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Genre Formation in Popular Music¹

In the first chapter of his classic study *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* Erich Auerbach outlines several essential aspects of representation with his comparative analysis of the stories of Odysseus' homecoming in book 19 of the *Odyssey* and Abraham's offering in the Old Testament (Genesis 22:1). Auerbach takes those texts as examples of two basic styles with "determining influence upon the representation of reality in European literature."² His analysis touches upon a number of perspectives and invites us to not only read the rest of the book but also engage ourselves in questions of cultural representation.

The scene where Odysseus comes home and hides his identity from Penelope is outlined by Homer with detailed information on the characters, events, and locations. Homer unfolds further background with the long passage on the origin of Odysseus' scar before concluding the scene. All events are displayed in the foreground and uniformly illuminated with a definite time and place. The Homeric style, Auerbach says, "leave[s] nothing which it mentions half in darkness and unexternalized."³ In contrast, the chronicle of Abraham's offering tends to give us only the details necessary to establish a narrative. Its uncertainties and ambiguities challenge interpreters. In the opening scene, little is said about the location of the two speakers (God and Abraham), and there is generally little information on the looks of the characters and the motives for their actions. The biblical narrator does not explain why God confronts a human being with this challenge or why he chooses Abraham. We can read that the journey to the site of offering takes three days, but except from this we know nothing about the journey. Also, God has a more metaphysical presence than the gods in the text by Homer and this is less a cause than a symptom of the styles of representation.

One of the things Auerbach's analysis clearly demonstrates is the fact that cultural representations are generic in the sense that symbolic codes of representation regulate signifying practices. The generic concept of style is pertinent to the authors' production

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2 Auerbach 1946/1953, p. 23.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

of meanings and the interpretative practices they call for. Moreover, it is clear that style regulates meanings of many aspects of culture, including religion, authority, rhetoric, time, and place (compare, say, the symbolic contexts of the two journeys). Auerbach's book reminds us several times of the historical and social specificity of generic paradigms of representation, while also situating the practice of representation in a wide horizon. I will address generic concepts in some of the avenues Auerbach's reading inspires me to explore, but the site of construction will be more recent battlefields of cultural theory and musicology.

For all its heterogeneity, it is safe to say that the antifoundationalist mood of postmodernism in the 1980s and 1990s headed towards deconstructing rather than reconstructing theories. Postmodern skepticism toward structures and systems led studies of cultural boundaries to focus on transgression, change, and hybridity (this pervaded epistemology, too, as in James Clifford's 1986 statement that ethnography is a "hybrid textual activity" that "traverses genres and disciplines").⁴ As much as these issues are important, generic categories are still fundamental to human existence. They obviously exist if they are transgressed, and many people perceive a number of them to be natural, pure, and timeless. Others do not have the power to question their authority.

This is true in musicology, too, where scholars inevitably invest in musical categories that define their own institutional boundaries. Even in some of the self-declared 'postmodern' musicology that intends to work from an 'ethos' rather than a 'system.'⁵ What is being said (language) and done (practice) in musicological institutions is regulated by definitions of generic concepts like classical and popular music because of the power assigned to them in the musicological discourse that *rules in* and *rules out* certain ways of thinking about music. If we think of musicology as one discourse, it is made up of several internal and external currents and constantly restructured by new formations. A recent example is the formation we are going to consult in this article: the field of 'popular music musicology' in the 1990s and 2000s. The category 'popular music' has become essential to an increasingly powerful discourse framed by 'foundational' works, which have connected the concept of postmodernism to the distinction between so-called high and low culture rather than deconstruction and relativism.⁶ This is related to the fact that the legitimation of contemporary popular culture as a subject for serious study in universities is still comparatively new. It really began in the 1960s and has grown enormously since then.⁷

4 Clifford 1986, p. 26. Clifford opens his article by quoting Barthes's statement that "Interdisciplinary work ... is not about confronting already constituted disciplines ... Interdisciplinarity consists in creating a new object that belongs to no one." As much as Barthes has a point in the indirect critique of simplistic notions of interdisciplinarity, I think it is impossible to go beyond all disciplinary boundaries.

5 Kramer 1995, p. 5. One might notice just how much this book invests in the category 'classical music' and sense the feeling of cultural otherness about Elvis Presley (*ibid.*, pp. 229-230 et passim).

6 See Middleton 1990, Moore 1993/2001, and Brackett 1995. These books are closely related to other foundational books in a broader field of popular music studies as represented by, say, sociologist Simon Frith (1996) and philosopher Bernard Gendron (2002).

7 Mukerji and Schudson 1991, p. 3.

At the turn of the 21st century we are in a position to face new as well as unanswered old questions about generic concepts of popular music. Our vocabularies consist, among other things, of local concepts and concepts appropriated from cultures of classical music; in both cases further discussion and theoretical integration can advance our knowledge. New questions come up when we try to understand the subject in the context of contemporary culture in general and popular music in particular. To mention just a few major processes, which have caused profound changes in our ways with generic concepts, one can think of the general debilitation of the divide between high and low, the aesthetization of everyday life, globalization, and digitalization. These are some of the avenues yet to be explored in the study of musical styles and genres.

