Public sphere, private interest: musical meaning in consumer space

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Introduction

"Any kind of social order could be represented as a network of channels through which the search for life meanings is conducted," Zygmund Bauman writes in his introduction to *The Individualized Society*. And it is the energy generated by this search for life meanings (or the search for transcendence, significance or liberation) which produces a culture's meta-capital through which all recognized forms of cultural capital, used to drive the functioning of social order, come into being (Bauman 2001). Western manifestations of capitalist social order are the target of Bauman's analysis: capitalism's rapid changes of direction in seeking future sources of profit, through dynamic and increasingly global connectivity, harness and commodify the social energy emanating this search for life meanings. By drawing the consumer into the process of production, and developing the space of innovation through the construction of forms that concentrate and speed up interaction, capitalist practice has gradually become concerned with the social engineering of groups, combining these with use of information technology and built forms to deliver greater financial return (Thrift 2006a).

The cultural market and by implication the musical market, as theorized by Pierre Bourdieu (1993), apportions value in 'symbolic capital' which is accrued through network interactions across the field of cultural activity. Bourdieu also posited a collective disavowal surrounding economic interest, for which the symbolic capital acted to veil the artist's commercial absorption that, if exposed, could damage his/her credibility and ability to function across the network. But much has changed in the twenty-two years that have elapsed since the publication of *The Field of Cultural Production*, raising questions surrounding the theory's currency in a fast changing social climate: whether the increased efficiency of the spaces in which networks are formed and citizens interact have affected their composition and outlook; whether the

increasing commodification of meaning itself has altered social and artistic perspectives on commercial interest; and whether economically driven changes in the public sphere can be attributed to music as a social act.

The argument formed in this paper will focus primarily on popular music, given the genre's pervasive nature across contemporary western society. It will begin by examining musicological discussions concerning meaning and identity in music; it will then analyze the commodification of urban space in order to discuss the creation of cultural identities in western networks and communities through popular musics. It will subsequently discuss the creation of popular music simultaneously as a network or community identifier, as a cultural commodity, and as an aesthetic advertising and marketing tool, and will acknowledge the blurring of boundaries between popular and advertising musics, highlighting the production of a modulated form of Bourdieu's symbolic capital. Finally, it will end by offering some brief conclusions.

Music as a social act

Whether conceived of as an aesthetic object, cultural commodity or social process, the majority view across musicological, ethnomusicological and musico-scientific fields is that music carries meaning, by which is meant that music signifies or refers to something beyond itself (Cross, Tolbert 2009). In addition, there is a growing experimental and theoretical body surrounding the cognitive, psychological, and physical processes underlying our experience of music. Recent studies in attentional entrainment (McAuley, Fromboluti 2014), rhythmicity (Hawkins 2014), physiological and physical responses to music (Hodges 2008), and affective potency (Lavy 2001) have shown that many aspects of music participation appear not only in a culture-specific manner but are humanly generic, while some also appear to be processes central to interaction (Hallam, 2008). Despite conflicting viewpoints, including that of Roger Scruton (2014), the majority opinion across musicological fields agrees on the suggestion that the something that music refers to or signifies can begin to be understood through, or can certainly be interpreted in, communicative or social terms. In fact, the idea that musical meaning signifies social constructs is now central to much contemporary musicology (Johnson 1995; McClary 2002; Krims 2002;

Benjamin 2010), and we can thus infer that communicative and social behaviors are intricately bound in musical meaning (Cross 2012).

Similarly, since ethnomusicological studies have a tendency to focus on cultural specificities, they highlight the heterogeneity of music across different societies (Cross 2008): through the prism of ethnomusicology it is clearly seen that musics are employed in representing differing cultural, ethnic, political, religious, territorial and ideological identities, a trait which has both sociocultural and biological roots (Tomlinson 2013). Philip Bohlman, in *Immigrant, folk and regional musics in the twentieth century* (1998), describes his chapter as a representation of "the ways in which Americans use music to strengthen their group and community identities, that is, the ways they use affiliational patterns to articulate selfness". We can therefore further infer that not only does music carry meaning, but that it's social or interactive core also enables individuals participating in joint musical activity to identify themselves as part of a social whole, and that individuals in social groups can identify themselves through a representative or emblematic music.

