**Helter Skelter- An approach to meaning making from Barthes to the Beatles**

1. **Introduction**

Any music lover will tell you that they’ve got that one song or a select few songs that speak to them. Music, though this is true of any art form, has the power to resonate with people personally, create meanings that tap into one’s lived experience, despite not being tailored for one particular fan or listener. Ofcourse, some themes are universal. It is no coincidence that the most popular songs of all time, often have themes that relate to the everyman – love, heartbreak, trauma or tragedy. Everybody hurts, as popular music will tell you, if you didn’t know already. How then do songs manage to create personal connections, while navigating supposedly universal themes? What of songs that start off as something in the creative vision of the artist, but end up speaking to a fan in ways that veer so far off that vision. These instances serve to exemplify the idea that meaning does not reside within a text. Meaning is read into a text by drawing upon a knowledge of signs and codes (Chandler, 2007). When we view texts such as songs from the semiotic lens, we cannot but deny Barthes’ propositions that texts are plural. That they don’t carry a single definitive meaning but put the reader (or listener) in the driver’s seat of the meaning making process, to explore and discern multiple meanings by manipulating the system of codes available to them, and by navigating the signifiers available in the text itself. It must be said though, that not all texts are plural; some songs about teenage heartbreak and tough breakups are just that. But even these seemingly plain texts with straightforward denotations and easily available connotations, are so easily decoded by scores of listeners, in part due to signifying elements like genre and narrative. Listeners make the most dominant meaning out of a song, because they have access to a set of common social codes or interpretive codes, thanks to their familiarity with the genre, the artist or most simply because no one is exempt to the universality of the human condition.

This essay however looks into a different kind of musical text – songs that escape the mould of common/banal interpretations and those that have had such shocking interpretations, so far away from the artists alleged intent behind writing them. In particular, I cite the example of “Helter Skelter”. The notorious song, by the iconic rock band Beatles was released in 1968, as a part of their larger “White Album”. It is one of their most successful songs, although its success has been colored by some ominous interpretations. Helter Skelter, penned by Sir Paul McCartney was a self professed departure from what the band and in particular McCartney were best known for –psychedelic/soft rock and pop ballads – into a raw and heavy rock/metal number. The song featured electric guitar riffs, extreme volume, loud frenzied vocals and is heavy on drumming – this was infact alluded to in the lyrics of the song (“I’ve got blisters on me fingers” – the drummer Ringo Starr’s refrain towards the end, supposedly having hurt his fingers from all the incessant drumming). The song was called Helter-Skelter which means chaos, but was also named for a British fair attraction – a spiral slide winding round a tall tower. The band members spoke about the song as being just an attempt to make a bawdy, loud song which was hard core rock and roll, with the lyrics signifying chaos and adolescent frenzy. The song, however reached peak fame, not just due to its departure from the Beatles’ style and for heralding changes in the band’s direction, and also for supposedly ushering in the era of heavy metal, but also for a series of high-profile murders it allegedly spurred, spearheaded by criminal cult leader Charles Manson.

How does a song about fairground games and adolescent fantasy, spur a series of grisly crimes? Ofcourse it can be attributed to one man’s descent into madness and the song’s inconvenient placement as an excuse, but a semiotician would be errant in dismissing this as random. While this is one of the more prolific instances of a song gaining notoriety in the aftermath of a crime spree, there are many examples of such songs (often belonging to similar genres- why this is so might be a question worth pursuing later on) misinterpreted by killers/criminals, going so far as becoming inspirations for their trespasses.

In subsequent sections of this essay, I hope to systematically analyse such texts, and arrive at an understanding of how audiences are central to the enterprise of meaning creation and if there isn’t some method to the madness, that goes into deviant interpretations of songs like Helter Skelter.

1. **Helter Skelter – An artist’s overview**

Though we will continue to maintain that interpretation of meaning has nothing to do with an artist’s intention behind creating a text, it is worth looking at the text from the point of view of the artist, in order to understand the system of signifiers they intended to exploit.

Its also relevant to mention that, song lyrics are quite unstructured as far as texts go, taken in isolation. They differ from a texts like poems because they coexist with a lot of other information in a song – we hear song lyrics against the backdrop of instruments; they are manipulated against musical elements like tempo, rhythm and tune. As far as musical texts go, song lyrics form only a part. Thus, when we attempt to analyse lyrics, in the absence of other elements that accompany it in the actual song, things don’t quite add up or make sense. Which is why, to have an artist’s perspective on the meaning behind the song, is not entirely inappropriate here.