This article intervenes in ongoing discussions of fundamental cultural and historical aspects of Anglo-American popular music. The general ethnographic context is the United States in the late 20th century. I am concerned with discursive boundaries of the concept of popular music, both in respect to its internal and external relations. Here, the concept of genre is essential because it is, to a great extent, the basic generic level in the sense of being a main point of reference in classifications of popular music.⁸ My principal question is this: How can we understand popular music genres in the context of popular music cultures and their generic systems?

1. 'Genre' in Vocabularies of Generic Concepts

I use the word 'generic' in a common sense definition as a general concept for referring to or being of a certain kind. My definition includes everything from the yet unnamed, intuitive recognition of differences in kind, to loose distinctions in everyday life, and distinct classificatory concepts such as genus, species, class, group, category, and type, which may be loaded with theory.⁹ We can discriminate *general* generic concepts like genre and style from *particular* generic concepts like blues and rock. The former refer to different classificatory concepts; the latter to particular kinds of music. My main reason for using the word generic so much in this article is simple: It enables me to discuss the concepts of genre and style on a general level. To have a common word for genre and style is also practical if we want to represent the two concepts without having to discuss the problems of them being used interchangeably and confusedly in discourses on popular music.

The origins of 'generic' and 'genre' in the Greek word 'genós', in Latin 'genus' (kind and lineage), call attention to the work of biological and organicist metaphors. From the perspective of cognitive semantics it is no surprise that our experiences of birth and death, growing up in a family, having a gendered identity, being distinguished from

8 Cf. Wicke 1997a, p. 389f.

9 This definition is close to the first section in *Webster's Dictionary*: "of, applicable to, or referring to all the members of a genus, class, group, or kind; general." ("Webster's" 1996, p. 796). This is similar to the short definition in *Duden*: „das Geschlecht od. die Gattung betreffend." (Wermke 1996, p. 588). A good German handbook has the following short definition: „Ausdrücke, die Gattungsnamen oder Typenbezeichnungen darstellen." (Prechtel and Burkard 1996, p. 184).

animals, and so forth, affect our understanding of other domains, including music. It can be advantageous to explore the conceptual potential of biological metaphors, but we are well advised to remember that there are differences between nature and culture. A basic point, here, is that taxonomies of culture cannot claim to represent order in the same way as taxonomies of nature, which are nomothetic and do not deal with the ways in which nature is experienced in aesthetic and emotional terms. Taxonomies of culture are not as objective and have much more social and historical specificity.

To illustrate change in taxonomies, i.e. hierarchic generic systems, we can take the old dichotomy of genus and species. The dichotomy has commonly referred to more and less general groups, respectively, as in the medieval maxim 'genus proximum et differentiam specificam,' but leading scholars in the 20th century have argued that this distinction is based on an arbitrary choice of classificatory principles. The same can be said of the relationship between style and genre in generic systems: Their positions are specific to the context in which they are used. In theory of European art music in the 17th and 18th centuries, style was the principal overarching category. It was common to divide music into three main styles (church, chamber, and theater), and, incidentally, they correlated with the social organization of music. Style was generally situated on a higher and more general level than genre. But things were different both before and after. Michael Praetorius, for instance, outlines a taxonomy in the third volume of his *Syntagma musicum* (1619), where he first distinguishes between vocal and instrumental music and then organizes four-five levels of genres under these two headings on principles of the selection and use of instruments/vocals. After 1800, the concepts of style and genre took on new meanings with the decline of normative poetics and the advent of autonomous aesthetics.¹⁰

Nevertheless, generic paradigms of European art music have enjoyed a high degree of stability and monopoly compared to other music cultures. This has got to do with discursive space and power. The most powerful cultural institutions in society, chiefly the church and the university, have defined generic systems of dominant musical culture and paid little attention to people outside of the institutions or to other musical cultures.¹¹ This situation has changed significantly with, among other things, the dominance of Anglo-American pop/rock in the Western world and with changes in the critical discourse of musicology.¹² Whereas the academy used to find it natural to control musical terminology, the academy neither has the power nor the ideology to do this anymore. In popular music studies, scholars are simply forced to deal with the terms disseminated by the powerful music industry. There are moments of confrontation between everyday language and academic language, and scholars have reasons for paying

10 Danuser 1995, pp. 1048-1054.

11 Danuser's (1995) article 'Gattung' in MGG attests to this fact.

12 In the new edition of Grout's *A History of Western Music*, we are now told that 'the Western art tradition' is but one of several other musical cultures that deserve study and that art is a loose concept (Grout and Palisca 1960/2001, p. xiii). This recognition of particularity is absent in the main body of the book, but the profile of the foreword surely reflects a change in the official politics of the musicological establishment.

special attention to this in these formative years of popular music studies. It is also difficult to balance between adopting local concepts from everyday life on one side and constructing theory on the other.

