

Cognitive Poetics in the analysis of Popular Music: A new approach to song lyrics?

Yngvar B. Steinholt

Bergen University

yngvar.steinholt@uib.no

-And how did you find yourself this morning?

-Well, I just pulled back the sheets and there I was!

The Bonzo Dog Doo Dah Band

1. Literature studies in popular music research

Having observed the variation in academic disciplines and theoretic approaches to popular music studies represented at this and past IASPM conferences, it is becoming increasingly difficult to imagine that forty years ago, studies of contemporary popular music entered Academia through departments of *literature*. There is little point in disregarding pioneering works that helped open a new field for academic study by imposing on them in retrospect the multidisciplinary standards of today. Yet, it is tempting to ask how popular music studies could possibly get off to a more reductionist start. Pointing the barrel back towards ourselves, it seems appropriate to ask how this initial problem of reduction is reflected in our present works and approaches. Despite the canonical status interdisciplinary approaches to popular music have been given within our organisation on the theoretical level, the ‘original sin’ of leaving the music out is still tolerated to a surprisingly high degree on the practical level.

When it comes to the part of literature studies in this multidisciplinary mosaic, its status has diminished considerably since the pioneering years. We should no doubt be grateful for that. During the postmodern wave of rock studies in the late 1980s to early 1990s, however, soberly noting that words were only *part* of a song’s message was no longer enough. Put to its extreme, the new refrain was that words were there not to *mean* anything, but to mean *anything at all*. Popular music was reduced again, this time to a brainless backdrop for youth rites and mating rituals. Consequently, any literary (or musical) analysis of pop songs became irrelevant, passé and worth little more than a passing smirk from the enlightened postmodernist. This attitude has certainly not helped researchers with a background in studies of literature define their niche in

interdisciplinary popular music studies. On the other hand, the discipline itself has stubbornly continued reeling out works (predominantly masters theses) that show alarmingly little progress when compared to vintage Dylan studies. For those who insist that literature studies belong among the disciplines involved in popular music studies, and that it has a significant piece to offer in the research of this complex field, such isolation is no solution. It is time to ignore the raised eyebrows and ‘why-are-you-still-here’ looks that tend to follow when one’s institutional background is revealed. After all, there is little evidence to suggest that the words of songs are better left to be semi-considered by musicologists, anthropologists, or sociologists. The crucial question is how a literary analysis of song lyrics can be embedded in the musical, performative and social contexts of popular music. In the 1990s the cognitive turn in psychology and linguistics started to spread into the study of literature. The concept of cognitive poetics might yield a perspective and an apparatus that can help us develop the part of literature studies in interdisciplinary approaches to popular music.

Thus, my purpose with this paper is, without delving into hardcore theory, to invite to some reflection on how the role of literature studies in popular music analysis - and its interaction with the other involved disciplines - may benefit from a cognitive turn. In the following I shall first lead you to a brief definition of cognitive poetics. Then, I shall give a short account of the song analyses of my previous study, which ‘after the fact’ pointed me in this direction. Finally I will suggest a few examples of how cognitive poetics may help improve the analysis of popular music.

2. A detour to a definition

As a manner of introduction I invite you to listen to the first attached sound file, Track 1: Butthole Surfers: *Some dispute over T-shirt sales*. While listening, why not try to consider how you would quote and describe this song in an academic article for a prestigious journal of cultural studies?

Admittedly, not all popular songs utilise performative and non-verbal modes of expression to the extent demonstrated in *Some dispute*. Still, all songs *do* utilise to *some* extent the signifying potential inherent in vocal delivery. All singers use their voices as musical and rhetoric instruments and this affects the way we interpret the messages they convey. Moreover, the vast majority of rock songs entail a staging of one or several characters that inhabit the song. *Some dispute over T-shirt sales* does so quite explicitly.

