SEMIOTICS AS A METHOD FOR THE STUDY
OF POPULAR MUSIC

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Abstract – Résumé

This article examines the role of semiotics as a method for studying popular music. It is based on the premise that current studying of popular music lacks both musicological depth and a suitable analytical method. Semiotics, because of its historical development in two broad streams similar to etic and emic levels, offers a solution to these problems. Its further application to the area of style analysis related to coding is considered both for its relevance to popular music specifically, and music in general.

Since its entry into thinking about music as a form of analysis and criticism in the 1970s, semiotics has developed its own, albeit comparatively small, corpus of literature and thought, though as McClary and Walser (1990) state:

»There is still considerable resistance to semiotics in musicology.« (p. 283)

Another area they discuss, one they see as neglected, is that of popular music, on which they comment:

»traditional musicology refuse(s) to acknowledge popular culture.« (p. 280)

It would seem doubly perilous, given these opinions, to propose that the musicological study of popular music could be achieved through the medium of semiotics, however, some work has been undertaken in this area, even though, as Middleton (1990) points out:

»Unfortunately, the science of music semiology... has paid virtually no attention to popular music.« (p. 172)
His ‘unfortunately’ would imply a suitability of semiotics to the study of popular music, a suitability that an examination of the development of musical semiotics, and its scope of approaches to music, can demonstrate.

One of the problems of the study of popular music is the lack of an analytical method. That traditional analysis is unsuitable for this music is discussed by a number of writers besides McClary and Walser (TAYLOR, 1985; WICKE, 1982; RAČIĆ, 1981), while MIDDLETON (1990) demonstrates a variety of alternative approaches. The premiss behind this opinion is that popular music, being inherently different to art music, does not respond to a system of analysis based on functional tonality, in which melody and harmony are hierarchised at the expense of other parameters; rhythm and timbre, for example, might be more logically the focus of popular music analytically. To demonstrate how semiotics redresses this problem it is necessary to understand how it has developed over the past two decades.

The term ‘musical semiotics’ is used to refer to a number of activities, and while NATTIEZ (1989) states that:

>there can be as many musical semiologies as there are theories and theorists of semiology,« (p. 23)

these can be classified into two broad streams depending on their aims and approaches, and represented by groups of writers: (1) an analytical style (MOLINO, 1975/1990; RUWET, 1966/1987; NATTIEZ, 1975/1982, 1990; POPLE, 1983; YORK, 1985), and (2) an interpretative style (NOSKE, 1977; TARASTI, 1979, 1986; LEWIS, 1982).

**Analytical Semiotics**

This style is exemplified by Nattiez’ analysis of Varese’s *Density 21.5* (1975, revised and translated, 1982), which attempts to discover the innate musical workings of a piece of music, thus to arrive at a statement of the meaning of a piece of music as music. This is attempted through structuralist processes of segmentation of material, tabulation, and interpretation of data. This process occurs at what is called the ‘neutral level’, one of the three levels at which, in this style of musical semiotics, a work is seen to exist, one which is divorced from the composer’s intent (the poietic level) and that of the work’s reception (the esthesic level). At the neutral level a work is seen as immanent, capable of expressing its own system. This bears striking similarity to the definition of absolute music put forward by DAHLHAUS (1989) as music that ‘represents itself’ (p. 7), and explained by him (1982) as:

>»The idea prevailing almost undisputed in recent decades, that a work of art must be understood on its own terms and judged according to its own inner measure, which it shares with no other work.« (p. 90)

Compare this to NATTIEZ’ (1990) definition of the semiotic neutral level:
This is a level of analysis at which one does not decide a priori whether the results generated by a specific analytical proceeding are relevant from the esthetic or poietic point of view.« (p. 13)

In principle, this is in line with the view of music that sees it as expressing itself.

**Interpretative Semiotics**

Interpretative musical semiotics focuses on linking musical events to extra-musical concepts. Noske’s tracing of melodic and rhythmic motives in the operas of Mozart and Verdi, and their alignment to dramatic ideas, in this way their interpretation as dramaturgical devices, is an example of this style. In it the components of the model central to the presence of basic semiosis, the signifier and the signified, are equated with a musical event and what it represents, and music is seen as a system symbolic of something else. This is a referentialist view of music.

