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An Interrogative Hermeneutics of Popular Song

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Abstract

This article presents a methodology for the analytically-enriched discussion of meaning in recorded popular song. It argues for a middle way between assumptions of universal and entirely relativist meaning, based fundamentally on Gibson's ecological psychology. It begins from the position that a listener encounters not a recording as communicable object, but a persona instantiated by a recording. Focus on the persona necessitates discussion of the personic environment constituted by the remainder of the musical fabric, and leads to a formulation of authenticity which acknowledges the weight put on this quality by many audiences. The paper then explores embodied meaning as a way of approaching the way that music feels, again acknowledging audience concern, and closes with a focus on the ecological position. Each of these stages in the argument is provided with a variety of illustrations.

Keywords: Ecological perception, embodied meaning, persona, environment, authenticity

Una hermenéutica interrogativa de la canción popular

Resumen

Este artículo presenta una metodología para el enriquecimiento analítico de la discusión sobre el significado en la canción pop grabada. Se argumenta, fundamentalmente a partir de la psicología ecológica de Gibson, a favor de un camino intermedio entre los supuestos universalistas y el significado exclusivamente relativista. Se parte de la posición de que un oyente no se encuentra con una grabación en tanto objeto comunicable, sino con una persona representada por una grabación –*persona instantiated*. La focalización en la persona requiere una discusión sobre el ambiente "persónico" –*personic environment*– constituido por el resto del tejido musical –*musical fabric*– y conduce a una consideración de la autenticidad que reconoce el peso que muchas audiencias le otorgan a esta cualidad. Este artículo, entonces, explora el significado corporizado –*embodied meaning*– como una forma de acercarse a la manera en que la música es sentida, teniendo en cuenta lo que a la audiencia le interesa, y concluye focalizando la perspectiva ecológica. Todas las etapas de la argumentación están provistas con diversos ejemplos.

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Uma hermenêutica interrogativa da canção popular

Resumo

Este artigo apresenta uma metodologia para o enriquecimento analítico da discussão sobre significado no quadro da canção popular gravada. Defende a adopção de um meio-termo entre os pressupostos de significado universal e os de carácter totalmente relativista, com base, fundamentalmente, na psicologia ecológica de Gibson. Parte da asunção segundo a qual um ouvinte não se encontra com uma gravação enquanto um objecto comunicavel mas com uma pessoa moldada por uma gravação –*persona instaciated*. O enfoque na pessoa requer uma discussão sobre o ambiente persónico –*personic environment*– constituído pelo restante tecido musical e conduz à formulação de autenticidade reconhecendo o peso que muitas audiências atribuem a esta qualidade. Este artigo explora ainda o significado incorporado –*embodied meaning*– como um meio para abordar o modo como a música é sentida, sempre de acordo com a audiência, e finaliza focalizando a perspectiva ecológica. Cada uma das etapas do argumento é fundamentada com vários exemplos.

Palavras-chave: percepción ecológica, significado incorporado, pessoa, ambiente, autenticidade

Introduction

Even a cursory glance at internet sites devoted to popular song will present the browser with the realisation that ordinary listeners care about the meanings of favourite songs. This is not to say that such meanings are necessarily clarified by the postings that fans make, but they are certainly addressed. It is barely necessary to argue, then, that the meanings of popular song are worthy of academic attention. What does require argument is how to address them.

The study of the meanings of popular song from the late twentieth century is heir to two very different traditions. Where nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship addressed the music of the European classical tradition in terms of meaning, it did so under the sway of the authority of the author, i.e. the composer. Thus, it was taken as axiomatic that the works of this tradition were means of expression on the part of the composer, that the composer encoded meanings which were usually, in Mendelssohn's felicitous formulation, too precise for words. Thus the importance of competence in listening practices within the tradition and, in part, the elitism which divided those listeners who understood the meanings of the great works, from those who did not, or apparently could not. Such meanings are taken to be embedded, somehow, in the artwork, or at least in the tradition of performance within which that artwork lies. Although those who work in the field which has developed as Popular Musicology may recognise the distinctiveness of the repertory with which they work, a great deal of North American scholarship, at least, demonstrates important continuities with this tradition of enquiry, particularly in terms of the domains into which the music is segmented (normally harmony, rhythm and melody dominate), and the ways continuities are effected (principally through voice-leading and metre).

The rise of the teenager as social role in Europe and North America in the wake of World War II was the proximate cause of the development of the study of working-class youth culture in Anglophone sociology, and a strong contributor to the birth of cultural studies. The dominant perspective of this early work was of popular youth culture as a mode of resistance to established cultural values. This discourse of resistance remains strong in what has come to be known as Popular Music Studies, even as the variety of musics addressed has multiplied. A resistance to the power of established values to determine the meanings of cultural products and processes carries the implication that such power is abrogated not, as Adorno once feared, by mass culture, but by the subcultural groupings which adhered around marginal styles (rock'n'roll, beat, punk) and thence, as more recent scholarship has argued, by cultural scenes in which music no longer dominates the expressive landscape. Key to this position is that the meaning of the song is not determined by any collection of individuals on the production side of the process, but is the preserve of its users, and is therefore, effectively, to be determined only in use.

Neither of these theoretical positions, the generally modernist, fixed (that meaning is embedded in the artwork) or the generally postmodernist, relativistic (that it is determined by the use of the artwork) is maintained strictly today, but both can be found held up as ideals. For political reasons, neither seems to be satisfactory. For the specialist (critic, musicologist, performer) to declare privileged access to the composer's (or, for popular song, performer's)

subconscious[1] is perhaps no less arrogant than for the academic (sociologist, cultural theorist) to lay claim to the special ability to decode a subcultural use of music and thus explain, for its users, its meaning. Charting a way between these twin poles is thus an urgent enterprise and, as so often in such cases, the answer lies in a reframing of the basic question. Thus, rather than ask how to address "what" a particular song may mean, this paper asks how to address "how" it may mean.

