
A World of my Own

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Introduction

At around 9PM one Saturday night, the pianist looks over from his station to see the familiar faces of businessmen, naval officers, frustrated artists, and failed lovers as they make their way inside the local piano bar in search for some solace in the drinks and music on offer. This brief scenario, which Billy Joel describes in 'Piano Man', demonstrates various archetypal properties of a narrative (characters, setting, temporal progression, and so on) as the result of extrapolating information in the song's lyrics. However, this is not to explain how I experience the work, either in the context of the recorded track or in terms of how I picture the narrative environment Joel describes.

The enduring popularity of the song can be seen, at least partially, as due to Joel's engaging lyric writing and its specification of an immersive narrative environment. Listening to the track, for instance, I do picture the hustle and bustle of the scene and also, however momentarily, imagine myself within it. Indeed, as Roger Watt and Roisin Ash argue in the context of the psychology of musical listening, "loosely speaking, music creates a virtual person" (1998, p.49). A related description by Michael Frayn of his experience of literary narrative in terms of accommodation and participation in the world of a story, is remarked upon favourably by Allan Moore, who extends this to suggest that popular song can also invite listeners to position themselves in the place of narrative agents (Moore, 2012, pp.184-185, referring to Frayn, 2006). For this to be the case, though, the relationship between our virtual self and narrative characters must be contingent on our impression of the world in which the story takes place.

Whilst hermeneutical analysis has established an important position within popular music studies, less work has attempted to make connections with ideas from narratology as to how interpreters experience the situations and events described by texts. In this essay I will show that narratology does have much to offer to discussions of musical interpretation. I will first outline an intersection between two discussions of the subjective basis of musical meaning and related work in the field of cognitive narratology, paying particular attention to the concept of *storyworlds*, a heuristic model of a narrative or scenario as experienced by its interpreter. I will then synthesise these ideas with the theory of affordance in order to provide a means of discussing musical

meaning which acknowledges the importance of both the text — that is, a recorded popular song — and the listener.

Subjectivity

For centuries, debates in epistemology and the philosophy of perception have questioned our engagement with what we typically call ‘the real world’ and the received notion of a coherent, shared reality. The alternative contention, that our understanding of lived experience is contingent upon the limits of embodied, subjective perception, suggests that all we can know of reality is subjective: we do not interact directly with the world, but via a mental representation of it. A popular scenario to exemplify this is a brain which is artificially sustained in a vat and provided with electrical stimuli that correspond to the perceptions of a simulated world (see Putnam, 1981)¹. Whilst the brain in this scenario is disembodied, it perceives an artificial simulation of a world capable of misleading it to think it is embodied. To the brain, its true state is unknowable, and so, by analogy, is ours. This scenario challenges us to reflect upon the nature of perception and objectivity through its suggestion we cannot know what is beyond the limits of our own subjectivity.

Despite the centuries-old questions raised by sceptical philosophy, discussions of meaning and interpretation, particularly within the tradition of literary theory rooted in Russian formalism and later structuralism, have held that meaning is encoded and transmitted by a text. However, with the arrival of poststructuralism (see, for example, Barthes 1977 [originally 1967]), the interpreter of the text, the reader, began to be seen as a more significant and, indeed, more authoritative agent in meaning-making. Under the traditional model, interpretation constitutes the accurate or correct perception of meaning, as exemplified by Phillip Tagg’s ‘basic communication model’ of musical meaning, which regards meaning as the transmission of an *intended idea* by means of a *transmitter* through a *channel* which the *receiver* perceives and decodes into a *response* (Tagg 2013, pp.174-178). In ideal cases, the response and intended idea should be equivalent and Tagg suggests that when they are not, this is a matter of ‘codal interference’, or

¹ Putnam’s scenario here is largely an updated version of Descartes’ seventeenth-century thought experiment concerning an evil demon similarly capable of misleading its quarry.

'codal incompetence', which arise from the listener associating different responses to musical signs than the producer intended or expected.

