

Introduction

You switch on the TV. It is a music show. A band is introduced as the latest thing on the indie scene. Yet when the camera cuts to them you see two middle-aged women playing acoustic guitars. Strumming gently they start to sing about a lost summer's days and world peace. This must be a joke. This is not indie music. The look, the instruments, the sound and the words are not how they should be. An indie band should not look like this. Their music should be more 'raw', 'darker' and troubled, as should their lyrics. In terms of attitude they should be more intense and yet indifferent at the same time, but certainly not brightly warm and eager. The next act to be introduced is billed as the latest boy band. They are introduced as producing their special brand of 'music from the soul'. Again this must be a joke. Boy bands don't play music from the soul.

You switch channels. There is a movie showing. It is a scene of suspense. You have no idea what is going on but you can tell because of the music. Then the mood changes, as indicated by the music, to suggest a happy moment. But how can we so easily understand this meaning? It seems that we do so with no effort whatsoever.

We often hear music referred to in terms of creativity, of self-expression, as ground-breaking. In record reviews classical composers and jazz musicians are often credited with producing music from the soul. Singer-songwriters are depicted as almost being slaves to their innate talent. These artists are often contrasted with those that are more manufactured, such as a boy band. The latest bands on the music scene are talked about in terms of their originality and their 'new sound'. Yet the example of the indie band and the film music suggest that there are patterns and conventions in music. Yet these are seldom discussed.

For a band to be recognised as 'indie' certain boxes have to be ticked – a particular look, a sound, an attitude. We are familiar with talking about such bands in terms of genre, but less so in terms of the precise details of sounds and look that qualify such categories.

We can quickly recognise when a band does not sound like a particular genre of music but we lack a language to describe just why this is so apart from using adjectives such as 'mellow', 'raw', 'rhythmic'. The fact that we can recognise moods connoted by music in a film suggests that we have some kind of repertoire of sound meanings or associations in our heads. Yet we are for the most part not familiar with trying to describe what these are.

This lack of a language to describe these sound and music details is not the same as lacking theoretical musical knowledge, although this of course can be true on one level. Often when a contemporary artist makes a cover version of a song previously released by another artist the music in many ways stays the same. The melody notes remain the same, as do the chords that provide the backing. What changes are the sound qualities on the instruments, the timbre of the voice, the rhythm and the instrumental arrangement. So a band like the Sex Pistols can transform Frank Sinatra's 'My Way' into something that expresses pure contempt. In this book it is this level of musical language that is of primary interest. The aim is to provide a toolkit through which we can describe the changes, the meanings of sounds, at this level.

Of course we might simply want to believe that music really does communicate with the soul, that when we hear music it does touch something deeper in us. In fact historically some musicologists have thought that music did just this, that it came from a different plane, that it was the sound of God or Heaven. And there are very good reasons why many of us still wish to believe that music is indeed about higher meaning and the expression of the individual. We will come to these in Chapter 1.

This is not the approach taken in this book. From the 1970s sociologists such as Becker (1974, 1976) have shown that what we call art, including music, is not so much about creativity but the result of shared conventions and shared definitions as people come to inhabit cultural spaces. Music too is about cultural definitions as people come to create meaningful worlds in which to live. This book deals with music as part of the way that through culture we come to give meanings to what after all are just noises (Levitin, 2006). Why does a distorted electric guitar sound meaner than an acoustic guitar? Why do punk vocalists use tense throats and seem to sing through their noses, whereas some singer-songwriters use more breathy sounds? Why do we think of conga drums as creating a beat which connects to our bodies whereas the rhythm of a clock does not? This book is about describing and analysing the shared conventions and associations that allow music and sound to have meaning for us.