The methodology I explore here has three main thrusts. The first focuses on the persona constructed by the recording of a singer, situated within the recording's musical environment. The second offers an alternative perspective on the hoary question of identifying authenticity in a recording. The third explores the methodology's theoretical underpinning, in embodied cognition and ecological perception, most particularly as formulated by Mark Johnson and Eric Clarke, respectively. This thrust may be seen as an explicit refusal of the basic assumption of the arbitrariness of meaning institutionalized by most schools of semiotics. The methodology has two proximate causes. The first originated in my undergraduate studies, with their strange combination of structural and descriptive analysis, wherein I found myself developing a series of questions to ask of any new piece I encountered, to overcome the assumption that it was all, really, only a matter of harmony. What this inchoate approach recognises is the discovery aspect of analysis, the recognition that what a piece of music carries is not self-evident, but needs to be determined by each listener as a listener. The second developed from a research council grant in the mid 2000s which endeavoured to provide a way of talking about the least understood aspect of any music listening experience, that of the apparent spatial location of sound sources. Rather than continue to outline the development of the methodology, I shall offer instead a structural exposition, illustrated and argued as necessary.

Persona and personic environment

For most of the twentieth century, and beyond, a larger listening public has been reached by song in some recorded medium (whether that be radio, or directly from vinyl or compact disc, or more latterly through digital files) than through live performance. And, although there is a large market for those who want to watch their music, the dominant means of consumption remains audio only. Through this medium, a listener principally encounters a combination of words and music, a combination which creates, however imperfectly, a notional persona situated within an environment. This, it seems to me, is the encounter we make as listeners. The key question, then, becomes "to whom am I listening?" A first move is to distinguish this "who", the recording's *persona*, from both the real life *performer* of a track, and the *protagonist* who may act within it. While many fans yearn to identify the *persona* and the *performer* as one and the same (thereby giving rise to the *authenticity* which underpins so much popular music discourse), there is no necessary relationship between them -a best first assumption is always to conceive of the *persona* as a fiction.

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[1] Even as mediated by the music, for such access is not direct and the music has to be interpreted to yield such meaning.

As an audio experience, this persona is created from three features: the lyric; its manner of articulation; and its shaping melody. Thus, when Jose Feliciano sang the Doors' "Light my fire", we hear a persona (who I will identify as *Jose*) bemoaning a faltering affair. We hear a comfortable register voice (which struggles with deeper pitches in the refrain) and a strange combination of held notes ("you knooooow that…", "if I was to saaaaay…"), which lead him to be rhythmically late on downbeats, and to rush notes in order to "catch up". This combination perhaps hints at the energy he is attempting to inject into the relationship, energy which comes to fruition at the track's end ("light my fire, light my fire, light *my* fire", all in quick succession). But the melodic compass seems compressed (C down to A with a prominent bass F sharp or, in the final verse, G to E to C sharp), the tritone compass failing to extend to a more comfortable (and normative) perfect fifth. This uneasiness is congruent to the way *Jose* expresses his baulked desire. The track also exemplifies the most fundamental of *narrative norms* in contemporary popular song. *Jose* sings to his lover in a realistic (if poeticised) manner, duplicating the experience of thousands of contemporary men, and is clearly personally involved in the situation he is describing. The time is the present (of the song), it describes a momentary sensation (a faltering in the relationship) and we are left to guess whether or not she succeeds in, or chooses to engage in, "lighting his fire". This narrative norm, then, has five components: a realistic (as opposed to fantastical) persona; an everyday (as opposed to a heightened, or rare, or imaginary) situation; an involved (as opposed to a distanced, or objectified) stance presented by the persona; situation in the persona's present (rather than her/his past or future, real or imagined); and an exploration of the moment (rather than the tracing of a history)[2].

The persona always appears, however, within an environment which results from three factors: the textural matters normally considered under the heading "accompaniment"; the harmonic setting, including the modal/tonal vocabulary; and the formal setting or narrative structure, i.e. the order in which its events take place, and the patterns of repetition within this order. Because of its manifestation in sound, we might properly identify this as the *personic* environment. In this track, the personic environment identifies various features. The opening guitar, with harmony in rhythmic unison, and that telling approach to the third beat (see ex.1) identifies, for this non-specialist listener, a stereotypical 1960s Latin feel.

Example 1
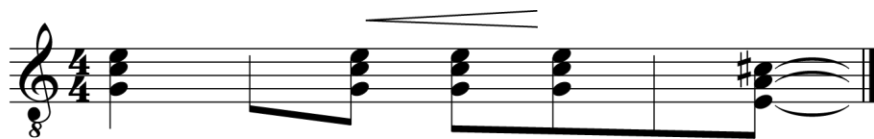
In the first verse, the guitar (despite being unelectrified) is foregrounded against the electric bass and drum kit and, although regularly syncopated, nonetheless provides a secure metrical basis against which Feliciano's voice presents a rather freer rhythm. In the second and

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[2] Keith Negus (2012) has developed useful work on this temporal aspect.

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subsequent verses, this guitar dominates over the orchestral string line, while the chorus' flute interjections both add rhythmic arabesques between Feliciano's phrases and, as his voice descends registrally, provides balance by bringing into play an upper register. The foregroundedness of the guitar during the solo allows us to hear this as an extension of *Jose*'s persona and, in its playful extemporisation over the unfamiliar chord sequence it emphasises the track's lack of narrative process, its kaleidoscopic reiteration of its central conceit which nonetheless finds resolution in the chorus. The ambiguity here is poignant. Harmonically, a dorian i-vi becomes reinterpreted as a mixolydian v-iii, leading to the chorus' ionian IV-V-I, while the final verse's melody also resolves (see ex.2), the G downwards and the C# upwards. The narrative, of course, fails to resolve, leading to a potential reading of the personic environment as symbolising *Jose*'s desire for a particular type of closure.

