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On Researching Music in Everyday Life: Assessing the Musician as Producer of Commercialised Music

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On researching music in everyday life,
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commercialised music

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On the Methods of Researching Music in Everyday Life: Assessing the Musician as Producer of Commercialised Music

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ABSTRACT

Adorno & Horkheimer (1998) argue that the Culture Industry generates cultural artefacts that fail to develop human consciousness and hence support the domination of the capitalist system. Steinert (2003) states that the pressures facing musicians to negotiate between the demands of the culture industry and the traditional role of the artist generates a fundamental contradiction within art which is symbolically enacted through artistic production. This study, which draws on on-going postgraduate research aims to develop a research framework that investigates how musicians negotiate this contradiction. The study considers if a more reflexive approach to art exists, typified by the Pop Art movement, which paradoxically lends itself to commercial appropriation whilst still remaining a legitimate art form in its own right. This study questions if the interaction of music with marketing represents a commodification or “sell-out” of music or if it can constitute a more reflexive approach towards musical production and the negotiation of Culture Industry pressures.

PAPER

Adorno & Horkheimer (1998) argue that the Culture Industry generates cultural artefacts that fail to develop human consciousness and hence support the domination of the capitalist system. Steinert (2003) demonstrates that the pressures facing musicians in negotiating between the demands of the culture industry and the traditional role of the artist, generate a fundamental contradiction within art. This study investigates how musicians negotiate this contradiction and considers whether a more reflexive approach to art exists, typified by the Pop Art movement, which paradoxically lends itself to commercial appropriation whilst still remaining a legitimate art form in its own right. This paper seeks to develop a research framework, which draws on on-going postgraduate research, that seeks to understand and locate the production of music in its theoretical context.

The paper examines the following issues:

- 1) Literature review
- 2) Research issues
- 3) The Present Study
- 4) Research Framework
- 5) Discussion

LITERATURE REVIEW—MUSIC AND THE CONSUMER SOCIETY

Adorno and Horkheimer, in the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, argue that the Culture Industry seeks to control individual consciousness, denying people the ability to form resistance to the capitalist mode of production (1998). In the Culture Industry music becomes predictable with a tendency towards the “obvious touch” (pp125) and fails to challenge the listener, leading to their ability to “resist central control” being suppressed by the Culture Industry which controls individual consciousness. Hence films, radio, magazines and music within the culture industry comprise a system which is “uniform as a whole” (pp120) and no longer “pretend to be art” (pp121) whilst citizens live in city housing projects “designed to perpetuate the individual as a supposedly independent

unit in a small hygienic dwelling make him all the more subservient to his adversary—the absolute power of capitalism” (pp120). All these factors combine to operate as tools of domination.

The claim that music may frame consciousness has resulted in authors interpreting music dialectically. McLary (1987) traces musical dialectics through the history of western music stating that music is often the symbolic enactment of social antagonisms. For example she argues that nineteenth century music dramatises the conflict between the subjective self and the constraints of bourgeois society (McClary, 1987:pp19). Similarly Shepherd (Shepherd, 1987) argues that contemporary ‘cock rock’ (for example Bruce Springsteen, Mick Jagger and Iron Maiden) represents the dialectic of the battle of the sexes. The dialectic between the artistic need to create an autonomous art form versus the market demands of the Culture Industry and sustenance in a highly competitive and ephemeral market is described by Steinert as the ‘internal contradiction of art’ (Steinert, 2003:pp88). Artists negotiate this contradiction, Steinert demonstrates, by adopting different approaches such as the ‘classic bourgeois’ typified by Schoenberg’s Circle (a group of people who organised esoteric private concerts where standard elements of cultural consumption, such as applause, were prohibited) to the reflexive working alliance whereby “the conditions of artistic production and reception became the subject-matter for art” (pp91) and the artist seeks to make the effects of the culture industry more visible. Steinert identifies Duchamp’s *Fountain*—a urinal which was displayed in an art gallery and declared as a work of art—as the “archetypal exercise in reflexivity”. Drawing on such analyses, this study examines artistic productivity dialectally and focus on how musicians negotiate the tensions of the “fundamental contradiction in art”.