By modelling musical meaning in this way, Tagg captures the attractive prospect that meaning results from intentional representation, and he is able to draw observable relationships between aspects of the text and perceived meaning. This approach thus makes possible his aim to discuss comprehensively the aspects of music which inform meaning. However, by placing interpretative authority with the composer, Tagg's model does not recognise the possible validity of alternative readings, by different listeners. In this respect, Tagg's approach can be contrasted to Simon Waters' discussion of access to timbral music which calls for a vocabulary to describe musical meaning that "acknowledges the complicity of the listener in listening (as an *interpreter*, not merely a *receiver*)" (1994, p.134, italics in original).

In his discussion of narrative and interpretation in the context of popular song, Keith Negus makes a forceful case for recognising the importance of subjectivity in discussions of musical meaning. Negus argues for a middle ground between absolutist and relativist models through "an approach that is attuned to the limitations of both the authoritative, monological, objective, definitive, or dominant interpretation and the pluralist, solipsistic, subjective, individual, or personal perspective" (2012, p.380). As he argues, songs participate within broader social narratives and the listener's interpretation is informed by textual components in addition to his/her biography. As Negus notes, though, the subjective position of the listener is mediated through interactions with other individuals, and we rarely encounter songs independently from surrounding textual and social discourses. Hence, Negus advocates a strategy which investigates the intersubjectivity of listeners, and the intercontextuality of social practices and narratives around the production and consumption of songs.

Negus' advocacy for an approach which considers the context(s) of musical consumption draws on earlier work by Chris Kennett (2003), who critiques the arbitrariness of semiotic musical analysis, which, he claims, fails to account for individual meaning as it does not address the influence of the listener and listening context upon musical meaning. He rightly observes that this semiotic approach may therefore greatly misrepresent how musical meaning is understood by an individual listener. As academic music analysis conventionally takes place in a high-fidelity,

focussed listening situation, for instance, he suggests this can only account for musical experience in similar listening situations, that is when the listener is listening attentively for the purposes of analysis in a high-fidelity environment with the same psychology, motivation and knowledge of the original analyst. This is not how most listening takes place. Kennett proposes as an alternative to semiotics a 'cultural-acoustic model' in which, as for Negus, musical meaning is negotiated *between* the listener and the track, with the text now the track *as experienced by the listener*. Kennett demonstrates his approach with a hypothetical scenario at a wine shop, in which he describes the different listening profiles of the middle-aged manager and her two customers, a trendy bank clerk and an elderly Major. Kennett suggests that each listening profile constitutes a different musical text, as the 'same' piece of music is heard differently, in terms of individual attitudes, situations and hearing ability. If each listener hears the music differently then, in Kennett's scenario, their responses differ correspondingly.

Although Kennett's approach rests on a critique of Tagg's semiotic method, as Allan Moore has noted, his "model, paradoxically, is closer to the semiotics he dislikes precisely because the meanings he suggests listeners may make in his thought experiment do not bear any determinant relationship to the music under discussion" (Moore, 2012, p.221). Indeed, Kennett does not support his approach with any study of actual listeners, which would, in any case, require them to adequately communicate all relevant aspects of their engagement with the music. Negus, on the other hand, summarises a classroom discussion of Steely Dan's 'Kid Charlemagne' as an instance of intersubjective interpretation, yet cannot fully account for the breadth of intercontextual and intersubjective factors which mediate the perspectives of the individuals concerned. In short, although both authors make persuasive cases for meaning as a negotiation between text and listener, they do not show how such negotiation works in practice.