The distinction between genre and style is a case in point: In vocabularies of classical music the distinction is fairly clear with strong conventions for using the word genre to distinguish between, say, 'vocal' and 'instrumental' and style to distinguish between different manners of expression within the same cultural sphere such as 'modernism,' 'neo-classical,' and 'minimalism,' usually situated in relation to the same unilinear canon with little attention to national and regional differences. Libraries, publishers, history books, and radio stations have long shared the classificatory system of periods, composers, and genres (in the sense of vocal, instrumental, piano, symphony, concert, etc.). The situation is different in cultures of popular music in which the most common framework is a catalogue of styles and genres with little systematic codification. It would be foolish to say that generic systems are uncomplicated in classical music, but some things are easier if they are controlled by the educational system and if the demographics of the classifiers are small and homogeneous. Vocabularies and classifications of popular music are primarily regulated by the music industry and magazines in a dialectical relation with local communities. Popular music is produced in a fast, opaque flow of international exchanges, and less stable and isolated than some other musical cultures. A major reason for this is, of course, market capitalism.

Funk, punk, hard rock, euro-pop, and acid jazz are examples of generic categories for which there are no clear consensus among academics as to whether they are styles or genres. Outside of academia the uses of 'style' and 'genre' are much more liberal and have considerable overlaps.¹³ Media studies has tended to focus on genre, the Birmingham-school of cultural studies has focused on subcultural styles (as in Dick Hebdige's study of punk), and a number of conventions have been established in musicology but without much of a tradition in theory.¹⁴ If musicologists now regard heavy metal a genre, it is due to things like nominalistic practice, intuitive distinctions, and an influential monograph,¹⁵ and not because a general, theoretical framework of genre has been established.

For all the vagueness of the concepts of style and genre in vocabularies of popular music – and this is an important point about the indistinctness of these two concepts – they both refer not only to kinds of music but also to distinct cultural spheres, except in a few instances as when genre is applied specifically to a selection of instruments or when style is applied to individual artists or to a whole period. Jazz and rock are not only different in terms of musical qualities; they have different concert venues, magazines,

13 See, for instance, Moore 1993/2001, pp. 1-3; Shuker 1998, pp. 145, 158, 237 et passim. Shuker allows for this problem by writing that 'punk rock' is a musical 'style/genrē' (ibid., p. 237). The overlap between genre and style is demonstrated in the empirical analyses by Fabbri (1999, p. 10).

14 Hebdige 1979. A recent example that clearly shows that there is now a tradition in cultural studies for focusing on style rather than genre is Erling Bjurström's (1997) dissertation on taste and social stratification in Swedish youth cultures. On genre concepts in media studies, see Berger 1992.

15 I am thinking of Walser's highly influential book on metal (1993). Cf. Berger 1998, p. 17.

and represent different social values. This is also true of smaller generic categories within cultural formations such as punk as Hebdige has demonstrated. Here, I believe, is a major difference between generic concepts of popular music and some other kinds of music, for instance classical music and military music, where musicians dress more uniformly and are less divided in social fractions. These aspects are related to the fact that generic maps are different in different musical cultures.

I am not the first to take notice of the cultural dimension of popular music genres. In his article 'A Theory of Musical Genres' of 1982, Italian musicologist Franco Fabbri writes about "musical communities" that are "variously structured," but he has little to say about this and operates with a rather closed and static framework.¹⁶ Informed by Fabbri, Simon Frith gives us a more sophisticated understanding of genres in *Performing Rites* of 1996. He uses the term "genre worlds" in relation to "a complex interplay of musicians, listeners, and mediating ideologues," and explains what he means by this in about a page.¹⁷ As the third link in this chain, media professor Keith Negus have coined the term "genre culture" in his 1999 book *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*. Building on Fabbri and Frith, Negus sheds much new light on the role of the music industry in genre formations, but does not have a clear and detailed definition of the concept of genre and how it might be distinguished from other generic concepts.¹⁸

A distinction between genre and style can serve as an example of how I deal with basic problems of generic systems. First, a distinction is useful because it enables us to have a more differentiated understanding of popular musical cultures. The distinction is widespread, if unclear, and a more case sensitive and systematic one can refine our understanding of certain cultural divisions. Second, the distinction may require sophisticated theory, but it is good to have a distilled version, which is as simple and close to the aesthetics among people in popular music cultures as possible. Third, the observation that there is no universal generic system does not have to lead us to the naïve conclusion that people do not agree about anything at all. We can start by identifying just a few broadly shared conventions and reflect on their cultural logic.

Without having a statistic report, I am convinced that a handful of generic labels are generally considered to be genre labels by musicologists and by major parts of popular music cultures. Ten examples are the labels Tin Pan Alley, jazz, R&B, country, rock/pop, soul, reggae, disco, hip hop, and contemporary dance music (techno and house).¹⁹ I find it practical and valid to have a concept of popular music genres that focuses on

