

Lecture 1: Discourses of Music

In this first session we begin look at discourses that dominate popular music as a form of communication. These discourses shape and influence the way we think and talk about music and why we think our musical tastes and knowledge say something about ourselves. In other words the meaning of the music, and of the look of an artist, is not so much in the sounds and visuals themselves, but in discourses we have for understanding them. Simon Frith has said that ‘to understand cultural value judgements we must look at the social contexts in which they are made, at the social reasons why some aspects of a sound or spectacle are valued over others’ (p22). For Frith the meaning in music is simply something we put there, through our discourses.

Authentic versus non authentic music

The idea of authenticity has its origins partly in the Romantic tradition where artistic creativity comes from within the soul and is somehow connected to God. Writers such as Goehr (2007) show how this idea is connected to the emergence of the notion of individual works of art, of creativity being an individual process rather than something that emerges out of society, out of wider shared cultural practices. Authenticity is about something from the heart, about sincerity and the lack of artifice or culture. Authenticity is therefore in opposition to that which is artificial and manufactured.

In 17th century Europe it was thought that people of certain temperaments would be affected by different kinds of music (Cooke, 1998). Cooke cites a theorist from the time who writes: ‘martially inclined men are partial to trumpets and drums, and they reject all delicate and pure music’ (Kircher 1:544). The idea was that temperaments would respond naturally to particular musical characteristics. In this way music was seen to represent nature itself, into which human character was also tied.

By the 18th century, Cook shows, this idea that music represented nature was altered by the idea of ‘affects’. Here music, due to its connection to the soul, could convey feelings such as anger, love and pain. This was seen in opera. Music could speak of the torments and joys of the heart and soul in a way that words could not.

In the 19th century musicologists such as Schenker argued that music was some higher form of reality entering into our own, an idea that had been around since the time of Pythagoras who had hypothesised that the universe was organised around the same structures as found in music. The music we hear therefore is the sound of the force of the existence of the universe. Schenker thought music used genius composers as a kind of medium to communicate this higher reality with ordinary people. Music is therefore a window to a different world. Cooke (1998) says that during this period as science was replacing religion as the dominant belief system, music ‘provided an alternative route to spiritual consolation’ (p38). From this Cook argues lies the logical association with musicianship and ethical qualities, being true to oneself, being sincere – qualities we might group as part of authenticity. From this brief review of ideas about musical affect we can gain clues of the origins of the discourses we have so far been discussing. We talk about music in terms of the way it says something of our character. We feel that music comes from a realm other than culture, that it is associated with the soul, and that it is connected to nature.

Mind and Body Split

Frith (1996: 124) shows that this association has its origins in Europe and the US in the 19th century of seriousness with the mind and fun with the body. We must be still and silent during a classical concert or a jazz session as there is something intellectual going on. But at a rock concert such behaviour is seen as silly. Serious music needs to be contemplated carefully. But the same behaviour would be viewed as inappropriate, repressed or as missing the point as regards certain forms of pop music.

Frith (Ibid: 125) explains this as the difference between listening with the mind and listening with the body. This he explains through the Romantic dichotomy between feeling and reason. Feelings were to be expressed spiritually and mentally rather than physically. This contrast is derived from the Romantic opposition of nature and culture. For this reason pop music is often seen as simplistic and not requiring intellect. It is not listened to spiritually but physically. Of course this has meant that pop music has come to be seen as a way of casting off bourgeoisie inhibitions. And Frith suggest this sets up the idea of a lower culture of the body distinction which is unrespectable. So artists, simply through using certain sounds and visual references that connote this discourse, can indicate that they are of the body, the low brow and not of the bourgeoisie repressed social condition. Of course pop musicians can use this to indicate that they are

anti-respectable to give a sense of challenging social convention, when in fact they do nothing of the kind. Of course this is convenient for listeners who can align themselves alongside a spirit of anti-establishment simply by buying and enjoying a particular kind of music.

Tagg (1989) has argued that all of the features often ascribed to black music, i.e. African American music, can be shown to be characteristic of much music played by people around the world and through history. For example, the blue notes that give blues its sound can be found in most European folk music. Further he argues that what is generally referred to as European music in contrast to African American music is highly selective and elitist. Tagg concludes that there are no intrinsic musical styles that are essential to black music.