The Beatles were a British pop rock band, who were already well regarded by the time the song, and the album came out. To say that they were a major cultural influence, and iconic signs of their own time would not be overstating it. As previously mentioned, the song was born out of a need to make a departure from being well-known for their love ballads or psychedelic anthems. Consider the lyrics

*“When I get to the bottom I go back to the top of the slide*

*Where I stop and I turn and I go for a ride*

*Till I get to the bottom and I see you again*

*Do, don't you want me to love you*

*I'm coming down fast but I'm miles above you*

*Tell me, tell me, tell me, come on tell me the answer*

*Well, you may be a lover but you ain't no dancer*

*Helter skelter, helter skelter”*

A few signifiers are immediately apparent – “*go back to the top of the slide*”, repeating instances of “*get to the bottom*”, *“Helter Skelter”*, *“coming down fast”*. These work together to create some denotative meanings like playgrounds or amusement park rides with the singer describing the physical experience of repeatedly going up and down a slide. Further repetition of the phrase “*Helter Skelter”* seems to confirm this notion (Helter Skelter is a popular British fair attraction consisting of a slide winding around a tall tower). The lyrics also seem to denote some sort of lover’s exchange between the singer and someone else, with the former questioning the latter. Apart from this, there is the straightforward meaning associated with the signifier “Helter Skelter”, i.e chaos and disorder. These seemingly disparate meanings, possibly come together (?) in a second level of connotation- to signify rise and fall, chaotic descent. The interweaving lyrics about a lover’s question “*Do you want me to love you”* may connote the heady progress and rapid decline in a lovers’ relationship. Another interpretation took the amusement park fixture to be a metaphor (taken in conjugation with the hysterical cracking vocals and frantic fades in and out of the chorus and false endings) for the tumultous emotions accompanying a sexual encounter or fantasy (Gould, 2014). Paul McCartney also curiously alludes to connotations of the rise and fall of the Roman empire, in later interviews and spoke of the lyrics being symbolic, representing the notion of chaos and historical rise and fall of the Roman-empire. In this respect, the lyrical elements such as *“going to the top”, “coming down fast”* loosely fit into the definition of a symbolic sign, wherein the relationship between the signifier and signified is totally arbitrary (seems to be the choice of the artist) and this particular reading is available to the listener only by learning of the arbitrary relationship, perhaps by listening to an interview or reading other texts.

Again, the purpose of the above passage was not to provide a content analysis of the song itself, rather impress upon the fact that sometimes texts have straightforward meanings and denotations that maybe available to everyone that interacts with it, based on common linguistic codes. There are also second order meanings or connotations that become available, based on the readers interaction with the text and manipulation of interpretive codes available to him which come with lived experience and familiarity with social mores. Some meanings are available post-hoc when taken in conjugation with additional texts (In this case, interviews of the artist, peer reviews etc)

1. **Murder, mayhem and chaos in the context of Helter Skelter**

To this day, this song remains shrouded in infamy due to the unwitting role it allegedly played in a murder spree in Los angeles by cult leader and murderer Charles Manson, and his loyal group of miscreants, referred to as the Manson family. The Tate-LaBianca murders, were a series of high-profile murders committed by the members of Manson’s cult under his orders, in addition to other incidences of unmotivated violence and homicide. The relevance of Beatles’ music, to this crime spree was one of the surprising elements that emerged during the trial following the apprehension of Manson and his cult. Manson claimed that the songs from the “White album” especially Helter Skelter spoke to him, and evoked interpretations of an impending race war between the white and the black men, the fall of the former and the rise of the latter, and the scenario culminating in a chaotic holocaust ala Helter Skelter. Manson was determined to expand his cult by recruiting white men and female hippies and escalate the impending race war, through carefully orchestrated murders of the white upper class. He hoped, that the family would survive the resulting holocaust and ultimately emerge from underground to rule over the victors of the race war, when they ultimately found themselves incapable of ruling the world. At this point, you may question the relevance hese ramblings (clearly those of a deluded racist who was conveniently appropriating popular music for his own benefit) may have to semiotic theory.

The fascinating aspect of Manson’s admission lies in the interpretation of the text, and how this interpretation has succeeded in captivating the imagination of a generation of music and pop culture fans. Would it infact be possible to semiotically deconstruct this notorious interpretation that veers so far from the denoted and connoted meanings available to listeners of the Beatles’ who were not Charles Manson.

This brings us back to the original question – how does one (anyone) go from amusement park fixtures or possibly connotations of adolescent sex to read meanings such as race wars and revolutions, without being completely out of their mind. I ask this question because even though the interpretation was an admission of a deranged killer who was possibly going for a defense so incredulous that it seemed plausible, the interpretation has endured in the minds of audiences, endured as a myth and created an unshakeable association with the song and the band. How does this happen?