For the most part music itself is highly formulaic and predictable. Some even think of it as having much in common with language (Cooke, 1959; van Leeuwen, 1999), even that music is a sort

of by-product of the centrality of language to human evolution and the kinds of development in our auditory cortex this has involved (Pinker, 1997). When we talk we draw on a repertoire of word choices. These words are designed to fit in a grammatical structure. So to some extent what we can say and how we can say it is predictable and takes predictable forms, or genre. This has to be the case to make communication possible. A more careful look at music reveals similar kinds of repertoires, patterns and structures. What sounds 'happy' has particular features, as does what sounds emotionally expressive, or emotionally contained. How these sounds are built up with others into arrangements itself follows a formula and can itself influence the meaning of individual sound choices. As listeners we tend not to think about music in this way, yet an indie band or a folk band will draw upon particular musical language in order to communicate particular associations. They will use a particular range of sound types, melody types and instruments in the way that a speaker will use certain words and grammatical features in order to make meaning through language.

There is a visual language of music too. Bands must wear the right gear and have the right haircuts. The right mood must be created through publicity shots and record sleeves. So in theory we should be able to describe the available repertoire for creating musical moods and looks.

Lyrics themselves can communicate something about a band that can be analysed. Heavy-metal songs tend to contain different lyrics than rap, folk or country music. And lyrics that deal with the same topics over time take very different approaches to them. We are more familiar with assessing song lyrics in terms of the story they tell, how much they contain feeling, what message they have. But when we look more carefully we find much deeper meanings that tie them to particular times, places and ideas.

This is the aim of this book. In the way that a linguist might document the linguistic resources and structures available to create meaning in linguistic communication, we look for the kinds of semiotic resources and patterns available for communication in the sounds, images and worlds of popular music.

To some this kind of approach might sound like music is being reduced to its nuts and bolts and therefore removing the way that it affects them, the way it moves them. This is partly because in our society we understand what we call art, including music, in terms of the 18th- and early 19th-century Romantic tradition. We have inherited a sense that artistic creativity comes from within. This is why in popular music the singer-songwriter is so important. Their music is the outpourings of their soul. As Raymond Williams describes, in this tradition, the artist – whether musician, painter or poet – has the business to

read the open secrets of the universe (...) the artist perceives the Essential Reality, and he does so by virtue of his master faculty Imagination. (1961: 56)

At the heart of this view is the idea of the artist as genius and art as in touch with a greater reality or a greater truth. To suggest that there are patterns and conventions in this process is therefore to challenge the very idea of music being almost spiritual, affecting us in a deeper, unfathomable way. While such ideas are not necessarily made explicit in the 21st century they nevertheless still have a huge influence over what we think music is.

The problem is that this Romantic idea treats creativity as mystical (Toynbee, 2003: 104). Drawing on the social psychologist Bakhtin (1981), Toynbee sees all communicative acts as to some extent ventriloquated from previous ones. In other words, when we speak we draw on what has been said before. This existing repertoire is what we can think of as culture. Music can be thought of in the same way in that it draws on what has been heard before. All aspects of musical styles can be understood as being part of cultures at particular moments, although of course how we understand and hear them – the meaning they have for us – may be different than for audiences at the time of production. Toynbee argues that far from being an outpouring of the soul ‘Creativity is thus manifestly a cultural process’ (2003: 111). Yet we still hold on to the myth of the individual creator as we enjoy the idea of individualism, and it makes us feel special when we feel we can recognise talent.

How we talk about music has itself has been shown to be very important in the study of popular music (Frith, 1996). This talk is part of the way that we come to know how to understand music, to have a relationship with it. We also use music to talk about ourselves, and this is another reason that the dissection of music into established codes and conventions seems to take away its essence. This demystifies the self, placing us as members of a wider culture rather than as special individuals.

McClary and Walser (1990) have said that to dissect music ‘is to compartmentalise it into atomic bits that no longer seem related to the entity that was able to seduce and move audiences. It is cut off from its power source’ (p. 286). But we can still learn about the way music works without removing the importance of its affect. When linguists describe grammar and the way that lexical and grammatical choices can signify particular broader meanings, we do not see that this somehow reduces what language is or therefore diminishes the way that it has an emotional effect on us. We do not consider that to analyse the language of poetry or novels is to somehow take away something of the way that they can inspire us. The affect music creates for us cannot be denied, but how we hear something, how

we talk about it, and the meaning it has for us, must be understood sociologically rather than as being something in the music.

