

Lecture 2: A Social Semiotic Theory of music

Commentaries on music are often made through vaguer adjectives (Barthes, 1977). A song or soundtrack might be described through adjectives such as ‘romantic’, ‘aggressive’ or ‘soulful’. But these terms point more to the *effect* of the music rather than to exactly what it is in the music that communicates these meanings. As analysts such vague terms are not satisfactory as they mean we will simply miss out on meanings that are created that can be drawn out by more systematic analysis. Just as linguistic texts can be critically analysed, in order to pinpoint the kinds of semiotic choices in language that realise particular discourses, so too can a more systematic analysis of music and sound reveal forms and structures that may have been missed by the more casual listener.

Apart from a handful of authors (Tagg, 1982; Middleton, 1996; Walser, 1993) little attention has been given to the ways that sounds themselves communicate meanings. While we can carry out analyses of lyrics to reveal how they communicate these never appear alone. These lyrics are realised through a melody and by a particular voice that will have particular qualities. They will also generally be accompanied by the sounds of instruments in a particular kind of arrangement. If we want to study how sounds communicate we must move beyond adjectives to systematically describe things like pitch ranges, choice of notes, instrumentation, articulation, arrangements and rhythms.

Tagg (1983) has described the way that in our culture we have come to make associations of particular musical patterns and sounds with emotions, attitudes, settings and events through their repetition in our lives and as they have become embedded in our shared cultural conventions. A composer can therefore rely on a certain combination of notes as being heard by listeners as ‘romantic’ or ‘scary’.

Tagg (1997) discussed the emergence of sounds and music as communicative acts in early human societies in terms of the way they could be used to express the attitudes and ideas associated with certain activities such as initiation rites, marriage ceremonies, harvests and the hunt. So analysis could compare the rhythmic intensity of the kinds of sounds used as members of a group prepare themselves for a hunt as when they wish to send a child to sleep. Tagg states:

Obviously, the pace required in conjunction with a hunt — intensity of heartbeat, speed of eye, of hands, arms, feet and breathing — will be far greater than that needed for singing a child to sleep (...) In the case of the hunt, quick, sudden movements enacted with the precision of split seconds are vital ingredients of the activity, but they would be detrimental when trying to send a child to sleep (1997:8)

Just as Tagg seeks to identify what more specific elements are present in kinds of musical experience: quickness and suddenness versus gentle and lingering, so the same kind of analysis can be carried out for all kind of communicative use of sound and music. But first we need to identify what exactly are the basic semiotic resources in music, in a social semiotic sense, we need to identify what are the basic building blocks available. To do this we take a Social Semiotic approach to sound and music.

Social semiotics, drawing from the work of Halliday (1978), assumes that all processes of communication are to some extent rule-based, although the nature of these rules can vary immensely. The idea that communication through language is rule based is already familiar. And it is readily accepted that humans can only communicate, in other words create and understand its meanings, through language once they have mastered its rules. However, social semiotics is different to other approaches to the study of the rules of grammar in that it is interested in language in use. It is interested in the communicative purposes to which people put language to use. This view of communication means that we consider language, or other forms of communication, not so much in the first place in terms of rules, but as a system of options from which people can choose for their practical purposes. This social semiotic approach draws in the first place on the work of the linguist Halliday (1978) and has been successfully applied to other modes of communication, to images in their classic text, (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 1996), multimedia (Baldry and Thibault, 2006), design (Kress, 2010), film (O'Halloran 2004) three dimensional objects (O'Toole, 1994; Bjorkland, 2009) and more broadly to sound and music (Van Leeuwen, 1999) and to popular music (Machin, 2010).

One important aspect of the social semiotic approach of Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996, 2001) of Van Leeuwen (1999) and Machin (2010) has been their search for the way that different semiotic systems fulfill Halliday's (2007: 183-4) three metafunctions, which he describes as being the basic fulfillments required of any semiotic mode. Here these same metafunctions provides a useful way to approach the communicative functions of sounds and sound qualities. These metafunctions are:

- Ideational metafunction: this describes the way any semiotic system can communicate about ideas, situations, events and identities. In language this might be a broader concept like 'freedom'. In visual communication an example would be where a color is able to be used to signify the ideas of a political party. In this lecture course we are interested in the way that sounds can communicate ideas like 'sacredness', 'open spaces', 'caution'.
- Interpersonal metafunction: this is the way that a semiotic system can communicate attitudes and evaluations. In language this is done through mood and modality. For example, we might show

high levels of certainty about an idea. In visual communication a bolder color can communicate something more bold and emotional whereas a diluted color something more muted, measured and less certain. In sound we can ask the way that melodies and pitch, for example, can communicate emotional openness or closedness.

- Textual metafunction: this is the order and cohesion in a semiotic system that allows ideas and attitudes to be realized. In language this would be the grammar, in visual communication this might be the way elements can be linked across a visual composition through colour. In music and sound we can look at the way that sound can be used in film to create coherence. We can look at the way that sounds, melodies and rhythms are brought together to create a meaningful whole.