16 Fabbri 1982, pp. 59-60 et passim.

17 Frith 1996, p. 88.

18 Negus 1999, particularly pp. 24-30.

19 For a general presentation of these labels, see Frith et al. 2001; Garofalo 1997; Shuker 1998; Wicke 1997a. For the purpose of gathering information on musical culture in America, a 1992 questionnaire from 'The Survey of Public Participation in the Arts' included questions about generic preferences. Item 37a in the questionnaire listed 20 different 'types of music' (the word 'genre' was used in a research report), and respondents were asked "which of these types of music you like to listen to?" The ten genres that were most popular are 'country/western,' 'rock,' 'blues/R&B,' 'big band,' 'jazz,' 'classical/chamber,' 'bluegrass,' 'show tunes/opera,' 'soul,' and 'folk' (DeVaux 1995, pp. 36 and 62). I wonder how people would have responded if they had the possibility to choose their own labels. The labels offered in the questionnaire were neither strictly systematic nor very representative of the

genre cultures and does not include the meaning of genre as a selection of instruments. Few people would claim that the catalogue of the ten labels given here is uncommon and has no classificatory logic at all. We can go on to say that many people often perform the systematic operation of subdividing several of these labels, for instance with terms such as folk rock and soft rock. These distinctions are not always designated by a prefix as with the label 'bebop,' which is considered a subcategory of jazz, and the systematic structure is frequently nebulous. Heavy metal, for instance, is a form of rock, but also considered a genre with its own subcategories and then we have at least three generic levels, but we cannot simply add up as in a taxonomy of a biological family, because they are not organized in this way in people's minds. The concept of style is very often applied to subcategories of genres, and I take this hierarchical dimension as the essential principle in my general distinction between style and genre.

2. A Theoretical Framework

This outline of a theoretical framework departs from the assumption that a genre is a cultural formation, which is constituted in particular places and historical processes. The genre begins somewhere and can be disseminated along many different avenues in dialectical relations with a wide range of social contexts through the practices of production, distribution, consumption, representation, and regulation. To understand this complex space of cultural formation in its entirety we need more than a systematic account of the individual dimensions and processes. A narrative can help us to understand connections between the different aspects. Holistic notions of an integrated totality would, however, be inadequate to the fluid and fragmentary character of culture. My strategy is to focus on a few essential aspects and understand them in the large context of a genre formation. I organize a framework that has an overall progression with elements of chronology in the sense that it follows principal stages in the life of a genre. While genres are not formed in the same way, all popular music genres are involved in two basic processes: they are *founded* (and *codified*) in what I shall call 'center communities' and they are *negotiated* (and *re-codified*) with other cultural spheres to which the culture of the center communities might disseminate. Negotiation is going on all the time, but in organizing a systematic progression I find it legitimate to distinguish between initial and subsequent stages of a genre formation.

The concept of genre proposed in the present article is primarily developed in relation to the ten examples mentioned above. These generic formations have had a significant presence in Western discourses for more than a decade – significant enough to have become part of the standard vocabulary in everyday life, media, and general books on popular music. This version of my framework does not deal with very small and marginal generic formations, but it is open to revision, and the concept of genre can be used in other ways. I have no objections to the concept being applied to selections of instruments/vocals (sound genres), profiles of radio stations (radio genres),

generic vocabularies that circulate in America. Rock, country music, and R&B, however, are included in most vocabularies of popular music.

or between Muzak and new age music (genres whose position in the category of popular music is doubtful). It does make sense, however, to center a concept of genre on musical practices rather than, say, periods or sale figures. Anthologies like 'Greatest Hits of the 60s' are organized by decades, and the 'New Releases' bin in the record shop are marketing categories rather than generic categories; the former refer to an era and the latter to the time of production rather than musical qualities. Categories like 'Easy Listening' and 'Music for a Romantic Mood' might be included in a catalogue of popular genres, even if they are constituted very differently from other genres: they are primarily created through the music industry's eclectic appropriation of music from different musical cultures, and they are defined very much by listener functions, with no distinct communities, festivals, venues, and magazines.

2.1. Emergence and Basic Operations of Codification

Popular music genres have been constituted by people who have shared codes for defining a particular kind of music and built a social network. There are different ways to go from here, and I prefer to begin with social and etymological-semantic context. Generic concepts circulate as representations in rich webs of meanings, and we can develop a thick description of a genre by identifying local concepts and ideas about a generic field and their references to putatively essential music examples, musicians, and places. Unfolding meanings of a concept in a larger context, we can gradually learn more about the generic category, how it is applied to music, and what the act of naming means to various people. The point is to have an interpretative context before interpreting in detail, and then move back and forth in the continuum between text and context. This is part of my strategy in the following outline with a bipartite division of what I shall term 'social network' and 'codes, values, and practices.'

A social network

Each of the genres under consideration has emerged as a musical culture with an open-ended *social network*. I assign this concept to what is often a loose connection of heterogeneous social formations that involve different communities and manifold experiences of what is perceived to be the same kind of music. Thus, my concept of network represents partially shared, diverse, and multilayered ontologies. Connections between some parts of the network may be loose and remote. People do not necessarily feel that they are part of a large collective musical movement to share and support the social organization of a genre. We can conceive of an overall network of, say, rock that includes everyone who listens to the music once in a while and participates in activities that uphold the existence of rock. On these principles, networks have been different in size, structure, and power in ways that can be selectively paralleled to the differences between the roots of small plants in a garden or a whole rain forest with a semi-autonomous ecological system.