Without accepting the fact that there are conventions and a repertoire of cultural meanings we cannot explain why a band must behave in a particular way on stage depending on genre. What if a female singer-songwriter tore up her ethnic jewellery and smashed her violin at the end of her set? Why do we sit in still silence to listen to classical music, yet are obliged to move around for rock? When we look at record sleeves we can easily anticipate the kind of sounds that are found on the record itself. These are all sets of established conventions that can be seen as communicative resources. Frith (1996: 91) said that, in order to be recognised as punk or country,

a piece of music has to have certain aural characteristics which include playing conventions – what skills the musicians must have; what instruments are used, how they are played, whether they are amplified or acoustic; rhythmic rules; melodic rules; the studio sound quality; the relation of voice to instruments.

Frith argues that while sound is organised according to formal rules so is the behaviour of the artists both on and off stage. Of course there are really no fixed genre boundaries, and we cannot exactly describe the rules for genre, but what we can do is look at the kinds of semiotic resources being used in particular cases – visual, lyrical and musical – and what these are used to communicate.

Music as discourse

Wall (2003) has suggested that rather than thinking about the way bands have musical influences we should consider the idea of ‘music culture discourses’ (p. 21). He says: ‘Music sounds are part of the wider cultural practices, which collectively constitute our knowledge of popular music’. These influences, which he refers to as discourses, constitute whole ways of playing, listening, moving to, talking and thinking about music. In Wall’s terms we have broadly shared discourses about what music is, how it should be made, how it should be listened to (people get offended on hearing Mozart or a favourite pop song piped through the phone while on hold, or used for an advert) and also for explaining why music is good and bad.

Walser (1993: 28–9) has suggested that music can be thought of as functioning much like verbal discourse. He says that,

by approaching musical genres as discourses it is possible to specify not only certain formal characteristics of genres but also a range of understandings shared among musicians and fans concerning the interpretation of those characteristics.

Hibbett (2004) used this idea to study the discourses used by fans to talk a particular genre of music, indie, showing how they used terms such as 'authenticity' and valued certain kinds of 'raw' sounds through which these are signified. In this study there is a clear sense that these discourses not only allow the fans to know about and share the music but also to go on to constitute what the music can be, how it should sound and what look acts should have.

While these writers make important points for the approach taken in this book, as is common in media and cultural studies, none offers any clear definition of what they mean by discourse, nor say systematically how it should be studied. Since the concept is a core tool in this book, however, there is the need to be more specific. The concepts of discourse used in this book is as generally found in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and it is one useful way to analyse the ways that sounds, images and words can have particular meanings and sum up to a broader picture or message. And there are more recent developments in CDA that allow us to assess visual and sound semiotic resources too.

In CDA the broader ideas communicated by a text are referred to as discourses (van Dijk, 1991; Fairclough, 2000). Individual lexical and grammatical choices in texts are examined to show the kinds of discourse that they signify. These discourses can be thought of as models of the world, in the sense described by Foucault (1978), which can include kinds of participants, behaviours, goals and locations (van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999).

In traditional semiotics it has been common to talk about the way that signs can connote meanings. For example, a flag can connote meanings about nationalism. So it can connote, to some, national glories and pride of a people. To others it might connote inward looking, narrow mindedness. So in each case the flag can connote a particular set of circumstances, identities, values and sequences of events. These are what we refer to as discourses. So if we saw a national flag flying outside someone's house it might connote a kind of identity such as a person who was not open to multiculturalism. This would suggest a set of values such as racism or xenophobia and a sequence of events such as might result from intolerance and exclusion of 'othered' groups.

More recently in CDA there has been a visual turn, inspired mainly through the work of Kress and van Leeuwen (1996, 2001). Prior to this discourse, analysts had focused on the way that discourses, were realised through the linguistic mode. But Kress and van Leeuwen showed how we could systematically analyse how this happens visually through photographs, pictures and visual designs. Out of a concern to include much of the visual meanings that had been missed in linguistic-oriented CDA, Kress and van Leeuwen argued that much

communication is 'multimodal' rather than 'monomodal'. Therefore, discourses, along with their values, participants, actions settings, etc., can be connoted by both linguistic and visual choices. They revealed that just as we can study lexical choices in language to reveal discourses so we can study choices of visual semiotic resources.