Example 2

Although this may be an unfamiliar way to approach the focus of a listening experience, the constituents of the music under discussion (pitches, rhythms, lyrics) are themselves familiar. However, in order to fully experience the environment within which *Jose* exists, we need to take account of the spatial organisation of the sound-sources we hear. Again, this aspect is uniformly present, even in pre-stereo recordings, as Peter Doyle insists (2005). Since the late 1960s, it has become an identifiable aspect of all the recorded music we hear, even though it is transparent to almost all critical writing (Moore and Dockwray 2008). Perhaps the best way to begin to characterise this aspect is by way of *proxemics*, a concept originally developed by Edward T. Hall to allow formal discussion of interpersonal encounters in anthropological contexts. Reformulated for recordings, we focus on the relationship between the persona and ourselves, individually, as listeners. Thus the key factors in characterising the apparent distance between the persona and the listener (which Hall divided into four zones: intimate, personal, social and public) are: the apparent loudness of the persona's voice; the degree of audibility of articulatory noises; the degree of force involved in the projection of the voice; and the degree of intervention between persona and listener by other sound-sources (Moore, Schmidt and Dockwray 2009). On the track "Road to somewhere", Alison Goldfrapp plays with the listener's sense of location. Two mixing principles dominate the track, principles I shall term those of *balance* and *foregrounding*. These principles it holds in common with the vast majority of other tracks released in the past forty years or so. In terms of balance, whatever happens on the left side of the stereo spectrum is balanced by equivalent events on the right. Thus, the foregrounded plucked guitar to the extreme left (entering the texture at 29") is, eventually, balanced by a second guitar (entering for the second verse, at 1'29"), while the impressive upward glissandi (which first appear at 1'10") appear simultaneously at mid left and mid right. In some genres, it might appear that such an acoustic guitar was played by the persona (that is the case for the

Feliciano track discussed above) but that is not the case here, since *Alison* (i.e. Alison Goldfrapp's persona) herself appears in the centre of the stereo field, and also foregrounded. Indeed, the quality of her delivery appears to place her in the intimate zone. I say "appears" because, although we can hear articulatory noises when they arise within her sung phrases (the intake of breath at 1'53", for instance), we cannot hear the breath she takes before singing a phrase. The engineer's intervention may cause an attentive listener to question her intimacy. And, moreover, when she reaches the chorus (at 2'09", for instance), not only does she remain foregrounded, but she has a doppelganger, slightly to her right, slightly behind her, and slightly above her. We are very familiar with such doubling in recorded media (and it does not cause us a problem, either, in many visual genres) even though its very fictionality is apparent[3]. On this track, her environment cocoons her: guitars and some other effects to either side, but equally in the foreground, with drums, strings, and other sound sources relatively central and only just behind her. Indeed, the claustrophobic effect of such production can appear to make *Alison*'s persona retreat to a personal space, an interpretation reinforced by the absence of those articulatory sounds of her vocal production which we do not hear.

Chris Martin's persona in the Coldplay track "*Viva la vida*" presents himself rather differently. The opening synthesised strings are presented with powerful attacks but no attendant noise, immediately suggesting the occupation of a social rather than personal space. *Chris* occupies an area in front of these strings, and the rather dead kick drum is presumably also in the foreground due to its lack of resonance. From 28", enveloping sounds encroach on this space, preparatory to a shift to a properly articulated string counter-melody, in front of the string hook which does not mask it. At 1'09" we move to the first chorus and, for the first time, the full potential of the soundbox appears, as a rather explosive bass drum/cymbal combination which results in a new string chord dies slowly, suggestive of a large resonant space. Immediately, *Chris* seems to be occupying a magnified stage (suitable to his conceit of world-ruling). By this point, most of the key textural elements are in play. At 2'06", the honky-tonk piano entry, although rather to the right of the mix (and therefore not to be associated with the *Chris* persona) is rather far forward, again contributing to a recession of the persona. At around 3', introducing the song's extended playout, we hear *Chris* reaching for a high register wordless hook, clearly receded to a social space, made plain by the contrast with his return to the words of the chorus (at 3'14"). While the self-centredness of the lyrics may make it hard to identify with the *Chris* persona, such identification is also easy to resist because of the space in which he operates. We are presumably to regard ourselves, as listeners, as taken into the confidence of his confessional protagonist, and yet in its broadcast nature, the confession lacks the intimacy which alone would guarantee its integrity.

The interrogative approach

With experience, the interpretive claims I am making of these three tracks are yielded by

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[3] An explanation for this phenomenon can be found in the concept of *conceptual blending*, and aspect of what I indentify here as embodied cognition. See Fauconnier and Turner (2002), and Moore (2012: 256-8).

simply listening to them, by the simple interaction of experiencing ears and a wealth of prior listening to relate to. Developing such a position can be made easier by conscious attention to the types of questions which may be raised towards that listening experience. I have found that the best starting place is not the making of some sort of rudimentary transcription, but observation of the operation of nine discreet domains, which work in groups of three. Thus: what functional layers are employed in the instrumentation; how are they distributed in the soundbox; what timbres dominate and to what extent are they manipulated? Then: what formal elements does the track have; how are these marked metrically and hypermetrically; what modes and harmonic patterns are employed, and of what kind? Finally: what sorts of vocal production are employed; how do these relate to the track's melodies; what do the lyrics tell us? Of course, until we observe the interaction of these elements, we cannot approach what the track means for us, but we can hardly *observe* the interaction of things we have not become aware of, and that process of becoming aware is the key function of asking these questions.

Subsequently, there are a host of questions I have found useful, and which derive from the substance of this paper. With these, one can begin anywhere, of course, although "to whom am I listening?" may well be the most economical place. So, what questions might we ask here? What interpersonal space is occupied? Is this space appropriate to the persona being presented? For instance, how would we respond were *Jose* to bellow at (many of) us from a social space, or were *Chris* to whisper his lyric in our ear? On the way, of course, we will find it necessary to ask other questions. Is the harmonic process principally looped or discursive? Does the harmony cadence, and is this matched by any melodic cadence? Does the groove change? Is syncopation uniformly applied, used for emphasis, used to identify a parent style? What sort of focus is implied by the lyrics which appear at the melodic apex, or on stressed beats? Does the vocal delivery make any attempt to emphasise these points, and with what consequence? These and similar questions can be asked no matter the style or genre of the track to which we listen and, while they may not all yield answers of interest, some of them surely will.

One of the most effective strategies a track may utilise is to do what a listener does not expect. Indeed, striking a balance between what is comfortable and what is just a little unusual is a key aesthetic aim of much popular song. Of course, it is not possible to determine in advance what any particular listener will find unexpected, although when musicians are working towards a defined style/genre/market mix, reasonable assumptions can be made. From the analytical standpoint, what is key here is to distinguish what is normative from what is not. This is why style analysis is so important. So much music analysis has tended to view the individual piece as somehow autonomous. What such analysis usually ignores is that the expectations of relationships between elements of music, which it elucidates, are not universal, but are relevant only to a particular style (and, even, to the way that a particular listener construes that style, expert or not). Foregrounding that realisation not only means it is possible to be clearer about what is not normative, and hence carries an affective charge, but is also humbling in that it helps us realise that other styles, "foreign" styles perhaps, are not necessarily "simplistic" (or even "needlessly complex"), but just different, whether or not different affects are generated.