So how do we ‘dance about this architecture’? No matter how imaginative our transcriptions, our attempt to quote this lyric in writing would be hopelessly inadequate. The same goes for the vast majority of song lyric quotations in works of popular music studies. And still we cling to this practice. We present, analyse, and draw conclusions about songs on the basis of their lyrics as if words on a paper were their primary medium. We use fragments of song lyrics to support our theories and arguments about the worldviews and political orientations of musical communities. However, when we fail to acknowledge that song lyrics are not only words, but also musical sounds produced by living bodies, we become scholars of a paradoxical popular music studies *without music*. The point has been made before, but we need to keep asking:

-What justifies our ignorance of the human body in music?

-How can we remain in contact with the human body when we transform songs to ink and paper for our analysis?

-Are there ways to investigate how the human body is embedded in the song on the performative level as well as on the perceptual?

During the 1990s cognitive poetics sailed up as the next big thing in literary studies. It is now commonly held as an important corrective and supplement to existing approaches to literary analysis. Cognitive poetics is founded on the basis of cognitive linguistics and cognitive psychology. According to the British theorist Peter Stockwell, the basic premise of these disciplines is that they - to a much greater extent than previous approaches - bind all forms of conscious expression and perception in our biological circumstances. In other words: we think, say things and perceive things in the forms we do because we are all human-sized containers of

air and liquid, bipeds with our main receptors at the top of our bodies. This implies that our minds are embodied both literally and figuratively. Thus, one of the most fundamental impacts of the cognitive perspective is its challenge of the philosophical distinction between body and mind.

In popular music studies, this distinction is reflected in an implicit assumption that the music speaks to the listener's body, whereas the lyrics speak to the listener's mind. This hard-dying assumption has enabled us to either over-emphasise or ignore song lyrics the way we have during the past few decades. Following a cognitive model of understanding, the lyrics are an integral part of the musical experience, and they enhance the possibilities for the listener to identify with the song. As listeners we identify with texts (musical and lyrical) by imagining bodies that inhabit them. A text might be abstract, it does not necessarily construct any explicit body or character as such. The fact that the sounds and words of a text originate in other human beings is sufficient for us to experience the implicit body in that text. In short, not only do we identify with lyrics as if they were bodies not unlike our own; in order to negotiate meaning in a text we also project certain sides of ourselves onto an 'outer' body, which we are prepared to send into negotiations with the imagined body in the text.

Let us begin with a simple example involving only a written poem and its reader: In order to open herself to the poem, the reader will activate certain sides of her personality and experience. She constructs a default reading body which she is prepared to bring into negotiation with the poem. More or less spectacularly, the default reading body enters in a dialogue with the imagined body in the poem. As a result, the reader is invited to develop her reading body, bring in new experiences, activate new thoughts and emotions to bring into the dialogue. Thus, if the poem is able to engage the reader, it can bring forth new insights and experiences through its encounter with the reading body. Now, of course, several bodies, or sketches of bodies can reside within the same poem. The imagined voice or voices of a poem can be more or less present. The possibilities of variation are virtually infinite, but in principle the poem always houses at least one implicit body with which we can identify.

Now we can make the situation more complex by letting someone read the poem aloud to one listener. In addition to the default reading body of the listener and the body (or bodies) that reside in the poem we now have the default reading body of the reader to deal with. The latter is also a performing body, and the performance of the poem involves a process of interpretation in itself. Add more listeners to this poetry reading, and the reading bodies of the audience members will start influencing each other as individual reactions are considered by other listeners, potentially resulting in the formation of a collective reading body which adds to, rather than replaces the individual reading bodies. Is this becoming more than a handful already? Just wait until we make our poetry reader sing rather than read, give her the backing of a fully electrified rock band, sound- and lighting engineers, style-specific stage outfits and a ten-album recording history!

If we allow this ensuing mass of bodies to roughly represent the field of popular music studies, the primary object of study for the science of literature can center on the body or bodies which reside in the lyrics. This body does not exist in isolation from any of the other bodies involved. It becomes meaningful through its interrelationship with these bodies: imagined, projected and physical. The task of literature science in popular music studies, then, must be to shed light on the interrelationships between the body constructed in the lyrics and its surrounding environment.