In this book we are interested in the way that visuals, sounds and lyrics are all able to communicate discourses multimodally. In other words, on a record sleeve, the contents and style, the poses of the artists, the kinds of melodies and sounds they produce, the words they choose for their lyrics all connote discourses. The importance of this will become clear in Chapter 1, where we find that there are certain discourses that tend to dominate popular music and it is often in the interests of artists to be able to signify these.

Multimodal semiotics

While traditional semiotic approaches address the way that individual signs connote or symbolise as we saw in the example of the flag, the multimodal approach used in this book is concerned with the choices of signs available to communicators and the way that the meaning of individual signs changes when used in combination with others. In this approach it is important to first describe and document the range of possible choices available to communicators. This *social semiotic* approach draws on the Systemic Function Linguistics of Halliday (1978). This is based around the principle that language is comprised of a shared set of lexical and grammatical options that can be used to build meanings. When we speak we can choose between words such as 'big' or 'small' to convey meaning. We can use modal verbs such as 'possible' or 'certain' to convey levels of commitment to truth. Halliday was able to create exhaustive inventories of the kinds of choices available that were displayed as *system networks*. This means that if a speaker makes one particular choice then they eliminate one possible pathway of other word choices and move onto others. These networks of choices can be represented diagrammatically.

Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) argued that the same process of analysis could be applied to account for the options available in visual communication. In traditional semiotics it was usual to describe the way that a colour (such as red) connotes sensuality through its association with flushed lips. But when a designer chooses a particular shade of red they do so rather than other possibilities such as cooler blues associated with rationality or brown colours associated with earth and organics. They also make a choice to use a saturated or more muted red, a pure red or an impure red. All of these involve

choices from options that can be used to create specific meanings. National flags, for example, will use saturated, pure colours to indicate certainty and emotional vibrance rather than muted impure colours that would connote moderation and uncertainty.

Halliday (1978) explained that the signs from which we are able to choose to create combinations do not have fixed meanings, but have 'meaning potential'. To continue with our example of colour, a saturated red might alone be used to communicate sensuality. But if we combine that red on a design alongside three other highly saturated colours – yellow, blue and black – its meaning changes. Such a use of colours, a loud, varied colour palette, is often used to communicate vibrancy and fun, or could connote garishness and lack of taste, for example. Clearly in such a case it is not just the hue that has meaning potential but the degree of saturation. This meaning would have been different had the colours been all dilute as opposed to saturated.

The point is that we need first to be able to describe the available repertoire. We must then treat this as an inventory of potential meanings. In our analyses we first describe the semiotic choices found in a text or visual composition and, second, describe the way that meaning potentials are activated.

Just as words and visual elements and features involve choices from an available repertoire of meaning potentials so we can think about sounds in the same way. At the start of this chapter we thought about the way we can grasp the meaning of a movie simply from what we hear on the soundtrack. Just as we can tell much about the meaning of a magazine cover from the uses of colour hue and its level of saturation and purity, so there are features and qualities of music that can be inventorised and which can be thought of as having meaning potential. As with language and visual communication, these are comprised of a repertoire of associations built up in our particular culture and also through the relationships of sound to qualities to our basic physical experience of living in the world. So when we see a scene in a film we can ask: What is the meaning potential of a deep sound compared to a high-pitched one, a rasping sound as opposed to a smooth one? What if there are many rapid accented notes as opposed to several longer, more softly articulated notes? And what are the iconic meanings of particular recognisable sounds, a petrol motor as opposed to an electrical engine, a clanging machine as opposed to the clicking of a computer? In all these cases we can ask what kinds of broader discourses each of these choices connotes.

We can ask the same kinds of questions about popular music. Do vocalists use large or small pitch ranges? Do musicians play in unison or as individuals? Do they use vibrato or not, and if so is it highly regulated? All of these involve choices from repertoires of meaning potentials that are realised through use in combination with other

sound choices. But importantly we need to avoid simply randomly choosing sounds and sound qualities to show what they signify, in the manner of traditional semiotics, and take care first to show the available choices. The following chapters deal with inventories for different semiotic modes in popular music: image, sound and word. Chapters 2 to 5 show how we can systematically analyse the ways that pop musicians communicate about themselves through these different modes. Through each they are able to draw on repertoires of meaning potentials.

