

STYLE AND GENRE AS A MODE OF AESTHETICS

Here's a notorious passage from the opening to Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*¹: "abstract expressionism in painting, existentialism in philosophy, the final forms of representation in the novel, the films of the great *auteurs*, or the modernist school of poetry...all are now seen as the final, extraordinary flowering of a high-modernist impulse which is spent and exhausted with them. The enumeration of what follows, then, at once becomes empirical, chaotic, and heterogeneous: ...the moment, in music, of John Cage, but also the synthesis of classical and "popular" styles found in composers like Phil Glass and Terry Riley, and also punk and new wave rock (the Beatles and the Stones now standing as the high-modernist moment of that more recent and rapidly evolving tradition)..." The Beatles and the Rolling Stones as high-modernist.² Hyperbole aside, what does this mean? Jameson's oppositional pair (understandably) is modernism and postmodernism, and the field of reference apparently the aesthetics of stylistic synthesis. And, as markedness theory demonstrates, oppositional pairs are never symmetrical - modernism here presupposes postmodernism. And yet other oppositional pairs are conceivable at this point: take high-modernism as the field, and the oppositional pair as elite and accessible (popular, if you will) musics. Elite high-modernism in music is almost defined by its effacement of categories, literally genre categories (thus the gradual demise of works labelled 'symphony'³, 'sonata', 'string quartet', from the 1950s onwards: there are no genres of which *Gruppen* or *Le marteau* are merely tokens). Ah, you say, but surely the differentiating factor in these categories is the media through which the music is realised, rather than the 'genre' - the orchestra, the solo concert instrument, the homogenic chamber ensemble. Indeed, but the presence of the very media themselves conditions a competent audience in their behaviour (degrees of intimacy, subtlety of expression, manner of admission) and thus sound-producing medium is articulative of genre. And yet accessible high-modernism (Jameson's examples) is unrelated to any challenge to genre - not for the Beatles (even) any challenge to the disc on the record-player, to the verse-chorus-alternating song⁴, to the voice accompanied by (literally, in the sense of being superservient to) instruments. But yet surely, distinctively, in these and other tracks the Beatles went about this work in a different way (to other musicians)? Indeed they did, but in pointing to these differences, we begin to discuss not genre, but style. So how distinguish these metacategories?

Style and genre. In a previous inter-disciplinary study of these two terms⁵ I identified four contrasting ways in which their interaction is viewed. In the first, "style refers to the manner of articulation of musical gestures ... genre refers to the identity and the context of those gestures". In this understanding, both terms refer explicitly to (musical) detail, to the realm of localised (musical) decision-making on the part of

¹ Verso, 1991.

² Ken Glogau has critiqued this identification, arguing that the Beatles are better seen as postmodernist, but it is the terms of the description, rather than its accuracy, which concern me here. Glogau: 'The Beatles: high-modernism and/or postmodernism' in *Beatlestudies 3: proceedings of the Beatles 2000 conference*, ed. Heinonen et al., University of Jyväskylä, 2001, pp.80-84.

³ Not *symphony*!

⁴ Thus even 'Tomorrow never knows' has conformant verses, while 'Revolution 9' represents the unrepeatable.

⁵ The study analysed the sphere of reference of the terms as used by scholars from a wide range of disciplines which impinge, however slightly, on the study of popular music. Allan F. Moore: 'Categorical conventions in music discourse: style and genre' in *Music and Letters*, 82/3, August 2001, pp.432-442.