Worlds and Narratives

In the analytical approaches critiqued by Negus and Kennett, meaning is regarded as encoded within a text. In principal, this is helpful by facilitating the general discussion of musical meaning which Negus' and Kennett's approaches cannot. It does, however, leave us unable to account for individual perceptions of meaning. This concern for subjective meaning can similarly be found in

the field of cognitive narratology, a discipline which investigates issues of narrative comprehension in relation to a variety of media on the level of the individual interpreter. Indeed, Monika Fludernik (2010 [originally 1996]) argues that narrative is not encoded within a text, but instead exists in its interpreter's experiencing consciousness. She thus decouples narrative from the sequences of events represented in a text and proposes that narrative is, rather, a function of the interpreter organising aspects of a text within a narrative structure. For Fludernik, then, it is the reader, rather than the author, who 'narrativises' the text. Her concept of narrativisation here supports the key point of Negus' and Kennett's arguments; she suggests, like them, that the perception of meaning arises from negotiations between the text and individual experience.

Related work by David Herman and Marie-Laure Ryan similarly charges the interpreter with the construction of narrative 'universes' or 'worlds' from the text. Expounding on the theory of possible worlds in relation to narrative, Ryan (1991) discusses the constitution of what she calls the 'textual universe,' which refers to a system of reality (whether fictional or not) as represented in a text. As Ryan continues, she contends that perceptions of systems of reality are mediated through worlds of representation and possibility. Herman also focuses on the textual domain, providing a more general encapsulation of Ryan's textual universes in what he refers to as 'storyworlds.' As Herman describes them,

"storyworlds are global mental representations enabling interpreters to frame inferences about the situations, characters, and occurrences either explicitly mentioned in or implied by a narrative text or discourse. As such, storyworlds are mental models of the situations and events being recounted - of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what manner" (2009, pp.106-107).

In other words, storyworlds are contextual frameworks of narrative parameters, as specified by the text but formed in the mind of its reader. We have already encountered one discussion of a storyworld, for instance, in Kennett's wine shop and the behavioural inferences he makes based on his take on the hypothetical situation.

Herman and Ryan are in general agreement that these worlds are constructed in the mind of the interpreter and hence, subjective. Indeed, Ryan makes it explicit that she regards a reader's understanding of a world to be formed from the negotiation of textual cues and his/her embodied experience through proposing a principle of 'minimal departure' (*ibid.*, pp.48-60). Ryan's rule contends that textual universes are reconstructed from what a reader knows from

his/her embodied lived experience external to the world of a particular text. A similar argument is made by Nelson Goodman, upon whose work Herman's discussion is built. As Goodman sees it, "worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already at hand; the making is remaking" (1978, p.6). The principle of minimal departure provides us with an important explanation to how it is possible that to suspend disbelief or otherwise engage with worlds of narrative media, including song, for it suggests that our experience of a storyworld is built from — and hence shares the logic of — external schema used to negotiate our way in the actual world unless the text specifies otherwise (see also Rick Busselle and Helena Bilandzic 2008).

Storyworlds, Affordance, and Musical Meaning

Returning to discussions of music, several scholars have employed the concept of affordance (from ecological psychology) as an alternative to semiotic approaches to musical meaning (see, for example, Clarke, 2005; Moore, 2012; Windsor and de Bézenac, 2012). James J. Gibson, who introduced the term into psychology, defined affordance in terms of the possible interactions which the properties of an environment offer to a perceiving organism. In this respect, Gibson understands affordance as a "substitute for values, a term which carries an old burden of philosophical meaning. I mean simply what things furnish, for good or ill" (Gibson, 1966, p.285). Hence, affordances are not exactly a property of either an environment or its perceiver, but rather the result of interactions between them. In Clarke's discussion of the concept, he emphasises the value of Gibson's concept not just in terms of visual perception but by reference to action consequences, such that "[a] chair affords sitting, a stick affords throwing, raspberries afford eating, a sharp pencil affords writing" (Clarke, 2005, p.38). As affordances relate to aspects of an environment interpreted by a subject, the concept is clearly useful for accounts of musical meaning that regard text and listener as equally necessary agents in meaning-making. The term is also compatible with the notion of constructing storyworlds. Indeed, Clarke's use of the concept to demonstrate how music affords meaning and his identification of affordance in terms of action consequences are both encouraging for this discussion, as they allow us to discuss worldmaking in songs in terms of affordance.