Within their networks, genres have had their own *center communities* of specialized musicians, listeners, and performance venues. I define a center community as a com-

munity that a large part of the network orient itself towards. It gives direction and helps to keep the pieces together. Well-known representatives of center communities are often performers with status as 'leading' or 'key' figures and celebrities, and they can be a starting point when we try to uncover the social network of a genre. Center communities are found in at least a few cities and sometimes in more than one country. They often consist of people from different social groups. In some cases, center communities of a genre have extended to specialized magazines, radio stations, and departments in record shops and record companies. Such institutional apparatuses are suppliers and mediators of representations in and between center communities. This is crucial to an understanding of why the social basis is so important to the definition of a genre, and why genre cultures can change significantly in situations where governmental support is changed or when the music industry relocates its resources from one genre to another for economical reasons. When a genre enters the educational system, for instance, it also intersects with practices and ideologies of pedagogy and governmental politics.

It is useful to distinguish the concept of center community from that of an *inner circle*, which denotes something smaller and more intimate than a center community. In my scheme of things, an inner circle is part of a center community and acts as its elite when agents declare themselves to be authoritative experts and insiders in opposition to imagined outsiders and the general public. Inner circles are minorities among musicians, critics, and fans, and these subject positions have often been quite distinct.²⁰

A few examples should substantiate some of these ideas: The formation of Tin Pan Alley as a genre took place in communities at the institutional centers of production and distribution in New York (Broadway) and Los Angeles (Hollywood) with key figures such as Irvin Berlin and Jerome Kern. The network of listeners has largely had the form of a mainstream without substantial center communities or inner circles. In jazz, we can point out a few neighborhoods in American cities (Storyville, Chicago's South Side, and Harlem) as homes of center communities from which paradigmatic styles were disseminated and leading performers resided. The formative stages of jazz followed the wider migration to northern cities, and it developed into an international network with communities in many cities, including Paris and Oslo where communities have struggled with their experience of being outside of the center country on the other side of the Atlantic. New York is still widely regarded as the leading jazz city of the world. Countless books and films testify to this, and so does the career ritual among musicians from all over the world of trying to play in one or more of the city's famous clubs. Inner circles emerged among musicians and fans in the 1920s and had a strong presence in jazz criticism from the very beginning.²¹ If we take rock as yet another example, it is worth noticing that international exchanges (particularly between the U.K. and the U.S.) were important in the formative stages of the genre. The contemporary dance music

20 See my article (2003) on representations of jazz in fiction of the beat generation. It discusses social relations between beat writers and inner circles of jazz cultures in the 1940s and 1950s with reflections on the concept of inner circle.

21 *Ibid.*

scene of the 1990s has largely been club-based and scholars have coined the term 'club cultures.' These clubs have accommodated a myriad of changing communities and collective associations between audiences.²²

Codes, values, and practices

To understand a few more basic aspects of genre formations we can proceed by taking a closer look at the flow of communication in the network. What are people sharing? Well, to begin in broad terms, we might say that people share music and some of the meanings they produce of music. Non-musical aspects are part of our experiences of music, and if we acknowledge that the musical and social are deeply interconnected, there is no sharp distinction between text and context. It is therefore reasonable to have a general concept of symbolic meaning, knowing that it has its limitations and needs to be supplemented by knowledge of musical specificity. The symbolic substance of a genre can be conceived of as a set of *codes* that are articulated in music and in interpretations of music. By 'code' I mean a correlation between signs, concepts and 'things' (objects, events, etc.), for instance the code or convention of connecting the word, idea, and experienced phenomena of a sunset; the code is more or less arbitrary and sanctioned by social conventions. The connection between sign and concept is a basic pattern in the production of meaning.²³ Take another example: A group of people can hear certain sounds and perceive them with a shared mental concept of music, which they represent with the word, or sign, 'music' in a shared language. A third example is how groups of people have set up a relation between certain melodies and texts, a general concept of the generic category called genre, and a particular concept represented by the word 'blues.' They have a communal conceptual and representational apparatus to make sense of the phrase "If I feel tomorrow : like I feel today" and musical performances thereof.

The word 'rule' can be used fairly synonymously with code and emphasize aspects of regulation and power, but it would be a simplification to say that meanings are dictated from one part to another in a one-way transmission. Some of the strengths of 'code' lie in its references to communicative relations and the practices of encoding and decoding. Identifying a set of codes does not enable us to organize all meanings systematically as if we had the key to a golden box with magic diagrams. Rather, it enables us to see that codes facilitate and govern the production of meaning. In this line of thought, genres are cultural systems that function as interpretative contexts. To be sure, signs, codes, and practices do not operate separately but are organized and classified in relation to each other in representational systems and discourses.

