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Philip Tagg and the semiotic dialogues of the popular song

This paper was conceived as a contribution to conference sessions honouring Philip Tagg, recognising his impact on semiotic analysis, and the importance of his polemics about the aims, method and social benefits of studying popular music. In the following pages I will be acknowledging how my research is indebted to Philip's ideas and arguments, and suggesting ways that his endeavours might be extended.

I did not write this as a fully referenced scholarly paper, and I have not converted it into one for this collection. It was written as a tribute and as an intervention into on-going musicological dialogues, and assumes a certain degree of familiarity with Phillip's writings. Although these were once dispersed across a range of sometimes obscure or hard to find publications, they are now neatly collected together on his website. Those who are unfamiliar with his work should go to that site, and perhaps start with his two most recent books – *Music's Meanings: A Modern Musicology For Non-Musos* (2013) and *Everyday Tonality II* (2014).

In his numerous studies, Tagg has emphasised the semiotic inter-relationships between musical signifiers and I draw on these insights to argue that the study of popular songs should explore and elucidate how songs are created through the social networks and cultural dialogues within which the signifying practices of identifiable songwriters, located at different points in time and across space, are one voice (albeit with authorial weight) engaged in an intersubjective conversation. Songwriting practice and acts of interpretation are embedded within semiotic chains that link songs to other songs, and songwriters to other

songwriters. Taggian music semiotics can allow us to understand and explore this as both a creative process, and also as an indicator of how songs participate in the wider cultural dialogues through which human experience is comprehended, expressed and narrated.

Before I develop this theme, I would like to offer a more personal preface: Back in 1989 I was researching for a PhD at South Bank Polytechnic, as it was then called, in London. I was based in a conventional Social Science Department and I was feeling a little isolated. In the days before internet communication, I was wondering if there might be any people out there interested in the study of popular music and its industry. Having written to Simon Frith (who I had never met), I received a reply advising me to make contact with the Institute of Popular Music at Liverpool, and there I found academics seriously interested in popular music and music industry research. On my frequent visits to Liverpool (through 1989–1992) I had many conversations with Philip, during seminars but more often than not over a beer, and these were hugely enlightening. Philip's ideas connected with my then intuitive sense of how music conveys meaning. These conversations, along with his writings and lectures caused me to rethink many of my assumptions about musical meaning and communication – ideas that I had acquired as songwriter and performing musician, rather than an academic.

Since then I have used Philip's work extensively in my teaching and research. The insight that has resonated and influenced me most profoundly is not so much his theory and concepts for understanding musical representation (sonic anaphores most obviously). Nor is it his attempt to introduce a more accurate technical vocabulary into musicology. Although I find both useful, the insight I have found most stimulating is a more general idea that pervades his writings; this concerns the inter-connections and inter-subjective relationships that link understandings of musical signifiers across time and space.

These dynamics are conveyed persuasively and woven like a thread throughout his writings and analysis; the idea that the musical signifiers in adverts, films and popular songs have acquired their meanings as a result of a long history of musical practice that cuts across styles, periods and peoples; the plurality of histories that have enabled pitch shapes, rhythms and sonic to

be used to convey meanings and emotions, and to be understood as such by varied listeners.

It is this overriding general idea about similarities between types of musical representation, and their inter-relationships, that has informed my approach to the popular song. It has led me to explore how songwriting practice and acts of interpretation are embedded within chains of meaning linking songs to other songs, to other songwriters, to listeners and to other art forms. Quite regardless of how copyright law and Romantic aesthetics have elevated individual creators, Taggian semiotics allows us to recognise how popular songs are constituted within semiotic chains of meaning, and it is from these that specific songs arise and meaningful narratives communicated, contested and canonised.

If I have a general criticism of Tagg's work here it is that, like other musicologists, he tends to privilege reception and critical listening. He asks listeners, students, scholars and critics about meanings rather than songwriters and musicians. I fully understand why. Far too much musicology has privileged an authorial composer originator as authority. Yet, I believe that songwriting practice should be to be more central to the study of popular music. And Tagg's method allows for the adoption of an approach to songwriting as a social, cumulative and dialogic practice. It counterpoints, contrasts and challenges the image of songwriters as inspired, unique individuals. This is an unsustainable orthodoxy propagated and fertilised by copyright law, the ideology of intellectual property and Romantic aesthetics and all too easily and uncritically has been absorbed into the methodologies of musicology.