At the outset, it was mentioned that the Beatles were a British band, with fans worldwide and this particular song was named for a British amusement park fixture or slide. For anyone that’s not British, Helter Skelter does not evoke this meaning. It simply evokes a first order meaning of chaos or disorder, available from the knowledge of the adjectival linguistic sign. It makes sense that an American like Manson, or a reader from Asia or Africa interpret the signifier this way, and be completely unaware of a parallel denotation. Another interesting element that becomes relevant here is the context of the entire album vis a vis the song. For one, the signifier “White Album” may denote an arbitrary name in the series of albums released by the beatles – red and blue albums (1962-1966). Connotations of race (white vs black) possibly arise with this particular name. Taken in its entirety, the album comprises a number of songs that seem to be reflective of no singular idea. The songs are diverse in both genre and theme. Manson admitted to finding inspiration from the album, especially via five specific songs that he thought had a unifying thread and a coherent message – *“Blackbird”*, *“Revolution1”*, “*Revolution9”*, “*Piggies*”, *“Helter skelter*” (Bugliosi. Gentry,1974)

Manson derived certain meanings from the song lyrics from each of these songs mentioned in table 1.1.

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| --- | --- |
| Blackbird | *“You were only waiting for this moment to arise”* |
| Piggies | “*And for all the little piggies’ life is getting worse”, “Living piggy lives with their piggy wives clutching forks and knives to eat the bacon”* |
| Revolution1 | *“You say you got a real solution”, “Well, you know We'd all love to see the plan”, “Don’t you know you can count me out (alternating with in)”* |
| Revolution 9 | *-* |
| Helter Skelter | *“She's coming down fast, Yes, she is”, “Look out, Helter Skelter”* |

As a part of their album, the Beatles created the above lyrics for each of these songs, hoping to convey some meaning (or maybe none). In the song Blackbird, the lyrics can be understood as symbolic signs – culturally specific/conventional meanings are evoked from the poetic form of the lyric - struggles of the black race, an inspiring call to rise from adversity (could apply to anything), transformation etc. The song Piggies uses signifying elements like metaphors to evoke meanings of consumerism and greed. Revolution1 was a song that used certain signifiers (“*count me out*-*in*”) to capture the moral ambivalence that the band shared towards revolutions and violence in bringing forth change. They remained sympathetic to the anti-war, anti-

oppression cause but were torn on the effectiveness and ethics of violence to achieve these ends. The juxtaposition of out and in, in the refrain “count me out-in” signifies this dilemma. Revolution9 remains highly suspect in its intentions due to the fact that it has virtually no lyrics, only recurring motifs like the number 9 chorus, and overlay of conversations and recorded sounds, along with other musical elements.

Circling back to the Manson interpretations that have been recorded as part of his criminal trial, testimonies and other works (Bugliosi/Gentry, 1974), we start to see a stark departure in the meaning making process that was referred to in the last paragraph. Table 1.1 focuses on specific elements of the lyric, which Manson used to interpret certain meanings in the White Album, all of which were ultimately decoded as instructions that the Beatles were giving – to the black man to rebel and rise and ultimately overthrow the whites (Blackbird), to attack the oppressive and excessive white upper class (Piggies), to show the beatles and the world a plan of action, encouraging or condoning violence (Revolution1), to watch out for the imminent race war and ensuing holocaust (Helter Skelter).

Decoding is the operative word here. Stuart Hall (1980) and Hawkes (1977) note that when texts are created, they are essentially encoded (or recoded) by the artist or creator with meaning. When texts are consumed, meaning is made by decoding. Decoding goes well beyond mere identification of the encoded meanings, but is a form of active interpretation and evaluation on the part of the reader(listener). Songs and other popular mass media, are the kind of texts that allow for endless and autonomous recoding/decoding on the part of the audience. When the encoder and decoder vary vastly in their lived experience, cultural repetoire and other socio-geographic factors, aberrant decoding (Eco, 1965) is imminent. This may infact be what we see with respect to divergence between McCartney’s Helter Skelter and Manson’s. And why a supposedly neutral, mostly pacifist band like the Beatles becomes embroiled in a grisly cult mass murder.

As noted in the beginning of this essay, popular music is tricky – Literary texts are generally successful in producing the dominant/hegemonic readings (Hall, 1980) while texts like popular music and song lyrics toe the line between negotiated reading and dominant readings. A band like the Beatles often falls prey to the negotiated reading wherein listeners tend to modify and manipulate some of the text’s codes to suit/condone their world view, while recognizing or accepting the rest.

