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Comment on Colin Campbell/1. Beatles, Pop-Rock, Art of Recording

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Beatles, Pop-Rock, Art of Recording.

by Motti Regev

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One of the most sharp and precise observations about the essence of the Beatles' musical artistry can be found in Tim Riley article from 1987:

The Beatles are the first rock band for whom recording came first [...] The Beatles' work came to be conceived with the studio in mind – all the production values a mixing board had to offer were used to serve the ideas conveyed in their music. A Beatles record is more than just a collection of songs, it is a performance for tape [Riley 1987, 266].

Coupling these lines to some additional key texts on the aesthetics and creative practices of pop-rock music, one realizes that the proper way to study and analyze pop-rock musical works, be them individual songs or entire albums, is by examining them for all their expressive aspects, as one whole sonic entity consisting of multiple elements, including lyrics. Studying the lyrics for themselves, as a verbal text detached from the sonic entity of which they are an integral part, and especially from their vocal delivery, amounts to missing the artistic point of pop-rock music – both in terms of the creative ideology held by musicians or critics, and of the way pop-rock songs are received by listeners. This is also a point made clear by Simon Frith in his seminal article on songs' lyrics, *Why Do Songs Have Words?* [1986]. As he puts it:

In songs, words are the sign of a voice. A song is always a performance and song words are always spoken out, heard in someone's accent. Songs are more like plays than poems; song words work as speech and speech acts, bearing meaning not just semantically, but also as structures of sound that are direct signs of emotion and

marks of character. Singers use non-verbal as well as verbal devices to make their points – emphases, sighs, hesitations, changes of tone; lyrics involve pleas, sneers and commands as well as statements and messages and stories [*Ibidem*, 97].

In other words, there is not much point in studying songs' lyrics for themselves, as written text. As an art of recording, as a performance for tape, lyrics should be studied as vocal utterances. In order to fully grasp the impact of a recorded song, the meaning of the words, sentences and phrases should be analyzed inseparably from the specific way in which they were sonically eternalized in the particular recording being studied – most likely the canonic version of the song.

One of my favorite examples in this regard from the Beatles catalog is the song “*I want you (she's so heavy)*” [*Abbey Road*, 1969]. The lyrics of the song amount to just a few simple sentences, where the authorial person expresses craving (for a loved one). These very minimal lyrics acquire their full meaning only when we consider the expressive delivery of John Lennon for all its range and emotive progression throughout the song, including the non-verbal aspects (listen how he shouts «*yeabbbhhheee*», 4:29 minutes into the song). Any such study must also pay attention to the guitar lines accompanying the singing, as well as the walls of distorted electric guitar sound in which some of the vocals are embedded.

So while I fully support Colin Campbell's critique of “the intentional fallacy” as a method for studying the Beatles' lyrics (or any form of art, for that matter), I don't really see the point in his implied call for a “serious” study of these lyrics for themselves, as a way to account for the phenomenal success of the Beatles – especially if we understand that success in global terms, beyond the Anglo-American or even European context. Campbell writes:

[...] given that thousands of people, all around the world, have for the past fifty years, found immense pleasure in listening to the Beatles records, while the majority probably have little idea of the circumstances surrounding their composition [...], it necessarily follows that the intentional fallacy needs to be upheld, and the focus placed clearly on the words themselves [2016, 12].

I find the logic here hard to follow, given that many if not most of those individuals across the world that listen with enthusiasm to the Beatles since the 1960s have only minimal knowledge of the English language, let alone acquaintance of British phenomena referred to in the lyrics. In my interpretation, the intentional fallacy should be upheld in favor of a comprehensive cultural analysis of all sonic features of any given song or album by the Beatles. This is the only way to get closer to a sociological understanding of what the Beatles

are actually famous for, which is their songs, or perhaps more specifically, *their records* [*Ibidem*, 13],

as Campbell rightly observes (my italics). I do agree that existing research about the Beatles tends to minimize, marginalize or indeed neglect the role and meaning of their lyrics in the overall sonic appeal of their music. This should be fixed in future research, by putting more emphasis on the lyrics when examining the entire sonic impact of a given song.

There is however a broader theoretical and methodological issue implied by Campbell's article. His critique of the intentional fallacy is also a critique of the tendency in music sociology, as well as in sociology of the arts in general, to look for explanations in extra-artistic or non-artistic factors. Popularity of art works, their success, as well as their consecration and canonization is most often explained by looking at various social and cultural aspects, but not at the art work itself, its aesthetic form and content. This has been clearly a major legacy of Bourdieusian sociology (albeit, in many cases, by simplifying his work). Analysis of aesthetic substance is left to others – musicologists, art historians, literature scholars. Recent years saw the emergence of post-Bourdieu sociological work that challenges this situation, calling for, and implementing, sociological research into the form and content of art works. This is a welcomed development, no doubt. But music, without lyrics, being supposedly an “abstract” art form with no clear narrative, is usually perceived as being less accessible for socio-cultural research than novels or paintings. This is at least one reason why early sociological studies of popular music tended to focus on lyrics analysis (again, see on this point Frith's article quoted above). I believe that music sociologists should look for proper tools to analyze pop-rock music as a complex, multi-layered cultural product. Such tools might help us understand the phenomenal global impact of the Beatles' oeuvre as it radiates from their recordings, and not only from extra musical factors. I read Campbell's article as a genuine call to develop sociological research on music in this direction.

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Abstract: The proper way to analyze pop-rock music is by examining it for all its expressive aspects, as one whole sonic entity consisting of multiple elements, including lyrics. There is not much point in studying songs' lyrics as written text. As an art of recording, as a performance for tape, lyrics should be studied as vocal utterances. I support Campbell's critique of "the intentional fallacy" as a method for studying the Beatles' lyrics. His implied call for a "serious" study of these lyrics for themselves is however problematic. Sociologists should look for proper tools to analyze pop-rock music as a multi-layered cultural product. Such tools might help us understand the phenomenal global impact of the Beatles. Campbell's article is a genuine call to develop sociological research on music in this direction.

Keywords: Pop-rock; Recording; Beatles; Vocals; Lyrics.

Motti Regev is Professor of cultural sociology at the Open University of Israel, specializing in cultural globalization and popular music studies. His most recent book is *Pop-Rock Music: Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism in Late Modernity* [Polity 2013].