Steinert’s dialectic may be witnessed in Robinson, Buck and Cuthbert’s (1991) study as the tension between the local musician versus the homogenising global music industry. Frith dramatises this dialectic as the battle between Good (the scattered bands of committed musicians) versus Evil (the corporate force of Time Warner, Song-CBS, Thorn EMI and so on) (Frith, 1991). Here two important concepts ought to be addressed, that of commodification and of the “sell-out”. Goldman et al (1991) define commodification as “the practice of joining otherwise disparate meaning systems to generate new sign-values” (pp336) illustrating that the meaning of the “commodity” is changed in the process. Hesmondhalgh (1999) defines a “sell-out” as “the abandonment of idealism (on the part of the musician) for financial reward” (pp44). Therefore the process of “selling out” or commodification are associated with the change in the meaning of the music and/or the abandonment of idealism. The question, then is, does the interaction of music with marketing represent a commodification or “sell-out” of music or can it constitute a more reflexive approach to musical production and the negotiation of Culture Industry pressures?

This paper argues that the increased interaction between music and marketing in the consumer society has resulted in a more widespread reflexive approach to art from the artistic community. Baudrillard (1998:pp26), in his treatise of the *Consumer Society* argues that the consumer no longer relates to a particular object in its specific utility, but to a set of objects in its total signification which act as a “chain of signifiers”. The consumer, then, becomes

immersed in this directive path of consumption and art, hence, becomes culturised until a drugstore is indistinguishable from an art gallery (pp27) or as Adorno & Horkheimer put it, “everything is looked at from only one aspect: that it can be used for something else” (1998:pp158). Music too has entered this chain, for example one piece of classical music is now identified as being the “Hovis song now” due to its use in an advertisement (O’Donohue, 1997:pp245). This reflects a change from the use of music in advertisements from aiding product recall to transferring or exchanging value from the music to the product. Music thus becomes broken down into signifiers and signified (Goldman and Papson, 1996:pp70). Such is the extensive appropriation of music by advertisers that one observer notes that watching—or at least listening to—television commercials is almost like flipping around the radio dial as more songs, from every era and every kind of artist, are filling up the commercial breaks (De Marco, 2002). Indeed one advertiser recently described music and ads as having “walked hand-in-hand up the aisle of advertising” (Channel-4, 2002).

POP ART

Arguably the symbolic enactment of the dialectic between art and marketing is most overtly represented in the Pop Art movement typified by artists such as Lichtenstein, Oldenberg and Warhol. Pop Art, according to Baudrillard, is the outcome of the “chain of signifiers” in that the logic of consumption eliminates the traditional sublime status of artistic representation as they coexist in the same physical and logical space where they both ‘operate’ as signs (Baudrillard, 1998:pp115). It is an art form contemporaneous with the logic of signs and consumption whilst also an effect of fashion, and hence itself a mere object of consumption (Baudrillard, 1998:pp115). Whiting (1997:pp4) notes that Pop Art borrows from consumer culture, but also consumer culture re-appropriates and disseminates Pop art. Hence works such as Warhol’s paintings of Campbell’s soup tins or Oldenberg’s *Shop* ought to be regarded as a celebration of the market (Frith and Horne, 1987; Whiting, 1997) and as homogenous with the industrial, mass production and hence with the artificial, manufactured character of the consumer society (Baudrillard, 1998:pp115). Frith & Horn (1987) state that Pop Art influenced a large number of pop musicians. For example Pete Townshend, the songwriter and guitar player with The Who, stated in an interview: ‘We stand for Pop art clothes, Pop art music and Pop art behaviour... we don’t change offstage, we live Pop art’ (cited by Frith and Horne, 1987:pp101). Frith & Horne regard the Who and albums such as *The Who Sell Out* for being a Pop Art masterpiece noting how they celebrated their own sales.

Recent technological changes allow musicians more freedom to explore signification. Popular music has witnessed the emergence of the DJ who remixes or samples sound bytes of existing pieces of music to create a pastiche. Just as the Pop Artists had stripped art of its sublime privileged status, the DJ is a glorified craftsman questioning the traditional concept of the artist, blowing it apart and re-establishing it in overhauled form (Poschardt, 1998:pp14). Strange (2002) claims that of all social commentators, the DJ, using the logo minefield of America as source, is placed to be in tune with the zeitgeist and therefore ought to be regarded as the meme shaman, a musician as commercial producer who provides the public with the ultimate form of music, one that resembles “a really cool commercial” (pp8). Hence there is a process which Goodwin (1992) describes as the “mediatisation” of popular music with sound-bytes and forms of editing associated with advertising being integrated into popular music. A further development in terms of the mediatisation of music has been the development of video. The music video is described by Savage as an advert turned into product: “pop is now culture in the situationist sense, with its

own past, its own references, even its own marketing, as part of a seamless package. With its industrial importance, it can’t afford not to be” (1990:pp149). The rise of the video, note Frith & Horn (1987), further blurs the traditional distinction between making music and marketing a commodity as pop groups are expected by their record companies to construct their music as its own advertisement as a video spot (pp176). As Adorno & Horkheimer described it, “advertising and the culture industry merge technically as well as economically” (1998:pp163).