Negus (1996) has also argued that there are hundreds of European musical traditions much of which contains all the ingredients of black music – blue notes, syncopation and improvisation (p 104). He points out that these are the kinds of music that black people have been allowed, or encouraged to do, which may then have become what they do produce. He notes that artists such as Scott Joplin had their operas ignored while their ragtime celebrated. Also the technical aspects of what we think of as black music tend to be ignored. Kofsky (1970) points out, for example, the jazz of Charlie Parker was highly technical yes is associated with feeling. Much of John Coltrane's saxophone soloing is highly mathematical and of incredibly high technical rigour. Yet this is not talked about in this way.

One result of all this according to Gilroy (1993) is that Black people might use this kind of romantic reference to define themselves. The problem, he suggests, is when it is treated as essentialist, that black identity is treated as unchanging, monolithic, a kind of ethnic absolutism. What being black is can be constructed through these categories even though this lumps together massive racial and cultural variations.

How we talk about music

There is a reasonable argument that when we listen to music for leisure we do not attend to the same features and qualities as we do when we approach it for purposes of analysis. It is akin to analysing a fine painting in terms of the kinds of brushstrokes and use of perspective. This is not how we enjoy such works and not why they move us. But this view of listening suggests that there is a way to do it neutrally and completely unmotivated. Again here we see the influence of Romanticism where there is a kind of listening where we simply connect spiritually or bodily with the music. But how we talk about music is a valuable resource itself that gives away much of what we think music is and how it affects us. These kinds of meanings are also found communicated in the images, music and lyrics produced by bands and artists.

Frith (1996) gives much thought to what we actually think listening to music is since this is interconnected to what we think music is and how it affects us. For example, he looks at some of the ways music critics describe and evaluate music. Here is an example of how critics write in a BBC review of an album by Willie Nelson and Wynton Marsalis called *Two Men With The Blues*:

‘Nelson's vocals on Stardust are a touch brighter than Hoagy Carmichael may have intended but the effect is leavened by a smokey, gently twisting trumpet line full of yearning beauty courtesy of Marsalis. Another Nelson standard, Georgia On My Mind, has a sweet, subdued but compelling intimacy and could legitimately lay claim to the title of ultimate standout track on an album of standout tracks’ (www.bbc.co.uk/music/release/3brg/)

We have terms to describe the trumpet sound; ‘smokey’, ‘twisting’ and ‘yearning’. Frith says that such descriptions may indeed appear as elegant ways of describing the work of a musician. But in other ways he feels they say more about pop history and culture and what we have come to believe of music (p68). These are clues to what we think music is and how it should affect us.

‘ it is not possible to arrive at a satisfactory definition of music simply in terms of sound (...) because of the essential role that the listener, and more generally the environment in which the sound is heard, plays in the constitution of any event as a musical one’ (p11).

Cooke gives the example of John Cage's 4' 33'' for piano. This is an entirely silent piece. A pianist opens the keyboard and sits motionless for the duration of the piece. What happens is that people in the audience become hugely aware of the sounds around them. Cage's point was that anything can be heard as music.

Music and Subculture

At the end of the 1970s Dick Hebdige, in his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, discussed what he called 'style' in order to explain the way that subcultures combined elements to communicate a way of life. He gave the example of punk music that used visuals of, torn clothes, swastikas, spiky brightly-dyed hair and swearing to point to their dissatisfaction with society.

Hebdige thought that Punk was basically about challenging conventional codes in the mainstream culture done through appropriation of things from this culture where therefore young people were able to give new meanings to established artifacts. All this came from working class young men who, disillusioned with much in their lives found alternative ways to create meaning.

Clarke (1990) was critical of this view of an active subculture challenging a passive mainstream. In the case of Punk music, for example, many people who became punks were not part of any hardcore subcultures but simply had a particular haircut, wore a few of the clothes for a while, or liked some of the music.

Thornton (1995) thought it useful to think about such subculture using Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital. Here young people use cultural, or subcultural, capital as a way of distinguishing themselves from others. For young teenagers there might be important cultural capital in wearing a particular kind of clothing for a while, or being able to connote the values of being anti-mainstream. Roe (1990) sees this as a kind symbolic capital. Kids use music and clothes as markers of distinction and status. Of course this can involve an extremely conformist seeking of status and recognition, realised in the first place through acts of consumption. How can this be any challenge to the mainstream?

Laing (1985) was critical of the view that subcultures of this kind did ever really offer any kind of challenge. After all the kinds of punk bands discussed by Hebdige made a fortune in sales, becoming mainstream themselves.