**Semiotics and Popular Music**

The existence of both an analytical and an interpretative style of musical semiotics provides a reason for the viability of semiotics as a way of studying popular music. The Nattiez/analytic style, because it is not based on hierarchised traditional analysis, allows analysis to be adapted to the prominent features of any style, in the case of popular music rhythm, timbre, repetition, etc, not only providing a necessary analysis model, but one that can be adapted to the music under examination through its ability to focus on the prominent parameter/s of the music. Because this concentrates on the music for itself and not on pre-ordained genres and styles, it provides what the study of popular music has always lacked, the possibility of proper musical analysis. This has been a concern of writers for some time. FRITH, for example, discussing one form of popular music, stated in 1978 that:

»Rock, despite the millions of words devoted to it, is seldom subject to musical analysis.« (p. 176)

This method of analysis can be used to define the semiotic code that works in popular music.

ECO (1979) defines the link between a signifier and its signified, the ‘something’ that gives meaning to semiosis, as a code (pp. 3—8, passim), and considers the definition of such codes a major part of his semiotic theory (see ECO, 1979, Chapter 2). It would not be wrong to suggest that what gives meaning to a musical event (seen as a signifier) and its signified (either musical or extra-musical meaning) is the context in which the event takes place, and in popular music context can be equated with sub-style. That sub-styles of popular music exist can be shown by comparative analysis of examples of hip-hop, juju,
Motown, Soul, reggae, pink, or heavy metal, to list only a few. It is the existence of sub-styles that the neutral level analysis can be used to formulate, and it is these sub-styles, through their use of specific musical events, such as rhythmic cells, harmonic motives, types of bass lines, musical processes, or specific timbres, which in turn give meaning to the events. A popular sub-style is to be seen as a code, giving sense to the relationship between a musical event and its significance. The definition of sub-styles as codes is only the beginning of an area of popular music requiring research: the way in which style evolves, is conventionalised, and, bearing in mind popular music's self-reflexivity, how these sub-styles interact and influence each other. The role of semiotics, in this area, has extended beyond our original analytical and interpretative acts to consideration of how sub-styles (seen as semiotic codes) develop and influence each other, and has moved beyond consideration of the definition of semiotic occurrence to the study of the processes of musical significance.

While the Nattiez style yields analytical data about how a piece of popular music works as a piece of music and how it can be used to extrapolate characteristics of a sub-style, the Noske/interpretative style can be used to study the received meaning of popular music. This is a broad area covering, among others, historical, sociological, and political considerations, and is based on the assumption expressed by MIDDLETON (1990) that:

»At the level of popular assumption, the belief that music produces sense, or conveys meanings, is unquestioned.« (p. 172)

It provides the basis for STREET's (1986) and DENSELOW's (1989) work, both of which discuss the political meaning of popular music, and for TROITSKY's (1987) examination of rock music in Russia. It is also included in WILLI's (1978) study of the lifestyles of London bike boys and hippies in the 1970s, and HALL and JEFFERSON's (eds, 1975) study of youth culture in post-war Britain. The underlying idea in all of these is that popular music acts as a meaning-laden tool, often with an antiauthoritarian implication.

In this style of semiotics, pieces of music are seen as representing sub-styles, and these in turn are seen as signifying lifestyles, and then beliefs, in a series of overlapping denotations and connotations common to semiotic reduction. This interpretation of music is shown in the following way:

\[
\text{music} \quad \text{denotes} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{style} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{connotes} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{sub-culture} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{denotes} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{lifestyle} \\
\downarrow \\
\text{connotes} \quad \rightarrow \quad \text{beliefs}
\]

in which music is traced through a number of dependent interpretations to represent only one of an infinite set of meanings that can be given to a piece of music.
This particular set of denotations and connotations depends on the relevant sub-style being identified and recognised, thus is culture-specific, or an emic view of popular music. In contrast, the neutral analysis of popular music is an etic study. That consideration of both the emic and the etic is made in the study of music as a whole is an accepted fact, MEYER (1956, p. viii ff), for example, discusses music as consisting of both its abstract theory and its historical and sociological applications, and translated into etic and emic levels, the analytical and interpretative styles of musical semiotics become a possible model for the study of popular music.

Conclusion

The study of popular music currently suffers from the lack of musical analysis, and a method to carry it out. Semiotics, through its development as two broad streams covering an analytical and an interpretative approach, and providing a means to examine music both etically and emically, can be both a method and a model to solve these problems. While analysis and interpretation could be seen as a primary application of semiotics to popular music, a secondary level develops from Eco's theories relating to codes, in which the link between a musical event and its significance is examined. This may prove to be the more important aspect of musical semiotics in that it questions how signification takes place, providing information on popular music specifically, and music in general.

REFERENCES


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Sažetak

SEMIOTIKA KAO METODA ZA PROUČAVANJE POPULARNE GLAZBE