artists (here, musicians and producers). *Genre* here identifies the intention to create a particular kind of (musical) experience – a ‘what’ - *style* identifies the means through which this is to be achieved – a ‘how’⁶. In the second, “genre, in its emphasis on the context of gestures, pertains most usefully to the esthetic, while style, in its emphasis on their manner of articulation, pertains most usefully to the poietic.” The distinction here is whether the musical experience is viewed as resulting from a creative act (*style*) or whether what is in view is the creation of meaning in the presence of that experience (*genre*). In the third, “genre is normally explicitly thematized as socially constrained [whereas] style [regards the social as] minimally determining ... it is considered to operate with a negotiable degree of autonomy”. Here, *genre* is largely chosen for the musician by virtue of the social circumstances in which s/he finds him/herself, *style* is chosen by the musician from the array of availability, according to the level of transferability their technique has achieved. In the fourth, “style ... operates at various hierarchical levels, from the global [where it may be socially constituted] to the most local ... Genre as a system also operates hierarchically, but with the distinction that ‘sub-genres’ cover an entire genre territory in a way that ‘sub-styles’ do not.” Here, *genre* organises experience prescriptively, *style* descriptively. To try to comprehensively list genres, or styles, is then rather pointless. So what is the import of such standard lists? Take iTunes’ ‘genre’ categories.⁷ ‘Blues’ indicates a manner of singing and of lyric and possibly melodic/harmonic content, of likely instrumentation, conceivably a manner of (imagined) performance. It could count, thus, as both style (in the first and second senses above) and genre (in the first and probably third). ‘Dance’ may, for a naïve contemporary listener, indicate style (in at least the first three senses), but for a larger number of listeners, indicates function, and this covers a range of genres (1930s big bands, 1960s discothèques, contemporary Balinese music for tourists - genre again in the first and third sense). ‘Holiday’ indicates function but again, for a certain group of listeners, may indicate the music they encountered in Goa (or elsewhere) - a weakened second sense of genre. ‘Rock’, however, is a dominant style category (operative in all these senses) - a country outfit playing at a rock venue is quite possible since the genre characteristics of ‘rock’ are equally identifiable (operating in probably all but the third sense). And so on (it goes without saying that iTunes doesn’t acknowledge such an experience as religious rock, that children’s music never appears on a soundtrack, etc.). What is to be gained from such an analysis? Certainly not the resignation to disregard any such attempts at categorisation, but probably the realisation that the category is not inherent in the experience (and, paradoxically, that a high-modernist perspective thus more accurately models much of contemporary practice).

Celtic music becomes an interesting exemplar here. However marginalised Welsh and Scots culture may have been in 1960s Britain, the situation of Breton culture within France was more extreme. The Breton singer and harper Alan Stivell marked his individuality with the release, in 1971, of his second album⁸ which included three Breton tunes, together with some seventeenth-century Welsh material and an extended medley of Irish, Scots, and Manx tunes. The following year, the

⁶ I bracket terms here to indicate the transdisciplinary nature of the original discussion – I omit the brackets subsequently for ease of reading.

⁷ A full list: none; custom; alternative; blues/R&B; books & spoken; children’s music; classical; country; dance; easy listening; electronic; folk; hip hop/rap; holiday; house; industrial; jazz; new age; pop; religious; rock; soundtrack; techno; trance; unclassifiable; world.

⁸ Alan Stivell: *Renaissance of the Celtic harp*; Phonogram, 1971. According to the rather dated <http://www.ceolas.org/artists/Stivell.html> (last accessed 20x06), he had already recorded eight 45 rpm recordings, the earliest as far back as 1958 – all this early material appears to be ‘French’ rather than ‘Breton’.

inaugural album of the equally enduring Breton band Tri Yann⁹ incorporated both Irish and Scots material. By means of this appropriating strategy, and particularly the use of recognisably Scots and Irish material, these musicians were staking claims about their own ethnicity: not only aligning themselves with the peripheralisation of geographically extreme cultures, but also implying the presence of a larger whole of which these tunes, individually identified in terms of geographical origin, formed parts. The birth of the Keltia label in Kemper, in south-western Brittany, in 1978 (and its subsequent commercial accomplishment), attests to the partial success of that early move. By the time of the release of a much more recent album¹⁰, the case for an identifiable Celtic repertoire no longer needed making: Stivell's sleeve-notes declare that "Some aspects of the album would seem to have been given over to somewhat jazz-blues, Spanish, African or Asian influences. I for one think there is a fine line between 'influence' and 'natural similarity'. Celtic music crosses borders between the non-European world and the 'Western world'." Celticity here is simply assumed. There is, then, a conception of a 'Celtic' music which exists among (some) players and the industry. It also clearly exists among consumers, following the success of the 'world music' marketing strategy followed from the late 1980s in the UK, part of which was directed toward constructing the 'Celtic' identity in the minds of consumers.¹¹ It is, though, to follow Stivell's suggestion, open to appropriation. As such, it is a style (in all the senses above), and a style marked by particular features of rhythmic and textural articulation, over and above the use of material identified as Scots, or Irish, or Welsh, or Breton, by tradition.¹² However, it is also a genre, at least in the first and second senses, above. And yet, as its (putative) origin (above) suggests, it has an ideological function too (a function strongly resisted by some musicians of older generations active particularly in Scotland and Ireland¹³). This ideology presents musicians with a rationale for performing in a particular way – for adopting certain style characteristics and locating their work in a particular genre setting – and this is best understood in terms of an aesthetic position – a position which identifies the reasons for working in a particular way. This, it seems to me, is the most effective way to recast the concept of aesthetics in contemporary situations.