THE COMMERCIAL APPROPRIATION OF MUSIC

Two of the most commonly researched uses of music within consumer research are the contexts of retail atmospherics and advertising. In both areas a notion that is regarded by many writers as central is that of Musical Fit (Areni and Kim, 1993; Bruner and Gordon, 1990; Chebat et al., 2001; De Nora, 2000; Dubé and Morin, 2001; MacInnis and Park, 1991; North and Hargreaves, 1996, 1997c, 1997a; North and Law, 2000; Oakes, 2000; Park and Young, 1986), defined by MacInnis & Park as the ‘consumer’s subjective perceptions of the music’s relevance or appropriateness to the central ad message’ (1991:pp162). That music can fit a context implies an underlying meaning or symbolism within the music which resonates with the context. As that context is commonly commercial and we live in a period where the musician is described as commercial producer (Strange, 2002) the suggestion is that some music may lend itself to commercial appropriation. Where music is successfully appropriated then the process can become, as comedian Vic Reeves described it, a “passport to No. 1” (Channel-4, 2002). In recent years numerous songs have gone on to become chart hits after their appropriation by advertisements (Channel-4, 2002; De Marco, 2002; Sexton, 2000). The outcome is what Derek Robson of the advertising agency Bartle Bogle & Hegarty described as a marriage between music and advertising (Channel-4, 2002).

RESEARCH ISSUES

In order to research music in everyday consumer life, a vantage point from which to view the issue is required. Within consumer research numerous writers have called for analysis of works of art as a means of gaining knowledge (Belk, 1986; Brown, 1997; Holbrook and Grayson, 1986; Schroeder, 1997). Noting how only art can convey the specific, personal, and experiential knowledge in a way that approaches the intensity and intimacy of the actual experience (pp23), Belk encourages consumer researchers to use art as a “non-traditional vantage point” (pp6) to generate hypotheses for further analysis through scientific methods. This is a similar approach to Holbrook & Grayson, Brown and Schroeder who analyse film, fiction and art respectively. In all cases, the consumer behaviour that they are investigating is directly represented in the art form itself yet this is rarely the case in music. According to the composer Mendelssohn, ‘The feelings expressed in music are incapable of articulation, not because they are too vague for words, but on the contrary, because they are too specific’ (cited by Holbrook, 1990:pp1). Schopenhauer (2001) states that music is the most powerful and penetrating of all art forms as, where other arts “speak only of the shadow... music is the essence” (pp92). Whilst recognising that music is abstract because the subject is obscure, Schopenhauer argues that music can communicate the essence of a phenomenon and, whilst we may not be able to explain why, when music is applied to context we can sense that it has conveyed the “secret meaning” of the context—it fits (pp94). This ‘essence’ is therefore difficult to represent in non-musical form. In this sense the interpretation of art as proposed by the various consumer researchers is either inappropriate for interpreting musical pieces or lacks

penetration and there exists a need to develop an alternative framework with which to consider the phenomenon.

Consumer research has traditionally observed musical response within the everyday context in which it is heard such as retail atmospherics (Areni and Kim, 1993; Bruner and Gordon, 1990; Hui et al., 1997; Milliman, 1982, 1986; Oakes, 2000; Yalch and Spangenberg, 1990). This contrasts with studies such as Holbrook & Schindler (1989) and Lacher & Mizerski (1994) that attempt to recreate the listening experience in laboratory style contexts. Outside consumer research, the context bound approach has been admired as it recognises the tendency of people to listen to music whilst engaged in other tasks (De Nora, 2000; De Nora and Belcher, 2000; North and Hargreaves, 1997b) and also because the fit of the music to the context has been illustrated to determine consumer response to both the music and the context (Areni and Kim, 1993; De Nora, 2000; MacInnis and Park, 1991; North and Hargreaves, 1996, 1997a)—hence the research focus on music in everyday life. An implication of this approach is that a new meaning emerges from the interaction of music with marketing (Cook, 1994; O’Donohue, 1997). This study seeks to develop a framework for analysing this meaning from a previously neglected vantage point, the musician.