Kruse (1993) suggests rather that we use distinctions like 'mainstream' and 'alternative music' in to differentiate ourselves from an imagined other. After all, she reminds us 'Senses of shared identity are alliances formed out of oppositional stances' (p34).

For Thornton (1995) the very the idea of a mainstream is itself problematic. It is often something proposed by people in order to authenticate their own likes and styles. It also helps to give a sense that subcultures are somehow actual challenges to an oppressive mainstream.

Negus (1996) makes the observation that much of what we think about as rebelliousness in pop music cultures is in fact pretty harmless.

The music industry versus creativity

Stemming from Adorno, commentators have talked about standardisation in the music industry challenging the very idea that such an art was independent of commerce. Like other goods, Adorno viewed, music was produced according to rationalised standardised procedures in order to maximise profits (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979). Later Chapple and Garofalo (1977), showed concern as regards the role of more contemporary massive music corporations who come to dominate what we get to hear. Writers like Harker (1980) and George (1988) would suggest that this means that artists, even if their music challenges capitalism or wider society, will become watered down. But other writers have pointed to a number of problems with these kinds of views. Its not so much that corporations have no effects at all on music but that this view also involves a romanticisation and simplification their relationship to creativity.

The idea of commercial activity sits in conflict with our idea of the creative artists who communicates something of the soul through their god-given raw talent. The big record companies are often thought to be in conflict with the idea of creativity. Art is about talent and expression which is seen to be corrupted by corporate control and manipulation. Even though we know that artists who make records do so as a way of making money, and that they most likely enjoy being very rich, this should be seen as a reward for talent and not as an end in itself. We also tend to resist the idea that creativity can be a large collective act.

There is a similar thing happening in music where it is not acceptable that a musician, or at least our experience of them, could be improved by the succession of music industry people, is not acceptable. It should be the artists who design their own sound, look at image. Musicians who we feel have become commercialised are thought to have sold out and lost their artistic integrity in order to sell records. But this will be judged through discourses of authenticity and not through any actual concrete facts.

Frith (1987) makes a more important point. He argues that what we know of as pop music, even that which we have thought of most creative, has come to exist not in spite of commerce but in harmony

with it. It was the industry, the commercialisation, that allowed pop to happen in the first place. Pop music as we know it is not something that is apart from the process of the commercialisation of music, of it becoming an industry. Rock and roll did not emerge from outside of the system of capitalist production but is a product of the fusing of creativity and commerce.

For the record corporations themselves a new sound, or creativity, is part of the way they can make money. On the one hand this important for what the public wants but also, as Negus has observed, while record companies must be profitable their acts are also assessed in terms of creativity by DJs, journalists, fans etc, which means that to some extent they must attend to these things. Of course this means that commercial decisions, which bands to promote, can be about a commercial/creative set of predictions meaning that at a certain time particular kinds of music might be preferred by record companies. But this might mean that at one time it is a new kind of sound that they are promoting. Negus (1996) says that it is important to view that what becomes commercially successful is not about the market deciding, yet nor is it a matter of the public getting what it wants (p50).

Activity

You should select four music reviews from the web or the press, of either a gig or a record. You should choose music from a number of different genres, such as 'soul', 'rap', 'boy band', 'jazz'. Compare the discourses of creativity and authenticity that are found in these reviews. What evidence is there of Romanticism, of the mind-body split, of authenticity or not, of how such music should be experienced.

Alternatively interview a number of people about music and what they like and dislike. Again what discourses do they use?

References:

- Clarke, G. (1990) *Defending Ski Jumpers: A critique of theories of youth subcultures*, in Frith, S. and A Goodwin (eds) *On record: Rock, pop and the written word*, London Routledge
- Thornton, S. (1995) *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*, Cambridge, Polity Press
- Negus, K. (1990) *Popular Music in Theory*, London, Polity Press
- Laing, D. (1985) *One Chord Wonders: power and meaning in punk rock*, Milton Keynes, OUP
- Chapple, S. and Garofalo, R (1977) *Rock n Roll is here to pay: the history and politics of the music industry*, Chicago, Nelson Hall
- George, N. (1988) *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, New York Pantheon
- Harker, D. (1980) *One for the money: politics and popular song*, London, Hutchinson
- Kruse, H. (1993) 'Subcultural Identity in alternative music culture' *Popular Music* 12
- Goehr, L. (1994) *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: an essay in the philosophy of music*, Oxford Uni Press
- Gilroy, P. (1994) *Small Acts: Thoughts on the Politics of Black Cultures*, Serpent's Tail