I mention, a band like the Beatles, because artistic identities often help naturalize the dominant readings. There are bands and writers and artists, who are vocal and singular in their pursuits, genres and identities, that audiences tend to accept and absorb mostly the dominant or hegemonic reading of their texts. It follows why it might be tough to interpret a song by the *Sex Pistols*, as anything but messages of anarchy and anti-establishment, or why no Rap/HipHop artist was ever accused of being cop-friendly or pro-police. The Beatles however were so genre agnostic and flirted with every type of music that could be made, that their songs often left the field wide open for listeners to decode meanings helter skelter (pardon the pun). Their lyrics also often were so bereft of concrete signfiers or full of confusing signifiers, like in *Revolution9* or the *Glass Onion,* that they fit so perfectly into Eco’s notion of open texts (1979). Helter Skelter is particularly noteworthy in this respect because it was, even for a diverse band like the Beatles, a disruption. It was their first brush with screaming vocals and heavy rock, created expressly for the purpose of making a loud and heavy rock song. From what had come to be expected of the Beatles till then, the White Album and Helter Skelter were disruptions in the syntagmatic chain. Perhaps, Manson channeled his inner Marshall Mcluhan in reading too much into the medium, or the sudden change in it, to evoke meanings that were so abberant.

1. **The enduring myth**

All the emphasis on aberrant decoding and Manson’s unwitting semiotic eccentricity, does beg the question – apart from being an obviously shocking chapter in pop culture, why must we bother with the Manson-Beatles saga as semioticians? Perhaps we can apply the notion of Barthes’ system of first order and second order signification (into the realm of myth) to try and understand what is going on here. Barthes (1957/1972) notes that myth is a second order semiological system wherein a signifier and signified exist in the first order of signification (the level of language) and the composite sign becomes the mythical signifier, out of which a second order meaning is created. And the myth is a motivated sign – which picks a signifier which is already full of meaning and strips it partially or wholly of the same, to create newer more pervasive meanings. The lyrics put forth by the Beatles are signs, which can be thought of as a composite of a signifier and signified (words and concepts) that have some straightforward denotations (at the level of language) and possibly some connotative meanings too (possibly the artists intent, context etc). The lyrics were already signs that were full at many levels, (denotative and connotative). Manson’s interpretations can be thought of as a second/third order of signification or myth, a kind of stolen language that Barthes talked about, wherein the signifiers are completely robbed (or partially eroded of) both their original linguistic and connotative meanings and have taken on somehing completely new. Ofcourse in Barthes’ explanation, he talks of this process happening historically and so naturally that it is impossible for a person to view the linguistic or literal meanings. In Manson’s case, the myth was engineered and naturalized owing to the shocking nature of the crimes he commited, such that the Beatles’ legacy or atleast that of the song, has become forever entwined with dark and twisted undertones of Manson’s crimes.

The Beatles were by no means an exception to this kind of notoriety. Rock bands have forever been plagued by enduring myths of backmasking (the notion that many artists recorded songs that were occult incantations when listened to backwards) and devil-worship, which have become ingrained in their legacy. Some bands like Black Sabbath and Kiss, purposely alluded to occult imagery in their lyrics, and created their legacy around invoking dominant readings of this kind, to carve out a niche and make a name for themselves, while other bands became unwitting players in the moral panic and hysteria, resulting from abberant decoding and institutionally motivated oppositional readings of texts. The latter is evident in cases of religious outfits decrying metal and rock genres as “devil music”, because they sense a clash/conflict with their puritanical ideologies and sensibilities, in said genres. Examples include bands like AC/DC and Led-Zeppelin or Guns n Roses that often became embroiled in controversies, in the height of the Satanic panic.

In this respect, Barthes (1973) would probably call The Beatles’ music and other such texts, texts of *jouissance* (bliss) – texts that subvert and unsettle the reader, putting him in the driver’s seat to engage, interpret and in many ways re-write the text. Not all music texts are that of jouissance, some are that of pleasure that renders readers passive while still being meaningful and enjoyable (ala Taylor Swift or John Mayer)

1. **Conclusion**

Music as a text, especially song lyrics, makes for a fascinating object under the semiotic lens. The sheer diversity of interpretations of musical texts exemplifies the fact that meaning resides outside of a text. The reader, at times is agreeable to the encoded dominant readings, while other times is able to draw on specific interpretive codes to not just accept or comprehend an artist’s vision, but possibly rewrite/resignify the text in the process of decoding. This collaborative process, at times reaches the level of second or third order of signification, and is able to create, tarnish or rewrite legacies of artists and their works.

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