Authenticity and intertextuality

As I suggested above, the experience many listeners have of music (and this issue is necessarily related to the question of taste, which I shall otherwise ignore) makes it necessary for them to efface the distinction between *persona* and *performer*. In other words, a dominant aesthetic position is to be able to claim that the expression embodied in the performance, in the recorded track, is an integral part of the identity, as a real-life being, of the singer whose words may form the starting-point for the listener's construction of the persona. This understanding of the term *authenticity* gives the lie, I believe, to those consistent claims that authenticity is no longer a relevant issue in popular music aesthetics, either because postmodernity renders the issue of personal integrity unattainable, or because the ideological divide between pop and rock musics has been dismantled. Indeed, such claims founder, it seems to me, on a general lack of analysis of the claim to authenticity, a lack which results in the assumption of a monolithic authenticity, and on the further assumption that such claims can be asserted as matters of objective reality. On the contrary, I argue that claims to authenticity are made discursively, and are matters to be fought for from within ideological positions. They are thus ascribed, not inscribed. I have been working for some time with a tripartite analysis of authenticity which, rather than asking whether or not an utterance is rightly described as authentic, asks instead who it is that the utterance authenticates. Asked in this way, there are three possible avenues of authentication. A recording can be heard as authenticating some aspect of the life experience of part or all of an audience, of affirming their self-understanding. I call this second-person authenticity, wherein a performance succeeds in conveying to that audience that their experience is recognised, is validated by that performance which accurately captures what it is like to live their life (in one or more aspects). Thus, when Paul Weller identifies with some aggressive disdain the capacities of the "thousand men in uniforms", in the Jam's "In the city", we can guess how a British urban 1977 audience could find their oppressive experience validated. We might, however, want to question whether that particular audience would equally have self-identified with the "kids" who, as Weller conclusively if clumsily (for this is 1977, not 1967) has it, "know where it's at". A recording can also be heard as authenticating some aspect of the life experience of its author, of communicating her/his self-understanding. I call this first-person authenticity, wherein a performance succeeds in conveying to an audience the (possibly illusory) sense that they are gaining first-hand access to a part of the life-story of that performer. Thus, notwithstanding the fact that the individual who takes the stage-name Elton John was not responsible for the words of his song "Candle in the wind", it is at least plausible for an audience to want to hear the song as expressing the sadness and touch of incomprehension ("I was just a kid") Reg Dwight may actually have experienced when contemplating first the fragile existence and untimely death of Marilyn Monroe, and subsequently that of Diana, Princess of Wales, even though by this latter time he was far from being "a kid". It is surely because this expressed emotion is experienced as "real" rather than "forced" that listeners are enabled to annex it as their own (in a way which would not be possible were it deemed merely expedient). Finally, a recording can additionally be heard as authenticating some aspect of the life experience of an absent other, or others. This individual might be the song's originator, or might be an earlier

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proponent of the style or genre within which a performance is categorised. This, I think, is an effective way to hear Imelda May's "Too sad to cry". Although her style, particularly on the parent album (it's title song, perhaps), is rooted in rock-n-roll-era swing[4], this track bypasses both eras, linking back to a Dixieland funeral march together with a beautifully-realised lead cornet line. In demonstrating a high level of competence in bringing that earlier means of expression to life, May and her band demonstrate their authentic place within that prior tradition, thereby authenticating that way of doing things as still having relevance at the time of her subsequent performance. Note, with each of these examples, that I make no claim that they *are*, somehow, *authentic*, but that each demonstrates *authenticity* in its capacity to be read, understood, conceived as authenticating one or more others.

This final example demonstrates the overlap between this concept and what might, in some contexts, be regarded as its opposite, i.e. intertextuality. If authenticity were simply demonstrated by producing what is unique to you, then inauthenticity is surely demonstrated by producing what you have taken from others. I don't accept this characterisation, for reasons given above, but it is a frequently encountered construct. Thus, intertextuality is taken as signalling a postmodern attitude, as a means of deconstructing the integrity of the individual performer. Not only does this fail to recognise that intertextuality is endemic to all music production (in that every example of music, from all times and places, refers to other examples of music, to greater or lesser degree), but it also overlooks the specific practice wherein signifying on another music is, within African American cultures at least, a means of honouring (and thus authenticating) that other music (and its performer(s)) at the same moment as going beyond it, and them. Some commentators have tried to generalise this concept, and argue that signifying can be found in other cultural contexts. Whether or not this is a reasonable move to make, the simple opposition between authenticity and intertextuality, as founded in the apparent opposition between original invention and pastiche, does not work.

Intertextuality appears at a variety of different levels within the popular song. The sharing of lines of lyric or of melodic patterns is frequently obvious. Indeed, legal ownership is normally felt to reside in these domains, in recognition of the assumed labour involved in their invention. The sharing of harmonic patterns can be equally obvious, but here there can be no legal claim to ownership. Let me return for a moment to Coldplay's "*Viva la vida*". It is founded on a four-chord loop, a structural device which has come to dominate recent Anglophone popular song, both "mainstream" and "indie". The voice-leading has a certain subtlety, emanating from the pedal A flat at the top of the texture. Bearing in mind the strongly directed bass line, we might hear this as IV^9-V^4-I-vi. Combinations of I, IV, V and iv are of course ubiquitous – in this order, the harmonies of the track recall such things as David Bowie's "Ashes to ashes" or Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Have you ever seen the rain". It is also reminiscent of the bridge to Paul McCartney's "Lady Madonna" and the hook to George Harrison's "My sweet Lord" (which replaces the opening IV with its near-neighbour ii)[5]. All these earlier tracks, though, use the

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[4] I have in mind a singer like Alma Cogan as a plausible source –"Bell bottom blues" from 1954, for instance.
[5] Of course, the song was charged with plagiarism of Joe Satriani's "If I could fly".