THE PRESENT STUDY

In order to refine the research question a number of in-depth interviews were carried out adopting the humanist emergent design where initial interviews were largely nondirective (Belk et al., 1989; Holbrook, 1992). The emergent approach allows data previously collected to form the basis of an interpretation, which then defines what data are still required to test the interpretation—as opposed to data collection followed by analysis. The advantage of this approach is that it allows the research question to be formulated based on the analysis of field data in tandem with the literature review which has been argued to yield a more grounded and refined research question (Belk et al., 1989). A series of respondents were chosen who were expected to have impassioned and educated views on the notions of music in the consumer society. The interviewees included: Mocean Worker, a New York based DJ who has produced three solo albums as well as scoring the music for numerous films and documentaries. He has licensed his music to appear in several commercial contexts, Pat Hannon, a multi-award winning freelance radio advertiser who has licensed the music of many musicians, Gerald Davis—a Dublin based artist, gallery owner and jazz record label owner who has campaigned against the abuse of background music and Pipedown—an English based lobby group who campaign for freedom from piped music. Depth interviews were conducted and analysed in tandem with the literature review in order to form the basis of further research.

Amongst the themes that emerged from the pilot study was the notion of the musician as producer of commercial music. In asking Mocean Worker why the American retail chain *Old Navy* had licensed one of his songs, *Tres Tres Chic*, he responded by describing the song as being “the flavour” of the business, it was for *Old Navy*, “who we are”. He also commented:

I wrote this song and was like, “you’ll see, this song will become a coffee commercial”. And then it ends up getting used by *Old Navy* and they’re whole thing was, it wasn’t really like a loungey coffee thing but it was like pretty near close to it.

The above comment shows how even before the song became appropriated by *Old Navy*, Mocean Worker had an expectation that it would become part of a commercial. Though the song’s lyrics

contain no reference to coffee or textile or any such notion, there is an underlying meaning or intertextuality within the piece that lends itself towards commercial appropriation. Similarly when Pat Hannon licensed the song *Inside* by Moby for a commercial, he claims that he knew immediately upon first hearing the song that it would be perfect as it “underpinned the architecture” of the advertisement.

Mocean Worker stated that the conservatism of the radio stations and other cultural intermediaries in terms of allowing new forms of music to emerge, forces musicians to explore other avenues of distribution.

I think that, like, licensing is a gift to a lot of composers that would not necessarily ever get noticed because the machine, as it works now, precludes a lot of different stuff from being noticed, period. Y’know film supervisors are actively going out of their way to find this music that nobody else knows about because they want to have something exclusive in their film.

This commercially aware approach to music differs to the more traditional approaches to music. For example the artist Gerald Davis considered the commercial appropriation of music to be insulting to the musician whilst one member of Pipedown described music during dinnertime as an insult to both the musician and the chef! A common argument put forward against the use of background music was that it was found to be distracting, for example one member of Pipedown, Mr Wackett, made the following point:

I’m a great fan of music. I spend a lot of my time listening to music, *listening* to music so my ears are fairly well tuned to listen carefully. Now when this Muzak is being poured over me, I find it very difficult *not* to listen because my ears are sensitive to listening and therefore it is even more of an affront...

Similarly Gerald Davis expressed irritation at finding himself listening to music in restaurants whilst also trying to engage in conversation. These views contrast with Mocean Workers’ who enjoyed background music as a “soundtrack to your life”.

These early findings lend support to the notion of a fundamental contradiction within art. On the one hand there is the musician as artist yet content to produce music and to consume music in a commercial context. On the other hand there are those who still hold the traditional romanticised notion of autonomous music and see commercial appropriation as an abuse of and insult to music. Mr Wackett’s view of this “Muzak being poured over me” implies that such commercial music is produced by hacks and is utterly devoid of creative content, echoing the sentiments of Adorno and Horkheimer, yet clearly Mocean Worker is very much an artist who is comfortable working within a commercial context which generates its own creative process. As he put it “my music has the purpose of much of what *Muzak* used to produce, but in a much cooler, hipper way”. The romanticists, therefore, may not represent an opposite spectrum to musicians such as Mocean Worker but rather it appears that they are trapped into prior notions of what music is, an anachronistic ontology that fails to recognise the creative process at play.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK

The present study attempts to delineate a framework, which permits the views of the musician to be documented and theorised. This framework will form the focus of this year’s conference presentation. We firstly draw the research back to Adorno and

Horkheimer who claim that the Culture Industry denies musicians the ability to create music that can develop human consciousness and resistance to the capitalist form of production (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1998). We thus acknowledge there is a lack of work considering these issues from the perspective of the musician and employ a symbolic interactionist perspective to frame the production and consumption of music as part of the same process of encoding and decoding the meaning of music. It has been elsewhere argued (see Robinson et al., 1991) that an analysis of the production of music is required, ironically, before the consumption of music can be further understood. This informs the rationale for the present study which applies ethnographic methods of data collection.