We can use the word *sign* as a general concept for sounds, words, images, objects, and gestures that represent concepts. We can then observe how strings of signs have

22 Cf. Bennett 2001, chapter 8.

23 There is no universal agreement about this, of course. My position is in line with the constructionist position represented by the late Stuart Hall, who has also been a source of inspiration for the following passage (Hall 1997a). I appreciate Hall's way of connecting linguistics, semiotics, and discourse theory in a cultural studies framework.

been connected to the same generic concept through codes in a genre system: Rock has been constituted as a genre by people who have shared musical signs such as riffs, distorted sounds, a rhythm group with electric guitar, and linguistic signs from vocabularies of particular youth cultures. These signs have been interpreted along with visual signs like long hair, jeans, light show, and monumental loudspeakers. Similarly, people have associated the label jazz with signs such as swinging eighths, a trumpet as lead instrument, and sophisticated harmony. The visual appearance of a jazz group has included signs like soloists in a cool pose, tuxedo, certain hats, and applause after a solo. The applause is an example of codified behavior that participants learn as members of the genre culture: they share a code for interpreting this as a gesture of appreciation for the individual soloist.

The aim of this outline of the production of meaning is to install a few important components in my theoretical framework of genre. This puts my bricolage in the front and the origins of the appropriated elements in the back. I do not intend to give a detailed account of semiotics. Others have written extensively on this. What is pertinent to the further construction of genre theory is closer attention to the specificity of the musical practices and social networks of the genres concerned. Some tools and approaches have a wider range than others, and this is somewhat relative to the individual genre.

In large genre complexes such as jazz and rock there are much heterogeneity, and then it is hard to discern the genre codes. It is easier with a small and comparatively homogeneous genre like disco, which has the social network of a style or sub-genre in a large genre, but is usually not considered to be part of a large genre complex. I should add that this distinction between large and small genres is not always straightforward because generic alliances can change and are related to issues of canonization (who wants to be small and powerless?). Disco, for instance, is sometimes subsumed into the overarching category of contemporary dance music that includes house and techno. And the idea of jazz as a genre that subsumes different generic categories has been subject to constant debate and did not acquire a secure position before the 1950s when a canon with an evolutionary narrative of a jazz tradition was codified.²⁴

A musicological method of defining music is the simple *style* analysis that registers musical qualities in parameters such as form, harmony, and so on. This is useful for the purpose of giving technical descriptions of some aspects of genres and its range is broadest when dealing with a small genre. However, simple style analysis confines itself to a rather limited range of aspects and has little conceptual space for psychological, aesthetic, and social aspects. With large genres, a catalogue of technical stylistic qualities will be small because many of such qualities have a high degree of historical and social specificity. The large genre complex of jazz cannot be defined adequately as a style or by a list of stylistic qualities. There is great stylistic instability and very few, if any, stylistic qualities are shared by all jazz styles.²⁵ Just try to compare New Orleans jazz and

24 DeVeaux 1991, pp. 525-545.

25 Cf. Holt 2002.

free jazz. Some stylistic qualities, however, function as *genre paradigmatic stylistic qualities* in the sense that they have been essential in the formation of the genre and are widespread throughout most of its history. This can be said of swinging eighths and chorus improvisation in jazz. Stylistic qualities have also functioned as markers of a genre once they have been considered typical of the genre by many people, as when a specific harmonic turn signifies 'blues' or a bebop motive 'jazz.'

Genres are also constituted by shared *values*. Country music has been widely regarded as representing life in the provinces, with cowboys and truck drivers as common characters. It has been associated with working class males, whiteness, nostalgia, and simple emotions. This is a simplification, but it points to essential values in the genre. It is more difficult to find shared values in large genre complexes. One strain of rock culture rejects artificiality and another idolizes it. One is avant-garde, another mainstream. I believe that it is possible to find shared values in rock, and we could start from the assumption that rock was formed as the primary music for pleasure, dance, and construction of identities among the majority of white youth cultures in the period c. 1965-1990. Genre systems have been structured by notions of whiteness (Tin Pan Alley, country, rock/pop) or blackness (blues, jazz, reggae). Even sexuality has been part of genre codes as in the disco communities that were open to gay male sexuality, a subject that has generally been excluded from country and jazz.²⁶ It should be mentioned that values can change radically in the history of a genre. When jazz emerged, it had low-brow status and musicians were entertainers rather than artists, and this picture has almost been turned upside down.

Some of the most wide-ranging conventions are *practices*. Inasmuch as fundamental practices in a genre endure while signs and values change, such practices enable us to see elements of a changing same. A practice is not necessarily fixed to specific meanings in historical and cultural contexts. We can loosely distinguish between musical and social practices, knowing that musical and social meanings intersect. General musical practices concern the creation of and communication with sound. These include performing techniques as when a singer yodels or raps, a guitar player uses a particular method of strumming, and a DJ remixes. Or practices for accompanying such as a walking bass and a melodic or harmonic bass line, which can be performed in many styles and genres. Practices of composition and improvisation can reveal important genre differences: Rock/pop performers typically have their own repertoire, whereas it is far more common in blues and jazz that a large part of one's repertoire is also played by many others. There are also genre differences in the practices of solo improvisation, which is minimal in Tin Pan Alley and disco, common in rock, and essential in jazz. Social practices concern behavior and communication when performing and listening, and they include rituals in dance halls, nightclubs, and festivals. There have been genre specific conventions for certain moves with a foot, shouting, or head banging. There are also differences between practices of organizing groups: rock musicians usually work as band

26 In a discussion of sexuality and genre, Negus reports that the recent phenomenon of 'the lesbian cowboy' has functioned as a subversion of the codes of the country genre (Negus 1996, pp. 123-135).

members in groups with a band identity and jazz musicians usually free lance as individuals with ad hoc groups.