sequence discursively. Its lyric may cause one to recall the standard "If I ruled the world", while its obscure biblical reference (while frequently identified with a fantasised Louis XVI, the protagonist might also be identified as either Lucifer or John the Baptist on the evidence of the lyric alone) may put one in mind of some of Bob Dylan's or Leonard Cohen's writing. The opening string texture is not uncommon; it recalls for me Annie Lennox' "Walking on broken glass" (particularly in the type of attack and in the unresolved dissonances), but other references are certainly possible. The structural outline of the verse melody ($\hat{3}$-$\hat{2}$-$\hat{1}$) is shared by too many other songs to enumerate, while the leap to the chorus' $\hat{6}$ (from where it gradually falls) and then to the wordless culmination on $\hat{8}$ is a familiar device from much of U2's work[6]. This track, then, intersects with a wide range of others, depending on the memory of the listener. The issue is the extent to which any of these intersections are activated. The principle of signifying situates such intersections in the practices of musicians, practices which will include the repertory competence of their audiences. I find this an unnecessarily restrictive perspective, for the same reasons that I regard assumptions of authorial custodianship of meaning to be suspect – the way one song may be felt to affect the sense of another is a hermeneutic move, and is in the gift of the individual listener[7].

Embodied meaning

The field of proxemics, as discussed above, provides us with a language for observing the relations between and among people in relation to spatial position. I now move on to a mode of discussion of movement in forms of metaphorical space, and to a language and conceptual framework for such discussion. One of the key constituents of Mark Johnson's theoretical discussion of embodied meaning is the concept of embodied schemata. The *schema* he describes simply as "… a recurrent pattern, shape, and regularity in, or of, these ongoing ordering activities [of our experiences]" (Johnson 1987: 29). He then argues that all abstract thought and language has its basis in our embodied experience of the world, and that this experience is processed, cognitively, as *embodied*, or *image schemata*. These pre-conceptual ideas are both simpler, and more general, than images themselves. They are constituted of few parts and the relations between them:

> their most important feature is that they have a few basic elements or components that are related by definite structures, and they have a certain flexibility. As a result of this simple structure, they are a chief means for achieving order in our experience so that we can comprehend and reason about it (Johnson 1987: 28).

By building from pre-conceptual schemata to propositional thought, Johnson extends the process of "reasoning" to include activities of the body, a bodily knowing that is intimately and inherently linked with rational processes, rather than separate from them:

> Logical inferences, I am claiming, are not just inexplicable structures of rationality (of pure

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[6] Particularly in the era of *The unforgettable fire* and *The Joshua Tree*.
[7] Extensive discussions of individual songs from this perspective include Zak (2011) and Moore (n.d.).

reason). On the contrary, they can be seen to emerge from our embodied, concrete experience and our problem solving in our most mundane affairs. The patterns of our rationality are tied, in part, to the preconceptual schemata that give comprehensible order and connectedness to our experience (Johnson 1987: 99-100).

Johnson's pioneering study discusses an extensive list of embodied schemata, including: containment; path; blockage; center/periphery; cycle; compulsion; counterforce; diversion; removal of restraint; enablement; attraction; link; scale; balance; contact; surface; full/empty; merging; matching; near/far; mass/count; iteration; object; splitting; part/whole; superimposition; process; collection. There is no reason why this list should be considered exhaustive, and equally there is no reason why we should find all of these exhibited in music. The presence of some, however, is incontrovertible. One of the most instructive is the CONTAINMENT schema, with its fundamental relation of inside/outside. We are aware of the nature of our body as container, and of the distinction between what is within and what is not. This distinction is problematised by certain features: ingestion; copulation; defecation; breathing (Moore, Schmidt and Dockwray. 2009). By metaphorical extension, other systems problematise the distinction, particularly that of the satellite, a key conceptual feature of which is that it essentially transgresses this fundamental relation. A satellite is, by definition, external to that which it orbits (otherwise its separate identity, as a satellite, could not be observed). However, it is also, by definition, contained within what it orbits by virtue of gravitational pull –its identity as a satellite is determined by these two, contradictory, features. It should, then, be of more than passing interest to see how the Doves' track "Satellites" negotiates with this twofold identity. The first thing to say is that the lyrics give no clue as to the identity of these satellites –allusive phrases about knowing darkness, pain and anger, together with a disappearing light, a "strange cargo" and sleeping for seven nights appear to lead us toward satellites (plural)– something can certainly be made of this, but it will be nothing straightforward. What of the environment in which this disturbed persona is located? A single high-pitched D (whose location seems to wander) plays against the drum hook from Queen's "We will rock you" together with much ambient reverb, while central in the soundbox a keyboard chord of C slowly glissandos away. These are followed, in terms of entry, by close harmony gospel voices and then the lead vocal. The gospel voices make some vague sense of the lyrics –a past experience of darkness and pain seems to become redemptive, in retrospect, on the entry of these voices. They have, however, noticeably less reverb than the drums, clearly occupying different virtual acoustic spaces. The lead vocal (and bass and an accompanying acoustic guitar, far left), also use less reverb. The gospel voices move from IV-I in G, harmonically bringing both the high D and the keyboard chord within their orbit. At this point, there is a clear locational distinction between the reverb-heavy drums, balanced on either side of the soundbox, and the remainder of the track's sound sources. Through the first verse, the gradually enriching gospel voices, and the introduction of a more conventional (although backgrounded) kit fill out the textural space of the soundbox such that, by the arrival of the chorus (at 1'45"), the opening kit sounds are no longer felt as distant from the remainder of the texture. Although they still appear at the most extreme points in the stereo spectrum (notwithstanding the tremendous width they had on initial entry, and which is

still present though masked by the ensemble) –they have been brought within its orbit. By the bridge, the kit has lost its reverb. At around 4'12", the sense of reverb returns, but without the kit –the passage of incorporation, of containment, of the kit within the main texture has been completed. At 4'38", a new guitar enters at the forefront of the mix with a swiftly arpeggiated chord. It is panned aggressively from hard left to right and back again, coinciding with the lyric's identification of the protagonist only knowing "madness": the panning literally evokes such attendant disorientation[8], presenting at this moment the protagonist's perspective. When the kit returns at 4'46", it is without its initial reverb. At this point we might imagine the track to be over (due to the completion of this process of incorporation), but there is a further stage through which it passes. At around 5', a Hammond organ enters briefly, and twice moves between a vibrato-less chord and a full vibrato. This motion, from cold to warm, is a stock timbral gesture, which might metaphorically be seen to match that of the movement of the kit –from "outside" in the cold to "inside" in the warm. This leads to the track's oceanic climax, in which there are hints of the gospel voices breaking free of the constriction "inside" their simple (vibrato-rich) block harmonies, and as this dies into the coda, those voices, the only element of the texture remaining, take on the reverb originally associated with the kit, problematising that inside/outside textural grounding. This description offers one way into the course of the track. It does not assign a simple, unambiguous meaning, but it offers a perspective which would be obscured by a focus dominated by the conventional elements of musical construction (lyrics, melody, rhythm, harmony). Thus, it seems to me, recognizing the perspective offered by just one embodied schema can get closer to the way a track feels.

