tradition in the increasingly disenchanting techno-scientific civilization of the present.⁶

The question about getting something out of the all-encompassing trip of life is undoubtedly a very deep one, which explicitly addresses existential problems but which is also potentially rich in philosophical-historical or metaphysical implications. A lot depends, among other things, on the way in which one understands the concept of the all-encompassing trip. If we understand it as referring to the life of an individual, then it is easy to interpret the question as focused on whether or not our singular life, the individual life of each and every one of us, appears to have some meaning or not, i.e., appears as meaningful or meaningless to he/she who is living it. From this point of view, as I said, the question raised in “Present Tense” can be summarized and briefly defined as the question concerning the meaning of life. The question formulated in these very simple terms might perhaps fall prey to the objection of a certain naivety, but it is one that a rigorous philosopher like Theodor W. Adorno nevertheless recognized in the mid-1960s as one of those fundamental questions that lead human beings to philosophize, even in an age of disillusion and nihilism like ours: “[t]he metaphysical categories live on, secularized, in . . . the question of the meaning of life.”⁷

However, we can also understand the all-encompassing trip as metaphorically referring to the wholeness of human history from its inception to the present age, or even as referring to what we may call “the totality of existent things (*das Ganze des Seienden*).”⁸ After all, the encompassing (or the embracing: *das Umgreifende*) was precisely the concept coined by Karl Jaspers to designate reality as a whole in its fullness and richness, i.e., the ultimate experienceable horizon, which is surely hard to describe in its essence and to conceptualize—even to the extent of being ineffable and unspeakable—but which we nevertheless know as a real presence and by which we feel constantly surrounded.⁹ If so, then

⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London-New York: Continuum, 2004), 3–37. I borrow the concept of “urbanization,” as applied to the relationship between the philosophies of Heidegger and Gadamer, from Jürgen Habermas’ famous essay “Hans-Georg Gadamer: Urbanizing the Heideggerian Province” (in Habermas, *Philosophical-political Profiles* [Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983], 189–98). On these topics, I allow myself to remind the reader of my works *Gadamer and the Limits of the Modern Techno-scientific Civilization* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011) and *Aesthetics, Metaphysics, Language: Essays on Heidegger and Gadamer* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015).

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London-New York: Routledge, 2004), 376.

⁸ Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of the Later Writings* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 382.

⁹ See Karl Jaspers, *Von der Wahrheit* (München: Piper, 1947). On this topic, see Ludovica Neri’s recent book *Il problema della “logica filosofica” nel Nachlass di Karl Jaspers* (Milano-Udine: Mimesis, 2021).

it becomes clear that the question asked by Pearl Jam in “Present Tense” can be interpreted not only in an existential way, strictly focusing on the meaning of our individual lives, but also in a philosophical-historical way, or even in a metaphysical way: namely as an ambitious question, focused on whether human history in its entirety, or even being in its totality, has any meaning.

Are we learning something about this immense journey? What are the conditions and limits, and above all what is the meaning, of the life of human beings in this world, i.e., of our “being-in-the-world”? How did this all-encompassing trip start and where will it lead us? We are the “first mammal[s] to wear pants,” of course, but can we “do the evolution”?¹⁰ Or are *evolution* and *progress* only ideologies and illusions, and our lives (both as individuals and as humankind) directionless and meaningless? As critical philosophers of history like Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno suggest, we should probably be more careful and indeed suspicious than we usually are in conceiving of human history as automatically guided by the progress of rationality and the achievement of our goals. Perhaps we “only [see] the progress in mastering nature” and “not the retrogression of society”¹¹ that simultaneously occurs, and so, “[w]hen progress could be plausible / In reverse we curse ourselves / By thinking we’re infallible / We are tempting fate instead.”¹² If progress is not linear, straightforward, one-sided, and guaranteed, as we often like to think, but is instead uncertain and contradictory, then it makes sense to claim with Benjamin that “[t]here is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism”¹³ (an idea which can be profitably compared to some views on history offered by critical historians like Howard Zinn¹⁴). Pearl Jam’s lyrics, “[t]ell the captain / ‘This boat’s not safe / And we’re drowning.’ / Turns out / He’s the one making waves,”¹⁵ might be metaphorically compared to Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s incisive interpretation of Odysseus, the hero of Homer’s *Odyssey*, as the perfect personification of instrumental rationality. His behavior as captain of the ship

¹⁰ Pearl Jam, “Do the Evolution,” in *Yield* (1998). As is well-known, this song was influenced by the ideas presented in Daniel Quinn’s philosophical novel *Ishmael* (1992) (see Simone Dotto, *Pearl Jam. Still Alive. Testi commentati* [Roma: Arcana, 2014], 181–6). Eddie Vedder cited Quinn’s book as an influence on the lyrics of *Yield*, and Quinn, in turn, responded to the album’s significance in relation to the book on his website.

¹¹ Walter Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in *Selected Writings. Volume 4* (Cambridge, MA-London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 393.