As to why such recasting appears necessary: the conventional, traditional understanding of aesthetics in terms of criteria for the creation of beauty in an art work is no longer tenable. First, *beauty* is itself ideologically, not universally, valued. 'Rightness', or 'appropriateness', however, may have wider validity – when beauty is appropriate, then aesthetics should pertain to beauty. When it is not, then aesthetics pertains to whatever other quality is desired, and it is the 'desired' which takes the more fundamental position - aesthetics pertains properly to signifying (creative) intention, whether authorial or receptive.¹⁴ Second, *in an art work* has become an issue in the wake of the dismantling of the single, monocultural, audience, which begins with processes of commodification of art in late eighteenth-century Europe.

⁹ Tri Yann: *An Naoned*; Phonogram, 1972.

¹⁰ Alan Stivell: *Au-dela des mots*; Keltia, 2002.

¹¹ See Jan Fairley: 'The "local" and "global" in popular music' in Simon Frith, Will Straw & John Street (eds.): *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 272-289, esp. pp.276-9. The identity of this larger field in the USA is rather different from that in the UK (and Europe?), and I shall not be addressing that difference here.

¹² Allan F. Moore: 'The identity of Celtic music', in progress.

¹³ I refer here to the virtual debate taking place between Scott Reiss' and Fintan Vallely's contributions in Martin Stokes & Philip Bohlman (eds.): *Celtic Modern*, Scarecrow 2003.

¹⁴ As I say above, the "distinction here is whether the musical experience is viewed as resulting from a creative act (*style*) or whether what is in view is the creation of meaning in the presence of that experience (*genre*)."

Prior to this point, the homogeneity of the audience permitted the illusion of the embedding of the entire meaning of the art work within the art work itself – since the largely monolithic audience appears to have veered towards a normative interpretation, meaning appeared to inhere in the work, as its symbolic locus became naturalized. Today, however, since there is no necessary relation between a work and its audience, since the majority of barriers between an individual item of music and any particular listener have been erased, it is far harder to maintain that illusion (although for purposes of identity construction, many listeners may continue to try, and thus to parade ‘correct’ readings, and ‘Celtic music’ is probably a case in point, here). The idea of criteria lying behind the creation of a work of art yet remains. Musicians maintain aesthetic positions, in terms of what it is they set out to do – they begin work with a creative programme, and with an implicit set of criteria through which they will value the results of that programme. It is thus that the concept overlaps those of both style and genre, for it may relate both to what is sought and how it is brought about.

Why is it, then, that particular effects are sought? Can we distinguish between contingent and necessary factors? Taste is certainly a key element, and there seems little point in arguing that musicians work as they do without some concept of their wanting to do so (the memoirs of rank and file orchestral musicians notwithstanding), where the reasons for such desires might be expected to combine both the virtuous and the venal to some degree. Technology is another, although this can not be entirely distinguished from taste. Some styles and genres are marked by technological novelty, such as the use of synthesisers and samplers in the 1980s. Guiding factors here are sometimes the desire to appear ‘modern’ (as in Kraftwerk, perhaps), sometimes the ‘purely’ aesthetic possibilities of hitherto unimagined sounds or a new level of control (as in Peter Gabriel’s early solo work), or the poetic possibilities of artificial sound ‘uncontaminated’ by human mediation (as in Gary Numan). Others, however, are marked by the explicit avoidance of ‘new’ technology (the constant presence of valve amplifiers and acoustic guitars, or the entire programme of the indie movement), while yet others are marked by the normalisation of technology (acoustic guitars are made to the best available specifications, synthesisers in the new century no longer carry the connotations of artifice which originally attached to them).

There is, though, a question of the level at which these categories operate. While we can talk of the style of an individual musician (or group of musicians), it is clear that this meaning does not have the same reach as talking of rock style, or blues style, or somesuch. So there is a third concept omitted here, which seems to me of some importance. Different writers prefer different terms: *signature sound* for some, *idiom* or *idiolect* for others. I prefer the last of these: it refers to the characteristic means of both organising and/or actualising sound patterns particular to the identity of an individual musician, or to the collective identity of an identifiable group of musicians, by virtue of which a competent listener recognises those sound patterns (the ‘sound-world’) as originating with that musician (or those musicians) and none other (unless that other is sufficiently expert in mimicry). *Signature* captures the analogy quite well. An idiolect may result partly from physical characteristics (the length of Richie Havens’ left thumb means he plays the guitar in a particularly idiosyncratic manner, recognisable as institutive of his sound-world; the particular tone of Rod Stewart’s voice is hard to both disguise and imitate, and appears no matter what material he sings), from manner of performance (Keith Emerson’s or Pete Townshend’s aggression towards their instruments), or from

technique (the fluidity of Allan Holdsworth's guitar lines). It may be hard (Elvis Costello) or easy (Elvis Presley) to isolate and thus identify.¹⁵