3. An arrival to the realms of cognitive poetics

My interest in cognitive poetics emerged from my doctoral thesis, entitled *Rock in the Reservation: Songs from the Leningrad Rock Club 1981-86*. In retrospect, I have become aware of some distinct cognitive traits in my own approach. I suspect these traits to be suitable to demonstrate some of the potential for cognitive poetics in popular music studies. This goes for song analysis in particular, but also for our general treatment of songs and their lyrics.

Among the challenges I had to face in my thesis was a dominant set of ideas within the Leningrad rock environment. Critics, fans and musicians shared notions that clearly reflected a fundamental dichotomy between body/music on the one hand and mind/lyrics on the other:

Pop (Soviet estrada)

Rock

Inauthenticity

Authenticity

<i>Dance</i>	<i>Literature</i>
<i>Cliches</i>	<i>Poetry</i>
<i>Female singers</i>	<i>Male singer-songwriters</i>
<i>Love songs</i>	<i>Existential questions</i>
<i>Moscow</i>	<i>Leningrad</i>
<i>Commercial</i>	<i>Intellectual</i>
<i>Entertainment</i>	<i>Art</i>
<i>Mass culture</i>	<i>High culture</i>
<i>Body</i>	<i>Mind</i>

Another cornerstone idea that sprang out of this dichotomy was that, compared to Anglo-american rock, Russian rock was regarded as poetically superior, but musically inferior. The ‘russianness’ of Russian rock thus became limited to lyrics, closely related to the Russian literary tradition, whereas the music was ‘borrowed from the west’. On the one hand, my research had to respect that these opinions were fundamental in the self image of the Leningrad rockers. On the other hand, non-Russian friends who listened to the bands I was studying claimed that the music sounded Russian to them. I had already decided to analyse four songs by rock club bands and include them as sources of information for my study. So, I decided to take the analyses further to see if I could challenge the local view of a musical ‘westernness’ combined with lyrical ‘russianness’.

My method of analysis was based on a small-scale version of Philip Tagg’s qualitative approach. I provided thirteen non-Russian speakers with recordings of the four songs. They were asked to describe the songs (sound, instrumentation, production) and account for their immediate notions of mood and meaning in the tracks (PMFA ParaMusical Field of Association). They were asked to consider ‘what person in what state of mind would use the kind of voice that the singer uses’. And, finally, they were asked to mention songs and artists they associated to when listening to each of the Russian tracks (IOCM: Inter-Objective Comparison Material). In other words, I was offered insight into thirteen different reading bodies negotiating meaning from the same song.

Not unexpectedly, the singing voice became responsible for a large and significant part of the information I gathered from my little panel of informants. For this paper I have limited my examples to the part of the analysis that dealt with the vocals, the lyrics, and their interrelationship. On the basis of respondent descriptions of the vocals and of the comparison material they suggested, I began investigating the stylistic context of the vocal performance.

-Was the mode of singing related to - or determined by - a specific musical style?

-Did the vocals, the various parts of the accompaniment, the general sound picture, and mix refer to the same style?

-If the song corresponded to an established rock style, would style conventions affect the song's message or choice of subject?

Moving on to the lyrics:

-Did they correspond to the musical style?

-Were they influenced by any particular style conventions in their mode of expression and their thematics?

Starting from the comparison material suggested by my informants (and with some valuable help from the IASPM mailing list), I began looking for rock songs about similar subjects. This LCM (Lyrical Comparison Material) of songs about the same topics, helped me consider:

- 1) How established stylistic contexts in the global rock tradition influenced the Russian words.*
- 2) Local differences and peculiarities in the treatment of common rock motifs.*
- 3) How the Russian language and performative context affected motif, message and sound.*

For illustration please listen to the attached fragment of *Poslednii geroi* ('Last hero') by the band Kino attached as Track 2 (translated lyrics below) and the selection of its IOCMs and LCMs included in Track 3. *Poslednii geroi* was written and recorded in Leningrad in 1984. My full analysis included twenty-nine IOCMs and LCMs.