¹² Pearl Jam, “Infallible,” in *Lightning Bolt* (2013).

¹³ Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” 392.

¹⁴ See Eddie Vedder’s note on the passing of Zinn published on the band’s official website.

¹⁵ Pearl Jam, “Green Disease,” in *Riot Act* (2002).

“in face of the Sirens” represents “a prescient allegory of the dialectic of enlightenment” in which reason, due to its dialectical and paradoxical nature, is “the vehicle of both progress and regression”¹⁶ at the same time.

Faced with the abovementioned existential, metaphysical, and *geschichtsphilosophisch* problems and doubts, it appears reasonable as well as honest to admit: “Got all these questions / Don’t know who I could even ask.”¹⁷ As is well-known, according to Immanuel Kant “[h]uman reason . . . is burdened with questions which it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason.”¹⁸ In Pearl Jam’s original treatment of this topic, it always feels like “a question is forming and the answers far,”¹⁹ so that, at the end of the day, “[q]uestions rise and answers fall, . . . insurmountable.”²⁰ For such finite, fallible, and imperfect creatures as we are, with our limited intellect and “[our] small self,”²¹ perhaps it is no great surprise to discover that “[t]he questions linger overhead.”²²

Questions rise, answers fall: The primacy of questioning

Whatever the precise interpretation of Vedder’s concept of the all-encompassing trip really is, what is of prime importance to this essay is the centrality of questioning that clearly emerges, not only from the abovementioned line of “Present Tense,” but also from the song as a whole and from many other songs by Pearl Jam. Precisely questioning can be considered as the very essence of philosophy, both from a purely theoretical and a strictly historical point of view, inasmuch as the origin of Western philosophy itself lies in the unprecedented inclination of the first Greek philosophers to raise questions. As noted by Karl Jaspers in a 1950 talk on the concept of the encompassing (which, again, may remind us of the all-encompassing trip sung by Pearl Jam): “Philosophy began with the question: What is?”²³ In a similar way, Ernst Cassirer noted that:

¹⁶ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2002), 27.

¹⁷ Pearl Jam, “I Got Id,” in *Merkin Ball* (1995).

¹⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, AVII), 99.

¹⁹ Pearl Jam, “Gone,” in *Pearl Jam* (2006).

²⁰ Pearl Jam, “Love Boat Captain,” in *Riot Act* (2002).

²¹ Pearl Jam, “Sometimes,” in *No Code* (1996).

²² Pearl Jam, “Thumbing My Way,” in *Riot Act* (2002).

²³ See Karl Jaspers’ 1950 talk on the encompassing (*das Umgreifende*), available on YouTube.

Aristotle called Socrates the discoverer of the concept, because he first recognized the relation between the particular and the general—which is expressed through the concept—as worthy of examination. In the *question* of the τί ἔστι, which he addressed to the concept, he saw the germ of a new *meaning* of the general *question* concerning being.²⁴

A very quick look at the observations on this topic offered by some leading figures in twentieth-century philosophy is instructive. For Hans-Georg Gadamer, for example, the hermeneutical experience, i.e., the experience of the simultaneous universality and finitude of the human understanding, and the “historically effected consciousness” that is especially disclosed by language, “implies the primacy of dialogue and the structure of question and answer.”²⁵ According to Gadamer, “there is in fact an infinite dialogue in questioning as well as answering, in whose space word and answer stand. Everything that is said stands in such space.”²⁶ In other words, everything that characterizes human thinking and language stands in the space disclosed by a *question* that searches for its answer(s). In a similar philosophical context (namely, that of a phenomenological-hermeneutical ontology) but more radically than Gadamer, Heidegger famously thought that in philosophy “everything is placed . . . in relation to *questioning*,” and he even interpreted the entire development of Western metaphysics in light of the distinction between two fundamental questions: “the basic question (*Grundfrage*),” i.e., “the question of being (*das Sein*) [which] is the question of the truth of being (*das Seyn*),” and “the guiding question (*Leitfrage*),” i.e., “the question of beings (*das Seiende*).”²⁷

Ludwig Wittgenstein, with his very different but no less rigorous philosophical style, stressed the central role of *questioning* in human life and especially in philosophy, arguing that “[t]he philosopher’s treatment of a question is like the treatment of an illness”²⁸ and that philosophy is typically “tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question” (so that, for him, a “real discovery” in philosophy

²⁴ Ernst Cassirer, *Kant’s Life and Thought* (Yale, NH: Yale University Press, 1981), 276 (my emphasis). Cassirer clearly refers here to Aristotle, *Metaph.* I 6, 987b 1–4; XIII 4, 1078b 18–31; XIII 9, 1086b 3–5 (see *The Complete Works of Aristotle. Vol. 2* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991], 13, 189, 202). I would like to thank Laura La Bella, a very expert scholar of Aristotle, for her help in finding the exact reference to these passages from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*.

²⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 363.

²⁶ Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 1976), 67.

²⁷ Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (Of the Event)* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012, §2), 8, 10.

²⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986, §255), 91.