So: genre, style and idiolect. How do these three terms interact? The commonest reading is that genre encompasses style, which in turn encompasses idiolect. However, as I have suggested above, a nuanced reading of *style* and *genre* suggests a non-inclusive relationship between these two, or at least a relationship which has to be addressed anew for each concrete case – it cannot simply be assumed that a style of playing/writing cannot cross from one genre to another. Although some musicians operate simply within single styles and genres, others do not. Rod Stewart's forays into standards are no less audibly performances by Rod Stewart than were his performances with the Faces. However, we should recall that key to the understandings of *style* presented above was the notion of appropriability. While a musician's idiolect may derive from his/her physique or character, a musician's style is available for learning, and for adoption (in both temporary and permanent senses of that term). It is this flexibility which should cause us to question its location. Does it reside inside a musical experience which we declare to instantiate a particular style, or does it rather reside in the declaration itself? Listeners with high degrees of relevant style competence will distinguish, on aural grounds alone, thrash metal from death metal, Lowland Scots from Northumbrian piping, glam rock from early 1970s bubblegum pop. Listeners with lower levels of competence, however, will not make such distinctions and rather than view this *tout court* as a lack of enculturation on the part of the latter, as a lack of knowledge¹⁶, I would propose a different model.

Before I do so, however, let me return to the other side of the equation – if *style* is not monolithic, is *genre*? There is something held in common between all attributions of 'ballad', or 'anthem', for instance, which transfers from one genre (the breath-taker in a metal set; the participative climax in a rock stadium) to another (Sinatra singing Cole Porter in a club; the large football stadium). I suggested earlier that, as organising systems, 'sub-genres' are conceived as covering an entire genre territory (as part of the definition of that genre), whereas 'sub-styles' do not operate in the same way (and therefore do not partake in the definition of that style). 'Gangsta rap' is a sub-genre, substantiating the genre that is 'rap'.¹⁷ What, though, is 'ballad'? Both 'gangsta rap' and 'ballad' organise features of their reception, and yet we encounter varieties of ballad (romantic ballad, folk ballad, rock ballad). Do these existent varieties cover the entire 'ballad' territory, or can other provinces be imagined? I would suggest they can (I do not know whether there are any punk ballads, but the term is not impossible, whether we imagine the Damned or Green Day). While we talk of genres of blues and rock, they too have a larger reach (they cover an entire performance event, most probably) than 'anthem', or 'ballad', which refer to individual items constituting such a performance. How do we recognise a ballad and an anthem as such, as they cross genres? By formal features, certainly – tone, relative speed, degree of simplicity, attitude to narrative, sometimes melodic contour and phraseology. Although this is not what musicologists would necessarily term 'form' (as in the attribution of sections and their relationship), I can think of no

¹⁵ For detailed use of this concept see, for instance, Allan F. Moore & Anwar Ibrahim: 'Sounds like Teen Spirit: identifying Radiohead's idiolect', in Joseph Tate (ed.): *Strobe-Lights and Blown Speakers: essays on the music and art of Radiohead*, Ashgate, 2005, pp.139-58.

¹⁶ Who defines when such knowledge is 'adequate'? It is necessity, surely, which defines this – competence is adequate if it permits communication which both participants judge meaningful.

¹⁷ Adam Krims: *Rap music and the poetics of identity*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

better at this point. And perhaps the only way to make sense of this is to observe that, just as 'style' (and constituent 'sub-styles') and 'idiolect' are frequently elided (and yet should be analytically distinguished), we must make the same distinction between 'genre' (and constituent 'sub-genres') and what I here provisionally identify as 'form'. *Genre*, in this sense, while identifying:

- a 'what';
- an experience in the presence of which meaning is created;
- a social constraint, and;
- a prescriptive description,

identifies these at a level which exceeds the individual utterance (the track, the song); whereas form pertains to the individual utterance. So, as *idiolect* refers to a localised reading of *style*, *form* bears the same relationship to *genre* (and, because in both cases the more local categories there are employed within more than one of the more global categories, none of these concepts operates hierarchically with respect to others, until we come to consider individual cases).