I take a second example, Tim Minchin's song "Not perfect". This is a very different sort of track –although I am making use of a live recording, it has a far greater identity as a "song" than does "Satellites". The lyrics do far more of the work here, and activate this particular schema certainly on three distinct levels. First, there is the local level. Minchin sings of the earth's spin preventing the "chaos flooding in". He also sings of locks on house doors which, while intended to keep others "out" serve more to keep him (and his family) "in". Second, there is the sequence of inhabitations which map out the song, in each of which Minchin finds himself. Thus, in turn, he describes himself as within the earth, his house, his body, and finally his brain (for which read "mind"). And, although each of these is "not perfect", nonetheless they are all we have, and his exploration of them promotes intense compassion (particularly when he talks of making his body do "things it wasn't meant to do", and of his brain constituted of "love and bad song lyrics" –the faltering of his voice on the last word, here, incredibly powerful). Thirdly, there is the process of successive narrowing in, which marks out the progress of the song. Thus, the earth encompasses the house, which in turn encompasses his body, which in turn encompasses his brain. There is a sense in which his generally conventional use of harmony underpins this. Each line orbits the tonic (and most either begin or end there), as if harmonic space is being explored in the same way that each of these habitations is described as being explored, and yet these explorations privilege a mixolydian IV and VII rather than a forthright ionian V (I spoke above about

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[8] My thanks to my colleague Sam Bennett for pointing this out.

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compassion…). Each location (earth, house, body, brain) receives its own particular texture (wind trills for the earth, regular staccato chords for his body, soaring string lines for his brain, most particularly the Romantic high register cello cantilena, which thereby recalls the introduction), but it is only conceptually that the song progresses, thus activating another pair of embodied schemata. Thus: although the process is one of focusing in (from the global to the local), the process is stepped, not smooth. Frequently, such stepping is overlooked in discussions of this sort –Johnson's SCALE schema is relevant here. The process has clear direction – successive verses do not, for instance, talk about house, mind, earth, body. Thus Johnson's PATH schema comes into play (a PATH has determinate start and end points, while stages on the way are usually marked). And yet, we must remember that each verse starts from the same (harmonic/melodic) point –there is thus a certain cyclicality to this path. Not only do we observe a teleological motion while listening, we also refer any part of each verse to the corresponding place in another verse (particularly when part acts as a refrain –in each verse Minchin describes spending, in each location, "the vast majority of my time"). In strophic song, both PATH and CYCLE schemas issue in what we might call a SPIRAL schema (which, I would suggest, is *embodied* probably only at one remove).

This spirality is a common trajectory in music –Family's "The weaver's answer" employs it in a different way. I choose this track to discuss because its plot is familiar (the metaphor of a life's journey), but is actualized in an unfamiliar fashion. The track's plot is to recount a one-sided conversation between a protagonist (sung by Roger Chapman) and a "weaver" who, though possibly male, can be identified with one of the norns, or moirai. In Norse and Greek mythology, respectively, these are three figures who weave the life(-story) of each mortal. *Roger* asks the weaver whether particular stages in his life are represented in the weavers' "tapestry": his childhood; his wedding; childbirth & his children's maturity; his wife's death; his own death. Three verses precede a solo section, and two follow, dividing his life story in two. The solo itself is in two parts: first Jim King's measured tenor solo, in a tone so reminiscent of Gerry Mulligan, and then John Whitney's more crazed distorted[9] guitar solo. In a sense, these two match the two halves of the song, the sax commenting, the guitar presaging. Where is *Roger* in this? The tense of the conversation is the present, as if he is conversing with the weaver at each stage of life, and yet in order to see his life as complete, he would seem to need to be outside the narrative (note, again, the importance of the CONTAINMENT schema!). In fact, as the final verse ends, he realizes that his life is also about to end, and so he virtually straddles the boundary of the container which is his life. Each stage in his life story is marked as a point along the PATH and yet, since each verse begins from the same point, again a SPIRAL may make for a better embodied schema. There are other ways in which this process is mapped out. Verses 1 and 2 contain four lines each: the first two sit on i, the third moves from aeolian VI to V, while the fourth moves from mixolydian I to VII. In verses 3-5, the third and fourth lines are melodically and harmonically repeated, immediately, extending the length of the verse. Moreover, instrumentation also works structurally to effect this SPIRAL. Throughout the verses, the kit and acoustic guitar (and

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[9] Almost certainly put through a Leslie speaker.

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sometimes bass) maintain an incessant, urgent rhythm (shown in ex.3). By the end of the first verse, we can hear a high, reverberant orchestral flute, deep in the mix. By the end of the second verse, this is joined by a boosted contrabassoon. During the third verse, tambourine and tenor sax are added to the texture. During the solos, we lose the incessant rhythm. This picks up again for the fourth verse, but we have now lost the atmospheric orchestral sounds –the texture gains in urgency as a result.

Example 3

The entire track is bookended in a way I have yet to mention. A short opening prologue finds *Roger* addressing the weaver, while Ric Grech's solo violin metaphorically weaves a line around the vocal solo. In the epilogue, these two elements are separated out –we first hear the vocal epilogue, and then we hear the violin line. It is as if, the tapestry having been completed, the opening evocation of the weaving of lines is no longer pertinent. In this way, the PATH traversed by the narrative of the track is also activated by the track's instrumentation, although not in a direct one-to-one correspondence. Such congruence is frequently found (Moore 2011) but, equally frequently, it is not necessarily overt.