This book is titled *Analysing Popular Music: Image, Sound and Text*. What is meant by the last part of the title has been clarified. But what is meant by 'popular music' here requires a few words. Much of the music and the artists analysed in this book are from contemporary music from the 1960s onwards. But there is also reference to classical music, jazz and blues. Contemporary pop music cannot be understood without drawing connections and differences. But for the most part 'popular music' in this book refers to the music that surrounds us in everyday life. We continually hear adverts that contain music. We hear movies and film drama, music in supermarkets and while we are put on hold at call centres. This music is used as entertainment, to provide background mood, to give things salience, to fill spaces, to create meanings to settings, people and events. While the main aim of the book is to provide a way to analyse what we would normally think of as 'pop music', this is best done through an analysis of the different ways music is used.

It is also important here to say something about the context of listening. To some extent the analyses provided in this book are 'disembodied'. This means that they are removed from the actual everyday way that we normally listen to music. As we will argue in the next chapter, there is in fact no 'neutral' or 'natural' way to listen to music. But it has become common in media and cultural studies to point out that how people interpret media will depend on many individual, cultural and contextual factors. What a television programme or magazine will mean therefore is in no way fixed but depends much on the viewer themselves, and on how and where they watch. We can argue that the same goes for music. The songs and sounds we analyse throughout this book may be listened to and enjoyed by people generally in their car, while they share food with people, while in a sweaty gig. The actual meaning of a song or set of sounds can change for us over time. A really great record that made us want to jump around might later depress us as we associated it with a break-up with a partner, for example. This issue of context should be borne in mind throughout the book. But in the tradition of linguistic analysis that this book takes as inspiration, it has been shown to be highly productive to identify some of the repertoires of meaning potential

that can be found in music and sound. And while there have been many studies of audience uses of popular music there have been few that have explored the way that its sounds can be analysed.

The toolkit provided in this book is aimed at those with no prior musical knowledge. Even where, for example in Chapter 5, there is discussion of the meaning of the different notes in a musical scale this is translated into a kind of analysis that can be easily carried out by a non-musician – although the kind of analysis that takes place throughout this book gets easier with practice. Sections and chapters contain activities to help develop such familiarity.

The book's contents

Chapter 1 introduces some of the discourses we have for thinking about music drawing on sociological work done on music. The aim of this chapter is to explore the main discourses of music that we find communicated through the images, music and text produced by different artists. Theorists have pointed to the centrality of the concept of authenticity, of music being from the soul, where only certain kinds of artists can lay claim to this ability. The origins and uses of this concept are explored. This takes us on to consider the way that some music is associated with the body and other music with the mind and why 'black' music is associated with the body and with movement. It is revealing to consider why there seem to be rules for expressing how we enjoy certain genres of music. Some writers have dealt with the way we talk about music that has certain predictable patterns, asking why we believe that our ability to appreciate certain sounds says something about us as people. We explore these patterns. The chapter then moves on to look at two areas that have been central to the study of popular music. One is the idea of music being part of subcultures, asking whether this is indeed the case. The second is the idea of creativity versus corporate control, itself a largely invented distinction but nevertheless important in the way we like to think about music.

Chapter 2 is the first of two chapters that deal with the analysis of the realisation of the discourses dealt with in Chapter 1 through visual semiotic resources. The chapter begins with an analysis of the iconography we find on record sleeves of different artists, looking at settings, poses and objects. It then moves on to modality. This is one way to analyse what is real, more real or less than real in images. This is one important way that discourses can be managed and comes from analysis of truth claims in linguistics (Hodge and Kress, 1989). While we use record sleeves as examples for analysis the toolkit can be equally applied to webpage, magazine features and other kinds of publicity material.