Last Hero

The night is short, the goal far away
 At night you often feel like a drink
 You go out to the kitchen, but the water's bitter,
 You can't sleep here, you can't live here

Good morning, Last Hero!
 Good morning to you and to all of your kind!
 Good morning, Last Hero!
 Greetings, Last Hero!

You wished to be alone but the urge quickly passed
 You wished to be alone but you couldn't face it
 Your burden is light but your arm's getting numb
 And you meet dawn over a game of 'fool'

Good morning, Last Hero!
 Good morning to you and all of your kind!
 Good morning, Last Hero!
 Greetings, Last Hero!

In the morning you opt for a fast getaway
 Telephone call's like a 'Forward!' command
 You go somewhere you don't wanna go to
 You go there to find no-one's waiting for you

Good morning, Last Hero!
 Good morning to you and to all of your kind!
 Good morning, Last Hero!
 Greetings, Last Hero!

The song lyrics construct an explicit body, a character, yet a second body implicitly resides in the lyrics, which presents that character to the listener. This second, 'invisible' body constructs the image of the song's main character by the use of a self-inclusive 'you'. This leaves the listener little choice but to identify with the main character. Thematically '*Last hero*' stands in a context of rock songs about boredom and alienation. Stylistically it has strong references to 'new pop'. New pop shares with punk, new wave and post-punk a preference for topics such as idleness, decay, and loneliness. In addition it often expresses fear of a de-humanised machine society.

In a cognitive approach, the song cannot be studied as merely the vocal message of the singer, musically mediated by a band. Since the vast majority of rock songs are not merely narratives, but character songs, the body in the lyrics is frequently constructed as a character that is in turn staged by the performer. The mood and message of the song is mediated through this imagined character. Consequently, listener perception is based on an identification not only with an imagined body in the song, but with a fully staged fictitious character - an explicit image of a human being.

By investigating the character of Viktor Tsui's '*Last hero*' - and by comparing him to other bored and alienated song characters from Lou Reeds junkie waiting for his man, via Iggy Pop's chairman of the bored, to Ian Curtis' pack of disillusioned young men - I was able to identify special Russian traits in the character of the last hero. This led me to further investigations of the interplay between external and local impulses in the Russian song. '*Last hero*' introduces a common rock scenario to a late Soviet context. Its 'russianness' can be measured by investigating how the character and his surroundings are embedded in late Soviet reality. The song thus represents both a rock view on Russian reality, and a Russian view on rock. To complete the analytic circle: these views were also reflected in the music.

This already demonstrates a substantial progression from the initial concept of a 'western' music combined with 'Russian' words. By turning attention towards the character *in* the song, it is possible to come closer to bridging the artificial gap between music and lyrics, between body and mind.

So?

A cognitive approach to popular music and its lyrics can help us reach a higher level of quality and ethics in quoting, describing, and analysing songs and their messages. It reminds us:

-That song lyrics are an integrated part of a musical performance;

-that the message of a song is partly determined by performance;

-that music and lyrics combined speak to both body and brain simultaneously;

-that our perception of songs is governed by our identification with the imagined characters that inhabit them.

There appears to be a lot to gain from turning to cognitive poetics for new resources and concepts when analysing songs and their lyrics. In this manner, the responsibilities of literature studies in popular music analysis can be re-defined. By concentrating not only on rhetorical and poetic structures in the lyrics, but on how these construct human-like images with which we may identify, and which interact with other images in the creation of meaning, it can bring results which are more immediately relevant for the other disciplines involved in popular music studies. Cognitive poetics has to the best of my knowledge not yet been applied to the analysis of song lyrics on a larger scale. Yet, it might well expand and improve existing approaches to popular music and lyrics both within and beyond discipline of literature.

Suggested reading

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