An ecological position

Both the embodied schemata-analysis that I have pursued here, and the discussions of persona and proxemics, resonate strongly with Eric Clarke's development of the theory of ecological perception (Clarke 2005, Gibson 1979, Reed 1996) for the discussion of music. Indeed, Clarke argues that "cultural" aspects of the environment (including those which manifest speech) are no less open to ecological perception than "natural" aspects, insofar as one can maintain a distinction between them (Clarke 2005: 41). The key process in Clarke's work is threefold, and can be summarised in the phrase: invariants afford through specifications. An ecological approach identifies *invariants* which are perceived in the environment, constants such as the flowing of water (which we identify as a river), a bounded slab of metal with a sharp edge (which we identify as a knife), or a high-pitched squeak. It observes what actions these invariants *afford*. A river, for example, affords (makes available) both swimming and drowning. A knife affords both cutting and stabbing. A high-pitched squeak is more complex, without identifying precisely what invariants it has, but such a squeak might afford flight, if it sounds like a mouse, inquiry, if it sounds like a squeaking door, or contemplation if it sounds like (or even is) the opening to a piece of electroacoustic music. The action which an invariant affords may consist of no more than a decision to make sense of that sound in relation to others (Windsor and de Bézenac 2012). Whichever of these responses we choose will depend on the particular source, for us, that the sound *specifies*. These affordances arise, as can be seen, not only from the natural environment, but also from the perceiver operating within a particular

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cultural environment. It is for the perceiver to either swim or drown, for example; that specific aquatic environment does not determine his/her swimming abilities. Bearing the example of the squeak in mind: "the ecological perspective on musical meaning discusses how sounds specify their sources and in so doing afford actions for the perceiver…" (Clarke 2005: 126). Although cognition plays a part in this field, the main emphasis is on the perception of facets of our bodily environment which lead to action without the need for cognitive intervention –such action is thus considered *direct*. Invariants operate at different levels. In music, it is certainly possible to identify those constants which remain necessary to the performance of a particular song, and which remain present from one performance to another (principally, perhaps, its melody and its lyrics, as discussed above). It is equally possible, and often pertinent, to identify the invariants that operate across a corpus (the syncopated anticipation of the downbeat in rock'n'roll, or the phasing effects used in psychedelia). The repetitive groove of "The weaver's answer", and the quadruple metre and Latin feel of "Light my fire" operate as invariants against which the constant change of individual durations, or of individual pitches, creates meaning, so that invariance can work both externally, and internally, to a track, and elides with the *norms* I referred to above.

So, how does this enable fruitful understandings of aspects of songs? I address three tracks which concern conflict –one in remembrance, one in the midst and one foreseen. Dire Straits' "Brothers in Arms" seems to be a perennial favourite. Formally it is very ordinary –it has a long introduction, two verses, bridge, third verse and playout. Indeed, the entire song is underplayed, which makes its popularity perhaps surprising. That popularity surely rests on its delicate nostalgia, which is achieved by two key elements which invite an ecological explanation –the first concerns its sound sources, and the second its harmonic patterning. Bearing in mind its release in 1985, the Hammond organ produces a highly anachronistic timbre, which can only call to mind earlier styles. There is a sound which recalls both a harmonica and a melodeon (although it is probably neither) –both instruments specify unsophisticated styles and, in their comparative lack of presence imply a weakness in the voice with which they are associated. This timbre is also highly distinct from that of the remainder of the band, marking it out for special consideration. Mark Knopfler's voice is highly underplayed and almost whispering at points. It conveys an introspective air, and yet voices great compassion –its potential to be read as authentic is underpinned by the same player's typical rhythmic guitar technique, almost stuttering, without rounded phrases, and lacking in glibness (and, just once, reaching a quite angry growl, to mark the despairing line "we have just one world but we live in different ones", of which *Mark* clearly does not approve). All these features support a feel for the song as one of slightly underplayed reminiscence, nostalgia if you will, but not a sense to be turned from. This is heightened by the way the refrain enters –syllabisation of the four-line verses is quite regular, but the last line "brothers in arms" appears too early, as if we reach out to the comfort the assertion brings. The lyrics also invoke the distance implied by the Hammond organ and harmonica, although that is presented as geographical rather than temporal –"these mist covered mountains are a home now for me but my home is the lowlands…". This resigned homelessness is beautifully captured by the harmonic sequence, which cannot decide between tonics of B or

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g#. While the introduction hovers between c# and g#, the verse begins reassuringly in the relative major, B. It cannot stay though –the remaining three lines shift toward g#, and the final g#-E-F# harmonic move is a typical rock sequence, opening the possibility of either an ionian V-I (F#-B) or an aeolian VII-i (F#-g#) (Moore 1995). This reading is also supported by the long echo during the introduction which, creating a haze around the distant gunfire, signifies memory. Indeed, that gunfire is surely an element in the persona's memory, and because we hear it too *we are invited into that memory*, from where the song takes place. This is perhaps the starting-point for the track's key attraction, and everything else follows. Note that special cliché –"you did not desert me". This suggests the quintessential comradeship found in first hand accounts of war, and is probably incomprehensible (and even kitsch) to those who haven't experienced it. This is made even more potent for a listener who recognises the close similarity between the verse's opening melodic phrase and that of Bob Dylan's "With God on our side": reading Dylan's song's ironic "might is right" political position into "Brothers in arms" makes that latter's acceptance of powerlessness even more potent.