Chapter 3 continues the analysis of visual resources, moving on to typography and colour. Van Leeuwen (2005) and Kress and van Leeuwen (2002), using their social semiotic approach based on the functional linguistics of Halliday (1978), showed that it is possible to look for the ways that qualities of typeface and colour can be used to communicate ideas and moods, and create coherence across images. On any composition these can be described precisely in the manner of doing a lexical and grammatical analysis of written texts. We can then consider what discourses are being communicated. Why, for example, do some artists use curved rather than angular fonts? Why do they use letters that are spaced out rather than close together? As regards colour, why might some record sleeves contain saturated colours and others more muted colours and a more limited colour palette? As we show, such semiotic choices are fundamental to the way that artists communicate about themselves.

Chapter 4 moves on to the analysis of lyrics. Many dismiss lyrics in pop music as fairly trivial, especially since most of them seem to be about falling in love or breaking up. But some analysts have shown that even love songs have changed dramatically over the years and reflect broader cultural changes. What men and women look for in relationships, what problems they have with each other and how they deal with break-up have changed reflecting changing gender roles and notions of sexuality and individualism. In this chapter we show that bands can communicate broader discourses about themselves even through lyrics that at first listening seem quite abstract or mundane. We begin by looking at the underlying activity scheme in lyrics. This allows us to reveal the underlying cultural values expressed by bringing out the core sequences of activity in the song. We then look at how to analyse participants and action. In the first case we think about the 'who' of the song. Are these named? Do they perform roles? Are they 'babes', 'American idiots', 'anarchists', 'the people'? In the second case we consider who has agency in the song. Drawing on Halliday's (1985) account of linguistic categories of action we show who considering who does what is revealing of the social world connoted in lyrics.

Chapter 5 is the first of two chapters that present a toolkit for analysing the music itself. In these two chapters we are interesting in the way that choices of semiotic resources in sound can connote discourses. This chapter deals with the meaning of pitch and melody. Why is it usual for some folk singers, such as Bob Dylan, to use a very limited pitch range, while in soul music we might find very large pitch ranges? In punk we even find whole songs where the singer hardly deviates from a single note, therefore using an extremely restricted pitch range. And why does much folk music use melodic phrases that descend in pitch, whereas much pop uses rising melodies? All of this, we show, is connected to giving out of emotions and emotional containment.

Chapter 6 is the second of our chapters that deal with semiotic choices in sound. This chapter deals with the meanings of arrangement, sound qualities and rhythm. Here we are interested in the actual kinds of sounds used by different artists, a 'raw' sound compared with a 'melodic' or 'soulful' sound. What are the semiotic resources used to create these and how does arrangement affect the way these create meaning?

Chapter 7 assesses the extent that one genre of music shares musical and sound quality features. A number of theorists have argued that genres of music are associated with particular discourses, for example that indie music is authentic and anti-mainstream. But there has been no analysis of the way that such discourses are communicated through sounds. Using mainly the concepts from Chapter 5 but also drawing on those from the preceding chapters on image and lyrics the chapter analyses the music of three British pop songs.

Chapter 8 offers a number of ways to analyse the music and sound effects in movies. In film studies there has been work explaining *what* music does in film but none that has dedicated itself to showing specifically *how* it does this. In the first part of the chapter we look at how music creates setting, character and action. In the second part we start to explore the way that music combines with sound effects. In Chapter 2 we show that images, like language, can be judged in terms of modality. This is to do with how elements and features appear as they would were we to see them in real life. Are they less than real or more than real (have certain details/qualities been enhanced)? Here we look at the way that sounds in movies can be realistic, or can be changed in a number of ways, or even symbolised, in order to communicate particular meanings. We look at a systematic way to analyse these changes.

Chapter 9 expands our assessment of modality of sounds in video. But in the first place the aim of this chapter is to show how we can analyse the way that video and music work together to create meaning drawing Halliday's (1978) account of clause relations in language that has been used subsequently by a number of authors to think about film editing (Iedema, 2001; Baldry and Thibault, 2006). The chapter begins by comparing two pop videos from Coldplay and The Clash showing how sound, image and editing style can work together to communicate discourses, and can also elaborate and extend the discourses created by each other in mode-specific ways. The chapter then moves onto compare the use of music and sound effects in two pieces of television drama, *ER* and *Sex and the City*. Again we are interested in the way that the different modes work together, including at the level of modality.