2.2. *Negotiating Boundaries and the Work of Media*

Identity and classification

Genre formations and the directions they have taken after initial codification have been conditioned by the dominant values, codes, and technologies in the society at large as well as the particular contexts of interaction between center communities and other parts of society – musical and social. The social position of the initial center communities has had an effect on the further development of the genre, just as changes in the general opinion about the music have changed opinions about people in the center communities. One example is how jazz has advanced the acceptance of African-Americans; another is how the overall shift in rock cultures in the mid-60s from working to middle class communities coincided with a dramatic rise in the accreditation of rock. We also know that the music industry has handled genres in relation to ethnicities of center communities and performers, as is the case with R&B departments and hit lists (racial segregation) and with world music distributed by country and name but rarely by genre.²⁷

The social position of communities is not only relevant to the understanding of how a genre has been received by the society, but also to the ways in which the genre formation have been defined by its internal discourses. I am thinking of relations between cultural identity (class, gender, race, education, etc.) and the practices of representation, production, and consumption. Working class communities, for instance, have usually not negotiated boundaries in sophisticated discourse and tended to concentrate more on orality and visuality than on writing. Bourdieu is still an influential scholar of relations between social status and cultural practice, and there is every reason to read him, but, as others have pointed out, his theory is encumbered with reductive homologies and a monolithic concept of culture. A particular problem is the mapping of genres to one position in a general cultural hierarchy. People might agree about the position of a musical genre in a hierarchy, but this does not necessarily correspond with actual divisions in musical cultures and it depends on a severe reduction of cultural complexity.²⁸ I suggest we loosen up the concept of homology and replace it with the concept of connection and a more plural and free flowing concept of culture.

A number of weak minorities have identified with one particular genre and considered it a symbol of their struggle. Genres that have emerged in and become associated

27 On racial segregation, see Garofalo 1993. On world music, see Taylor 1997.

28 It is reasonable to question the type of visual representation where the social sphere of a genre is indicated with a dot on a map. A fair critique of this dimension of Bourdieu's theory says: "The attribution of popular tastes and activities to class, for example, tends to obscure the complex ways people make sense of and use their tastes. Still, Bourdieu integrates the constellation of culture into a broader analysis of society as a whole, which the production-of-culture approach rarely even attempts." (Mukerji and Schudson 1991, p. 34).

with a weak minority have typically had limited access to the public sphere, and the music has been redefined and detached from the minority when appropriated by other social groups. Jazz, soul, and hip hop are examples of this. The usual thesis of appropriation says that they emerged in black communities, were initially ridiculed and subjected to attempted suppression, and as resistance gradually eroded they became absorbed and redefined in ways that reduced their association with blackness.²⁹ In several respects, heavy metal exemplifies roughly the same pattern in different ways. It emerged in small subcultures of primarily young, white males from the working class in the early 1970s, received virtually no airplay, and only entered the mainstream in the 1980s when it became popular with a more gender-balanced and middle-class audience.³⁰

Genre and industry

The music industry has had an important role in genre formations and their mediation between people. The following observations on a few basic aspects of this subject are indebted to Negus' pioneer sociological study *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*. A fundamental question is how we understand the position of the music industry in society, and the prevailing answers to this have been positioned in relation to the concept of a 'culture industry' in the Frankfurt school and the 1970s Marxist theories in British cultural studies. The 'production of culture' school in cultural studies has studied how owners exercise control within corporations and what the consequences of this have been for workers and the public. Influenced by political economy, it has demonstrated how production occurs within unequal power relations, how social minorities are being marginalized, and how a small number of big entertainment companies can dominate a field of cultural production and widen deep social divisions. Today, more than 80 per cent of the global trade of recorded popular music is in the hands of five major record label groups.³¹ Negus points to another side of the coin by stating that cultures produces an industry "to stress that production does not take place simply 'within' a corporate environment structured according to the requirements of capitalist production or organizational formulae, but in relation to broader culture formations and practices that are within neither the control nor the understanding of the company."³² Companies are run by people who are members of a culture, and their activities are not confined to the formal occupational tasks and specific place of work. Accordingly, Negus and Paul du Gay have adopted the concept of 'cultures of production' that involves a critique of both the Frankfurt school and previous theories in cultural studies.³³

Generic concepts are essential conceptual tools for the music industry to control and, in effect, constrain the flow of culture. Generic concepts, and especially genre, help

29 Cf. Hall 1997b, p. 32.

30 Walser 1993, p. 3.

31 They are: EMI (includes Virgin), BMG (includes RCA and Arista), Warner Music Group (has the biggest market share in the US), Sony Music Entertainment (bought CBS in 1988 and Columbia in 1989), and Universal/PolyGram (merged in 1998, Universal formerly operated as MCA) (Negus 1999, pp. 35-45).