The framework is therefore ambitious as it attempts to develop previous theoretical problematics. As a result it synthesises Baudrillard's (1998) "chain of signifiers", develops the framework for symbolic interactionism for musicians attempted by Robinson, Buck and Cuthbert (1991:pp14); embraces Steinert (2003) thesis that there is the 'fundamental contradiction within art' (pp88)—a tension between the traditional role of the artist in opposing bourgeois values versus the economic pragmatics of sustenance in a highly competitive and ephemeral industry; and incorporates the influences of Bourdieu in Cottrell's typology of London musicians (Cottrell, 2002:pp70). Bourdieu defines musical capital as a "measure of the desirability, from the musicians' point of view, of their participation in the event, as well as its value to them as they seek to establish a reputation and profile for undertaking particular types of work within the professional world" (Bourdieu, 1984:pp70).

Acknowledging Baudrillard, the framework notes how each of the cultural artefacts of the consumer society all signify each other in an intertextual chain. O'Donohue (1997) states that intertextuality also includes decoding in terms of how meanings generated from one text are determined partly by the meaning of others. The exchange of meaning therefore is a two way process.

This represents a research framework that acknowledges the creative processes that exist between the artist as producer of music and the advertiser who appropriates the music for commercial purposes. The intervening process involves society who encodes their own meaning to the chain of signifiers. For example, Dvorak's *Largo* is regarded as being the "Hovis song" even though it has no reference to Hovis and indeed was composed long before the foundation of the company (O'Donohue, 1997). It is that ecological context bound meaning that society applies to the music and the values that such variables represent that attract the advertiser to the music rather than the psychophysical elements of the music itself, though the psychophysical elements may imply a meaning. The musician, realising this process, produces music that becomes part of the directive path of consumption and hence there is a reflexive chain of signifiers. However this symbolic meaning within the music is represented dialectically alongside the traditional role of the artist (i.e. Mocean Worker's "hip Muzak").

The research framework focuses upon professional musicians who have been approached by marketing companies to allow their music to be used in commercial contexts. Discourse analysis shall be used in order to determine the underlying narratives and interpretative repertoires employed by musicians (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). This shall allow an investigation into how musicians regard music as dialectically opposed to the dominant logic of commodification.

DISCUSSION

The research framework embraces the spirit of change investigated in this conference. In the past the research of music in marketing contexts has typically taken the form of positivist single variable analysis studies (Alpert and Alpert, 1990; Areni and Kim,

1993; Babin and Attaway, 2000; Chebat et al., 2001; Gorn, 1982; Herrington and Capella, 1994, 1996; Kellaris and Cox, 1989; Kellaris and Kent, 1992; MacInnis and Park, 1991; Milliman, 1982, 1986; Park and Young, 1986; Yalch and Spangenberg, 1990) however more recent studies (De Nora, 2000; De Nora and Belcher, 2000; O'Donohue, 1997) reflect the marketing academy opening its doors to other forms of methodological analysis (Brown, 1995). This paper has argued that, for many, music no longer exists as an autonomous art form and a method is required that will investigate the creative process on its own terms. It is hoped that the framework, which forms the basis of on-going postgraduate research can provide a new way of investigating an underresearched phenomenon.

Whereas music has traditionally been regarded in a highly romanticised way, the integration of music into the chain of signifiers destroys music's claim to sublime status until we arrive at a point where Beethoven's music might now be regarded as the music for IBM. The transition of music into the chain has not been always been smooth. Where the meaning of the music is thrown against itself, research has found that hostility can result (O'Donohue, 1997) and Nike's use of The Beatles' *Revolution* for a commercial caused widespread revulsion (De Marco, 2002; Densmore, 2002; Scott, 1994) and accusations of, to carry forth the Yeats allusion, "fumbling in the greasy till". John Densmore, former member of the Doors recently described musical appropriation as being "bribed to make a pact with the devil" (pp4).

However when the mediated forms of musical production are considered alongside Strange's writings about the ultimate piece of contemporary music being a "really cool advert", musicians such as Densmore and their romantic approach towards music in commercial contexts appear anachronistic. Many of today's musicians, then, reject such romantic approaches to music and, like the Pop artists, ride the line that separates art from consumerism. In Ireland too this process is manifesting itself and in 2002 both the Walls and Jerry Fish & the Mudbug Club have had hit singles after selling commercial licenses to AIB and Vodafone respectively. "All changed, changed utterly" indeed, and the outcome is, to quote Yeats again, that, at least in the traditional response to music, "Romantic Ireland is dead and gone, it's with O'Leary in his grave".

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