Within such an ecological framework, we can describe a music track as an environment in which elements *afford* to the listener ways of worldmaking or world deformation. Such information is often highly schematic in the case of recorded popular song. Typically, details are made explicit in the lyrics, though could also be reflected in the musical environment or aspects of production. Hence, when Billy Joel describes the bar worker John and his concealed melancholy in 'Piano Man', he offers to me the opportunity to furnish my storyworld with the mental image of how my understanding of John might look and behave, which I do so through negotiation between the schematic information provided by the text and my understanding of barmen from my actual world experiences. I could equally, though, remark on Joel's use of a stepwise descending bass pattern which evokes a sense of weariness attributable to the protagonist, the piano man Bill. Or even, a momentary change in the phonographic staging of the accordion at 4'29" which makes it appear to waver very briefly between the left and right channels of the stereo mix, coinciding with the line "and the piano, it sounds like a carnival." Whilst this is uncharacteristic of the production of the track, this sudden and unexpected animation invites me to embellish the world with the excitement and kinesis of a speeding swing ride at a fairground.

Due to the schematised nature of worldmaking information in popular song, Ryan's rule of minimal departure dictates that we tend to assume correspondence with the actual world unless a text specifies otherwise. In this way, songs are capable of blurring boundaries between a possible world and real life events of their authors, which Moore identifies as a "dominant aesthetic position" (2013, p.9). 'Piano Man' offers a fitting example of this in the way that Joel voices a first-person perspective of the piano player, also named Bill, referencing his own career as a saloon player.

In his article on narrative theory in the study of popular music, David Nicholls (2007) suggests that narrativity is dependent on the interaction of different media or aspects of a track. Similarly, as with 'Piano Man,' we can attribute aspects of worldmaking to the affordances of the track's lyrics, music, and production. Unlike Nicholls, however, I hold that the storyworld I perceive has been inflected by my subjective position, as it represents the negotiation of textual affordances and external schema, and that a narrative interpretation would require the narrativisation of my storyworld. To this list of lyrical, musical, and phonographic aspects, one

could also add Nicholls' concern for album packaging, Frith's (2007, originally 1987, p.270) interest in the representation of pop performers in the media, Negus's attention to the social role of songs, and the contexts of listening which interest Kennett.

Conclusion

As the philosophy of perception suggests, all that we encounter is through our own subjective perceptions and perspective. For us as listeners and analysts, authorial intent thus remains ontologically undecidable, which is problematic to discussions of meaning in terms of correspondence to the reported or posited intentions of an author. Worse still, such approaches also negate the interpretative authority of the listener. Some sympathy with these concerns can be found in cognitive narratology and its consideration for how we as individuals experience texts and structure meaning. For Fludernik, as for Negus, and Kennett, a meaning has to be understood as something constructed from negotiation between a text and its reader.

Derived from cognitive narratology, the concept of storyworlds provides a useful heuristic model of the situation or narrative described by a song and allows us to discuss individual interpretations in the context of the information which can be found within a recording. Combined with the principals of narrativisation and affordance, I have suggested that recorded songs influence the construction of a storyworld through schematic cues which afford worldmaking to the listener, and that this storyworld provides an organisational framework in which interpretation takes place. This model therefore regards meaning to be a negotiation between the text and an individual's own subjectivity. Thus, the interpretative agency of the listener is maintained without compromising the importance of the text itself.

The task now is to explore further the role of storyworlds in the conception of musical meaning, thus contributing to further study of narrativity in popular music. As Nicholls (2007) writes, this remains a somewhat neglected area of inquiry in popular musicology, which is hampered, perhaps, by the situational (as opposed to narrative) nature of most lyric writing. However, by applying the theory that storyworlds act as a basis of narrativisation by the listener, we are able to open discussions of how we as individuals experience narratives in song — an

avenue of further research that gives hope of theoretical advances for narratologists, musicologists, and creative practitioners alike.

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