32 *Ibid.*, pp. 15 and 19.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 21.

the industry to organize music in business units in order to produce and sell it and improve the statistics of the success of the artist they employ. Presumably only one in eight artists sells enough to recoup the company's initial investment in them.³⁴ Genre is used as a way of integrating a conception of music with a notion of the market, and this regulates the genre system in terms of both social network and symbolic codes. The industry cannot sanction codes single-handedly, but it transforms the codes. All these aspects become more tangible if we look at the role of generic concepts in the practical organization of the corporate structure of record companies. Major companies have organized their production, catalogues, and promotional systems in discrete departments according to generic categories. This generic differentiation means that what is defined as 'rock,' for instance, is produced by other people, on other conditions, and maybe in other places than what is perceived to be other kinds of music and assigned to, say, the 'rap' or the 'classical' department.³⁵ From the very first moment, musicians are positioned in departments by generic categorizations that control the production, marketing, and distribution of their music. This system is part of the major record companies' portfolio management whereby each department is assessed by a head quarter that gives priority to profitable genre departments and cuts down or simply closes departments in recession.

Media and ontologies

In addition to the transformation and regulation in the production of recordings, a crucial dimension of the work of media is the transportation of music that involves ontological transformation from live performance to mechanical objects that can reproduce sound independently of the people, time, and place of creation. Thus, music can easily be disconnected from center communities and brought into circulation among virtual audiences in multiple avenues of communication. Distribution of music by way of records, radio, television, and the internet, helps to establish genre codes among large groups of people and the pervasive capitalistic logic of organizing music in clear-cut business units comply with our instinctive desire to make simple typological distinctions of the vast complexity of social reality.

At the same time, media complicates generic boundaries through constantly changing and inconsequent generic vocabularies, the extreme quantity and diversity of distribution, and the obscured ontological relations in a situation where codes are negotiated in multiple spaces. Genre formations consistently become displaced from the initial contexts of production and brought into other contexts. A particular performance of music like, say, Bing Crosby's 1942 rendition of "White Christmas," continues to be reproduced for many different listeners in many different contexts, and music is transformed in time and place when recordings bring a rock festival into a living room or when a person downloads recordings of Bessie Smith, Dolly Parton, and Eminem and organize them

34 These considerations are primarily based on Negus 1999, pp. 1-62.

35 These issues are dealt with throughout Negus' book. To exemplify genre departments, Sony has a department for alternative rock in New York, one for Latin music in Florida, and one for country music in Nashville (*ibid.*, p. 49).

to be played successively on a mini disc while jogging in a park in Jerusalem.³⁶ The generic experience of this jogger is very different from those of the communities in which the music was produced. The jogger is a peripheral participant in the genre cultures and does not live in the social and historical contexts where the genre systems emerged. Boundaries change when music is disseminated to new contexts.

For all the virtuality and displacement in technological mediations of music, initial center communities continue to inform new communities and listeners in general. Many people appreciate different kinds of music and do not identify with a genre culture, but their attitudes towards a genre are informed by center communities. A listener who likes rock 'n' roll or heavy metal will have some idea about where and by whom the genre was formed and the values it has represented, but s/he does not have to participate directly in those communities in order to learn some of the codes. This information is easily transmitted via cover notes, pictures, magazines, movies, and encounters between people. Magazines codify concepts, boundaries, distinctions, and, in turn, aesthetic discourses. As a general rule, magazines for devoted listeners and fans have strong feelings for the genre label and a more sophisticated definition than record companies and mainstream mass media.³⁷ Rigid boundaries are more useful to the industry than to fans, and the functional aspect also explains why radio is more genre sensitive than record shops. With radio, the records are heard consecutively, while they just need to be easy to find in a record shop and adhere to consumers investments in a persona or group. Record shops mostly situate all the records by an artist together in the generic category in which s/he has been accredited a discursive position. Records by Ray Charles are likely to be found under 'soul,' including his ventures into country and jazz, just as Joni Mitchell's jazz records are to be found together with the rest of her work under 'rock.'

3. *Concluding remarks*

I could continue to specify, exemplify, and add new components, but my aim is not to present a definitive, all-encompassing theory. My ideas and arguments are hopefully articulated with enough substance and consistency to constitute a coherent theoretical framework. Various disciplines and epistemologies have been brought into play for the purpose of developing a wider perspective in the study of genre in cultures of popular music. Part of the endeavor has also been to integrate and synthesize knowledge from relevant academic fields to develop a more complete understanding of the subject. I have persistently tried to retain a broad concept of culture that encompasses people, places, institutions, industries, meanings, practices, values, experiences, and ontologies. Genres are not simply constituted as classes of musical objects. A genre can be conceived of as a set of symbolic codes that are organized and constituted in a social network at particular moments in history, and the boundaries are negotiated in multilayered

36 Cf. Bohlman 1999, p. 31f.

37 Cf. Walser 1993, pp. 4-5.

ontologies between different interpretative contexts. My theoretical framework necessarily contains some suggestions for guide lines, or theoretical codification if you will, and I am well aware that some people will find my methodological dispositions inappropriate and disagree with me. I accept this as a basic condition of scholarship and consider it as yet another reason to keep the construction of theory as open as possible, both in terms of transparency (the Homeric style!) and receptivity to dialogue and revision.

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