However, I suggested a different model. To begin, what reason might there be for listeners without any academic or philosophical stake in the question to make identifications of either genre or style? The purpose of such identification is surely to evade the hermeticism encouraged by the high-modernist position – the purpose is to recognise degrees of similarity between different musical experiences, and then to try to site those degrees of similarity within the sound-complexes without which those experiences cannot have been. We thus construct, as individual listeners (no matter how (en-)cultured), a chain of similarities and, to the extent that this chain can be discovered to be intersubjective, it can conveniently be lodged within the sound-complexes. Various specific criteria for the construction of such chains can be found in any extended study of particular styles. Such criteria, however, betray the listening habits of the chain-maker involved. And they are exceedingly difficult to build effectively, in terms of identifying what is significant. The "music genome project"¹⁸ is a case in point, where one of the first identifiers of similarity is whether the 'key' is major or minor. Although this will not adequately identify similarity of style (or even of idiolect, of course), it will enable a chain of similarities to be generated (even if, in this example, the similarities are rather strained due to the small size of the database from which the site chooses its chain).

So, what is the status of this chain, and where does it break? Here genre differs from style, for the chain of stylistic similarity is more dependant on each listener. The best heuristic model is constellatory – individual performances are linked on the basis of the experience of the individual listener (in the same way that distant stars, without any necessary relation to each other, are seen as linked, as belonging to a greater whole which then becomes a discursive object, according to the viewpoint of the perceiver) and, where these understandings are shared, a style begins to acquire a name in its own right. And this is to discover where the chain breaks, for to create (on the basis of listening) a chain of similarity linking John Spiers and Jon Boden's singing of the folk ballad 'Bold Sir Rylas' at Bracknell's Cellar Bar to Elvis Presley's singing of the rock'n'roll ballad 'Return to sender' in a re-screening of *Girls! Girls! Girls!* is surely a step too far. And yet, as I sit here at my computer listening to them successively via iTunes, it becomes not so hard – the genre which organises this experience is that of digitised tracks (and, thus, genre, while organising the reception of a track is not embedded within that track, for its medium of replay can no longer be prescribed).

¹⁸ <http://www.pandora.com/>, last accessed 1xi06.

So much for the specification of categories. Their interaction is far less easy to theorise at a universal level. I suspect the most successful way to do so is to focus on the notion of originality, which makes the assumption that a (group of) musician(s) sets out to do something hitherto unforeseeable¹⁹, but from the opposite direction, from its antithesis. As I have argued elsewhere, the concept of originality, of originating music (if nothing else) *ex nihilo*, is peculiar to post-Enlightenment Western culture, holds sway only in industrialized spheres of this culture, and may plausibly be considered aberrant.²⁰ On the contrary, it is normative for musicians to invent a new piece, or a new performance, by working with or against their previous musical experience – the presence of intertexts and hypertexts²¹, is to be expected. And if this is how texts interact, the same is true of genres and of styles. The parallel experiences of Sam Phillips and Elvis Presley, experiences of individual examples of country and of rhythm'n'blues songs, enabled the creation of performances which fit neither category particularly well. Keith Emerson's experience of blues piano and the nineteenth-century European concert repertoire likewise, or Ashley Hutchings' experience as a rock bassist with an exploratory interest in the English folk tradition. So what cross-fertilisations might be inadmissible? It is hard to think of any. Some common ground between styles is necessary, but as long as this can be found in at least one particular domain (most usually harmony, metre, timbre), then such an interaction can be effected. Whether and why it achieves aesthetic success, and whether and why an audience congregates around it, is probably only a facet of each individual interaction. So, consideration of genre without style, without idiolect, without form, is only partial. And aesthetics crosses all these boundaries. Indeed, in that it partakes of all of them since authorial or receptive (creative) decisions are made within each of them, it is best understood as organising the field.

¹⁹ I develop this understanding of originality, and its distinction from creativity, in a number of places, particularly accessibly in 'Principles for Teaching & Assessing Songwriting in Higher Education'; Palatine papers, 2004, <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/palatine/reports/allanmoore.htm>.

²⁰ See note 12.

²¹ See Serge Lacasse: 'Intertextuality and hypertextuality in recorded popular music' in Michael Talbot (ed.): *The musical work: reality or invention?*; Liverpool University Press, 2000; reprinted in Moore (ed.): *Critical Readings in Popular Musicology*; Ashgate, 2007.