In the remainder of this article I will schematically outline my approach to these semiotic dialogues, and suggest ways that Tagg's work can be extended. As I mentioned earlier, I am not going to extensively cite the work of the numerous scholars that have influenced my thinking in his area (these can be found elsewhere in my writings on authorship and narrative, easily located through a simple online search), although I should declare the important influence of Simon Frith's writings on the popular song, and Paul Ricoeur philosophical enquiries into narrative and inter-subjectivity. Instead, I am going to hook my thoughts on to some familiar loaded terms.

TEXT

I have an inspiring collection of poetry called *Staying Alive, Real Poems For Unreal Times*, published by Bloodaxe Books in 2002 and still much in demand. At the back of the book, editor Neil Astley selectively suggests some further reading with the following cautionary advice: 'many books on modern poetry ... are written in a jargon-studded private language ... avoid any book which refers to poems as texts' (p.472). Not long after reading this, I was teaching a class of undergraduates and, drawing on terms used in the early writings of Allan Moore and Richard Middleton, I found myself referring to popular songs as 'texts'. Caught listening to myself and stumbling over my thoughts in the classroom, I suddenly recalled Astley's warning. From that moment on I decided - let's call a popular song a song. It is words and music. In performance and as recording it is all of those aspects that Tagg has delineated so comprehensively in his work - voices, vocal personas, pitches, rhythms, melodies, harmonies, chord sequences, synecdoches and more. It is also something else - it is lyrics. It is the wordplay and performance of lyrics that Frith has astutely discussed in his writings on song words, voices and popular songs.

On this point, the semiotics of music, and musicology, has perhaps paid more attention to music and not enough attention to lyrics. The vast majority of popular music recordings are songs with words. If we are to take ordinary listeners interpretations of popular music seriously, and seek to engage them in our work, then it is clear that most people talk about lyrics when discussing the meaning of songs; this apparent in everyday conversations and on internet forums (such as songmeanings.net).

Furthermore, whilst music semiotics illuminates instrumental music, it is profoundly limited when it comes to the interplay of music and words; the way words may be used semantically, to convey meaning, or the way words may be used for their sonorous qualities. Identifying sonic anaphores, or genre synecdoches is easier in instrumental music. It is far trickier when it comes to songs, although there are certainly some fine examples in Tagg's work. We perhaps need to further develop a semiotics of signification in popular songs. Tagg has given

us *10 Little Title Tunes* (written with Bob Clarida), and we have a good starting point with *Fernando the Flute: Musical Meaning in an Abba Mega-hit* (first circulated unpublished in the late 1980s/ early 1990s). His recent book for non-musos *Music's Meanings* ends with Chapter 14 'Analyzing Film Music'. For me, the next logical step would be a Chapter 15 'Analyzing the Popular Song'.

INTER-TEXTUAL

I have already suggested that we should not refer to songs as texts. So, where does that leave intertextuality? This term has surely become overused in recent years. Although once deployed to animate discussion of an apparently novel postmodern practice, intertextuality (copying, borrowing, imitating, allusion, homage, sampling and generally taking inspiration from existing models) has been a characteristic of all forms of human creativity for centuries. Focusing specifically on the connections between songs, it is possible to identify two dynamics:

Creative copying - There is a long history of musicians copying from other musicians, a practice found in numerous times and places, and in many styles of music. Theories of individual ownership, laws of copyright and Romantic individualism are - here again - quite contra to the way music has been made in numerous folk traditions that feed into contemporary popular music. Copying, appropriating and transforming existing songs and music are fundamental to the creativity of popular music. Musicians may do this quite deliberately (as in the way John Lennon used melodies, riffs and lyrics from Chuck Berry songs, elements that Berry had not 'originated' in any simple sense). But, more often it is unintentional or beyond conscious awareness, seeping into songs from an individual's immersion in musical culture and the ubiquity of music in their lives. In his study of Abba's 'Fernando' Tagg gives an illuminating sense of how this may occur through his discussion of museemes - the musical building blocks from which a song is composed. In 'Fernando' he finds resonances of Borodin, Beethoven, Schubert, Grieg, Simon & Garfunkel, 'teen angel' songs from the late 1950s, bolero rhythms, stylistic fragments from country y music, and elements of traditional songs from Mexico and Spain, and much more

besides. The intuitive absorption and weaving together of such musical threads leads me to my next point.

Coincidences, conjunctions, synchronicities – Tagg's semiotic analysis clearly illustrates how songs are heard in relation to other songs and how music acquires meanings that are independent from the intentions and knowledge of the songwriter. Critical connections are detected, interpreted and established by fans, critics, forensic musicologists and by other songwriters and musicians. Hermeneutic links are identified tying songs to films, novels, poems, paintings, plays, articles in newspapers and slogans from advertisements (all of which can be found in the songs of Lennon and McCartney, for example). Further insights into these connections to other arts forms and media could be provided by extending Tagg's music semiotics into an analysis of signifiers across popular culture and the varied digital and physical media. This leads me, in turn, to yet another rather ugly term ...