In music and sound, therefore, it is also a useful step to consider the way the communicative use of sound also is able to fulfill the three language metafunctions. It is possible to ask what ways specific sounds and sound qualities can communicate ideas, attitudes and be used to create links and coherence across soundscapes?

Above we saw that Tagg argued that certain kinds of early human music will have taken its form based on the associations of the situations it was used to ritually represent. The sounds used for wedding music would draw upon different kinds of associations of ideas and attitudes than hunting music with its bursts of energy, anticipation and victory/failure. While the wedding music might have included smoother more consistent rhythms the hunt music might have included more abrupt, uneven and dramatic sounds. In both cases the rhythms created would have communicated the ideas and attitudes associated with the context. The role of a social semiotic approach is to pin down exactly what kinds of semiotic choices are drawn upon to communicate the ideas and attitudes associated with occasions such as hunts and weddings and likewise for the rhythms of popular music. This is what we do in the rest of the lectures in this course.

Social Semiotics versus musical analysis

It is important to note that the system of rules, the ‘code’ that forms the system of choices that are available to communicators through sound and music, is not the same thing as the musical theory that is learned by musicians themselves.. This can be illustrated through the following example of the changing vocal style on one particular pop song. If you listen to the Sex Pistols version of the song forever associated with Frank Sinatra, ‘My Way’ we hear two distinctive vocal styles (This can be heard

on Youtube). We consider these not in terms of their technical musical characteristics such as chords and harmony but what it is in these sounds that communicate particular ideas and attitudes. But nor do we consider these in terms of adjectives such as ‘relaxed’ versus ‘contemptuous’.

At the start of the track the vocalist the vocals are performed, parodying the style of Sinatra, with an open throat, vibrato and long sustain on the vowels. After the first verse, when the ‘punk’ version begins, the vocals change. The throat is closed and tense and articulation is very nasal. The final words in each line are cut off abruptly, with emphasized final consonants and the whole is performed at a much higher pitch. Clearly these two styles communicate different meanings that we might describe through the adjectives ‘relaxed’ and ‘musing’ versus ‘contemptuous’ and ‘aggressive’. In a social semiotic approach is interested precisely in the kinds of semiotic choices in use here that allow these meanings to be created.

In speech, according to linguists (Brasil et al 1980) lower pitches suggest relaxation and higher pitches to suggest energy or excitation. We can hear that the Sinatra style uses a lower pitch than the punk style. The open throat also can indicate a person is relaxed as opposed to the restricted throat which suggests they are tense. We can hear that the Sinatra style uses an open throat whereas the punk style uses a restricted throat. Nasality suggests complaining and contempt, which is used by the punk style. Lingering vowel pronunciation can suggest emotional openness and musing, whereas snappy vowels and abrupt phrasing suggests anger. This range of meaning potentials of speech can be harnessed by the vocalist to create meanings which have seen in the case of ‘My Way’. This will be explained much more carefully and slowly in later lectures. But here it is important to give a sense of what kind analysis this is as compared to a musicological analysis. A Social Semiotic analysis seeks to observe the repertoire of choices that are available to communicators in popular music. It sees these choices as having ‘meaning potential’ that can be realized in context through use and in combination with other semiotic resources. Drawing on the work of the linguist Halliday (1978) it is concerned with the way that semiotic resources can be used in the fashion we have seen on ‘My Way’ to communicate wider ideas, moods and attitudes and identities. When we hear a song like ‘My Way’ a listener hears not simply a song but a whole set of attitudes and ideas.

Music and creativity

We saw in the previous lecture that music is generally talked about through discourses of creativity that have their origins in the romantic tradition. This means that there can be resistance to analysing music in a social semiotic way. It is seen as somehow reducing music from the meanings that it has to us in our

lives. I personally have songs that I have been listening to since I was a student that still activate a whole set of personal memories and associations. And we should never forget this part of our experiences of music. But this is not to say that we can not still examine the way that talented musicians use semiotic resources to communicate, often in slightly new and creative ways. People generally accept that we can enhance our understanding and appreciation of poetry through its analysis, by exploring the techniques used by the author. This is not thought in anyway to invalidate the way that it works, the way that it affects us. A social semiotics of music and sound should be seen as a celebration of the successful use of semiotic resources. It should be one way, like the study of poetry, to open our ears to the wonderful profusion of semiotic production that is the thing we call music. Studying music and sound through social semiotics does not mean that we reduce making music to a process of rule following. When we speak we follow rules of grammar yet we do not feel oppressed by them when we sit chatting in a bar over a few beers. Nor does studying the rules of how we communicate through grammar make us feel like something is taken away from these friendly chats. This kind of study should be seen in the first place not as a study of the rule book but of what can be expressed through the semiotic value of sounds. Sound provides a rich potential for meaning making. It how this potential is harnessed that we are studying

Activity

Make a list of what kinds of sounds, volume, pitch and rhythms would be appropriate/inappropriate for the following social activities. Make a list of these and next to them say what ideas and attitudes these communicate. We will be breaking these down much more in later lectures. But here it is important to begin to think about these in terms of choices from an available repertoire of oppositions or continua.

Wedding

Funeral

Hunt

A first date

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