My other two tracks are both by the Strawbs –one from the early 1970s (and originally quite popular), one very recent (and widely known only to fans). Both obliquely address conflicting global politics. The track "New world" is uncompromising in its attack on an unspecified politico-cultural decline. The "new world" of the title appears to be the track's addressee through three verses, and yet the addressee is clearly an agent, of various forms of destruction, and is personified (has "eyes"). Perhaps, then, the addressee is properly an actor working to bring about this "new world". And, although the listener is then positioned as observer of this diatribe, the possibility that we, too, are obliquely addressed remains possible. Are we made culpable here? In my listening the track has four key invariants, which contribute to sense-making. These are the constant recourse to 4-3 suspensions, the strange 1½ + 2 grouping of its 6/8 metre (i.e. 6/8 + 3/8 + 6/8 + 6/8), the emphasis placed on VI within an aeolian context, and the rather overbearing repeat, in the "chorus", of the persona's desire for the protagonist to turn, to rot, and perhaps finally to rest "in your grave". I start with the grouping. A balance between motion/action and rest at a local level is a common experience –breathing, for instance, or the pattern made by drinking and then swallowing. That balance occurs here in the sung line and the intervening space. However, this is uneven –the sung line is always shorter than the intervening space. In terms of breathing, this might suggest activity, or at least a heightened, non-relaxed state. The emphasis on VI is related to this. The verse has the following pattern in e aeolian: i-v-VI; v-III-VI; i-v-VI, with the regular proportions of harmonic change 2:1:4. The constant ending on VI produces a lift at the end of each line, a possible promise of escape from the negative tone (the fact that both i and VI harmonise a melodic E to which the line has risen, serves to intensify the actuality of these "alternative readings" made by the two different harmonies). This escape appears to be realised at the beginning of the chorus where iii-VII-v-VI-iii-VI-v-VI could be reheard as a move to G ionian: I-V-iii-IV-I-IV-iii-IV, before it is pulled back to e. If heard this way, a contradiction with the lyric is palpable, for the constantly reiterated insistence that the addressee suffer its/his just desserts has no leavening touch (unless it is the final, exhausted, "may you rest"). However, it seems to me that, harmonically, we are

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presented with the promise of escape unfulfilled. Lyrically, that promise is dashed with some venom (note the growling tone which Dave Cousins reaches, implying rage held, just, in check), and the extended gap between lines acts to enable *Dave* to regather his strength for each subsequent line. So, what of the suspensions? The introductory sequence is i-v-VI-V^4. On repeat, leading into each verse, this suspended fourth resolves, but at the very end of the song it fails to do so. In the context of the song, there seems to be defiance in this refusal to fall, to make the conventional move, a defiance entirely in keeping with *Dave*'s relationship with the "new world". And perhaps it gives the lie to the final call to "rest".

The later track "The call to action" is a little more specific. Its addressee is clearer (it is the listener), while the context appears to be religious fanaticism (which the last verse identifies as "vanity"). Its geographical location is pinpointed by a fiddle sound rich in overtones playing a decidedly Moorish scale (flattened third, sharpened fourth). Whether the addressee is called to join, or to resist, is unclear (the options are left completely open). The track has a number of important invariants, but I want to focus on just two that it shares with the earlier track –lyric repetition (here, it's the song's title) and a prominent suspension preparation (strangely incongruous against the Moorish fiddle). In spoken communication, excitement and increasing emotion (whether positive or negative) are frequently marked by a rise in pitch, even in some tonal languages, a rise associated with (and perhaps even caused by) increased heart rate and difficulty in remaining immobile. The PATH[10] of the melody through the verse is to rise gradually (twice) from ^1 to ^4 over a stable bass ^1, then leaping to the upper octave to move from ^1 to ^5. Such a motion traces increasing excitation at two levels, as we move from uninvolved description ("from the mountaintops they come") to resistible involvement, or engagement ("no need to show remorse") and then finally to irresistible involvement, or challenge ("will you heed the call?"). That this challenge is the point for which the melody had been heading is clarified by its achievement of the consonant half-close upper ^5. At this point, however, the stable bass moves by step through ^2 and ^3 to ^4. The effect is as if the listener is positioned between these two lines. As the social possibilities which the lyrics open up begin to become clear, the gap between the melody and the bass increases, and the listener's potential future (swayed, perhaps, by the fanaticist's vision) opens up. As the challenge is issued, however, the listener becomes squeezed between the static melody and the rising bass, impressing the urgency for decision. As with the earlier track, it is the space between verses which finds that all-important suspension. Here, the tonic-based texture beneath the Moorish fiddle line is suddenly interrupted by a ii^{ø7}-V^4 pre-cadence. On the downbeat of the final bar before the new verse, the rhythm is telling us that V^4 has resolved to V^3, but within the texture, that is very hard to hear –I rather think it fails to resolve. In any case, it is immediately swept away by the fiddle line, which immediately reinstates that suspended fourth. Again, it is hard not to hear this as defiance, both according to tonal logic and according to the move's presence, as demonstrated, as an invariant in the band's repertory. All three of these tracks, then, achieve some of their power by using very basic sound sources and processes which present events to us in a way which *appears* unmediated, i.e. not

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[10] It increasingly seems to me effective to view the embodied-ecological position as, ultimately, a single domain.

arbitrary, and which can be addressed by identifying invariants which afford responses through observing what may be specified by the sounds which constitute our listening[11].

Conclusion

So, this is but an outline of what I believe to be a very rich methodology for the elucidation of the personal significance of a wide range of recorded popular song. I have explored aspects of it in a range of individual papers over the past five years or so, and the full methodology, questions and all, is presented and illustrated in my recent monograph *Song Means*[12], although the examples which furnish this paper are all newly chosen. I see the methodology as a whole, its parts interacting as I have tried to demonstrate here, but as a toolkit (which does not prescribe the order of use of its particular elements, nor the use of all elements at every occasion) rather than a linear instruction sheet.

I do not claim that the interpretations I have offered here will be universally accepted, since meaning is always a relation –here, at minimum, between the sounds perceived and the life experience of the perceiver. But, in that they are rooted in something universally shared –the experience of our human bodies as they operate in the environment– nor am I claiming that these interpretations are purely personal, that there will be no points of contact between those of different listeners. What I have aimed to do is to present a grounding for the phenomenological observation, and thence interpersonal sharing, of the ways these sound worlds have potential to signify in our experiences. While analysis is charged with determination of the "what" of music to which we give so much time and resources, I have attempted to propose answers to the more pressing question, the subsequent "so what?"

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[11] Elsewhere (Moore 2009), I compare this mode of explanation with a Piercean semiotic position and find it more helpful.

[12] While complete in itself, I am not fully satisfied that the methodology enables sufficient attention to be paid to the richness of sound manipulation utilised in recordings and, thus, is perhaps not sufficiently nuanced in terms of the constructed nature of the aural environment with which we are presented. Such further work represents the next stage in my own investigations.

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