INTERCONTEXTUAL

The intercontextual accumulation of knowledge through time (days, weeks, months, years) is emphasised in studies of education that demonstrate how our knowledge of the world is cumulative and always in a process of becoming through time. We do not learn in bite sized atomized chunks, but in relation to existing knowledge, skills and competences.

We comprehend songs in a very similar way. The meaning of any popular song is tentative, always part of a conversation during which interpretation is in progress, forever moving through the time – proffered, debated, adopted as plausible or discarded as improbable. The internet and daily conversations are constantly providing examples of misheard lyrics and idiosyncratic understandings of songs. But, these die as ironic anecdotal oddities, rather than convincing interpretations (see for example www.kissthisguy.com – The Archive of Misheard Lyrics). Misinterpretation might sometimes be unavoidable on first hearing, but this is usually a moment during a dialogue about the meaning of songs. You can often hear this – the deliberations, the moments of realisation, and the formation of consensus in everyday discussion and on internet fora (such as songmeanings.net).

In his work, Tagg has quite convincingly challenged the idea that a musical signifier can have endless possible meanings (a claim sometimes asserted with the word 'polysemantic'). During everyday dialogues, and Tagg's extensive listening tests, those engaging with songs tend to reach a consensus about song meanings rather than multiple interpretations. The dialogue, the discussion, the debate contributes to this – the networks of social encounters within which interpretations are proposed, disputed, accepted or rejected – an intercontextual dialogue that continues into the future as songs are interpreted through repeated listens and from conversations with others.

INTERSUBJECTIVE

Tagg has used a notion of intersubjectivity in his discussion of how musical meanings are negotiated and agreed, and demonstrated this in his listening tests and empirical research. This idea can be traced back to Edmund Husserl's argument that any apparently 'objective' understanding of the world is 'intersubjective'. This clearly does not mean that all subjectivities and their interpretations are equal. Critical sociology provides persuasive evidence of how opportunities are shaped by the social environments and institutions that structure and mediate individual and group abilities to participate in such hermeneutics. Depending where people are located, intersubjective dialogue may be mediated by religious orthodoxies, the commercial imperatives of business, or the regimes of state organizations. Semiotic meanings are socially grounded and realized within material conditions.

Popular songs can cross, consume and confuse the boundaries between fact and fiction, between the empirical and the imaginative, between documentary and drama, and between reality and its representation. This is why they are important in our lives. Songs are not a reflection of society (a by now clichéd phrase, even if it is still heard). Songs are embedded within the actions and relationships that we call society. Songs are not a record of history they are part of the making and comprehension of history. Songs are not simply representations of our world but material practices that contribute to the making and remaking of our worlds – a point, again, that is emphasised strongly in the radical

commitment and political critique that threads throughout Tagg's critical music semiotics.

A discussion of intersubjective dialogue and critique perhaps inevitably leads to an issue that is central to Tagg's semiotic project – terminology: What terms do we use to talk about and debate the importance, the meaning and the influence of popular music? Philip is concerned about debate within musicology, and has, for many years, argued that concepts developed from the study of European art music is inappropriate when used for analysis and study of popular music. Tagg aims to change the theoretical vocabulary and conceptual terminology used by musicologists when addressing each other at conferences and in journals.

Yet, Philip is also concerned with talk about music outside of musicology – amongst 'non-musos', as he calls them. This may be sociologists, music critics, or critically engaged music fans with no understanding of music theoretical terms (the dominant seventh, the tritone, the Aeolian cadence and so on). Here the issues are trickier because 'non-muso' listeners do not usually have any problem talking about popular songs. They are rarely restrained by assumptions derived from art music and will talk in an uninhibited manner about songs using the rich repertoire of everyday words provided by language. As Philip has shown, people talk about music in tactile and kinetic terms, according to verbal-visual associations. Non-musos also talk about the meaning of lyrics; the sounds of lyrics (the pleasures of the sounds of words); they talk about timbre, texture, tunes and rhythms using adjectives, similes and metaphors. A vernacular lexicon is deployed to talk about popular songs quite regardless of musicology. For a fuller inter-subjective and inter-textual dialogue about popular songs, we must extend Philip's work and open up the dialogue, to embrace and engage with the non-technical vocabulary of listeners outside of musicology.

THE ROLE OF HUMANITIES IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY: SEMIOTICS, CULTURE, TECHNOLOGIES

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