At this point it is worth observing contemporary western culture's notion of music, and more specifically that of musical performance, as a specialized activity for the few, and that consequently musical participation for the unspecialized many is generally limited to roles surrounding the act of listening. This leads to musical experience occurring largely in contexts that are specifically designed for auditory consumption: in 'intentional' spaces such as concert auditoriums and nightclubs; in the media; in 'unintentional' spaces including bars, restaurants and commercial centres[1]; and more recently on portable electronic devices including mobile phones, iPods and mp3 players (and with decreasing frequency, despite their recent fashion-catalyzed resurgence, on widely obsolete formats such as tape or vinyl).

Also worthy of note are Cross' suggestions in *Listening as covert performance* that the act of listening does not only have value in cognitive but also in cultural terms, and that "listening is valorized as a cultural act, a behaviour that can restructure the cultural world […] - but only where performed in a context in which listening, and

[1] For spaces of popular music performance, see Kronenberg 2012

more specifically the representation of listening, has an acknowledged cultural or institutional role" (Cross 2010). Although there are a number of ways in which the act of listening has been adapted, reapplied and combined to other culturally institutional activities, in western society we can safely say listening has definite priority over other aspects of musical participation such as performance, which is an activity undertaken by a comparatively small proportion of society. In this light, perhaps a broadly representative space in which to begin looking at the phenomenon of contemporary western musical participation is in the intentional space, and social melting pot, of the nightclub.

Me, you and the dance floor

There is much written material surrounding the environments in nightclubs and popular music venues, and how they contribute to community solidarity and identity. These include papers postulating theories of intense emotional experiences in the production techniques used in electronic dance music (Solberg 2014); studies noting that music participation promotes empathy when experienced as group interaction, therefore that participation in music can impact on group cohesion (Rabinowitch, Cross, Burnard 2012); and writings concerning the involvement of dance in music, with Ian Cross (2012) listing various studies in which it has been found to be an integral component of coping with social change, demonstrating the centrality of the music-dance hybrid to the maintenance of social cohesion in a listening environment.

These behaviours can be observed in the audience to Chris Brown's well-documented live performance at Drai's Nightclub, Las Vegas, in 2011[2]. Within the first five minutes of this performance, filmed by an audience member, one can see clear signs of social interaction and entrainment: the upstretched hands moving in unison to the beat, the collective singing of lyrics, and the mirroring of Chris Brown's movements by the audience are all indicative of a social group coming into alignment, behaviour discussed in descriptions by Luis-Manuel Garcia (2013) in his own chapter on nightclub interactions. This alignment is achieved about the 'axis' of Chris Brown

[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ov1m-wdHUEE

within the music-space of the nightclub. A brief analysis of Brown's 'Forever'[3], which reached the top ten charts in the UK and USA among other countries in 2008, both enhance this observation and highlight the extent to which nightclubs and the interactions therein are integral to this type of popular music: the video is set in a nightclub with frequent scenes of groups dancing in unison, and lyrics including "It's like I've waited my whole life; For this one night; It's gonna be me, you and the dance floor" and "Me and you, you and I; All you got to do is watch me; Look what I can do with my feet; Baby feel the beat inside", serve to reinforce both the social dynamic and Brown's position as a communal focal point. Through the musical and lyrical content emphasized by physically expressive responses to the music, Brown brings the nightclub audience or community into social cohesion about him.

So here we see how popular music in a nightclub, in this case Chris Brown's 'Forever', can establish social identity achieved both by the individual nightclubber's acceptance of the music as emblematic of identities and group dynamics, and through the audience's shared auditory and physically streamlined interaction, centred on Brown. However, in order to express the effects and implications of this social act more fully we must take into consideration the social spaces in which that music is formed and takes place. What follows is a brief discussion surrounding conceptions of space, which will help us to better understand this phenomenon, and which will be contextualized in the subsequent sections.

Space and background noise

Conceptions of space have long been regarded as fundamental to the ordering of our lives, and have been the subject of much historiographical, philosophical and sociological consideration: numerous successive writings throughout history all highlight the differing treatments of and approaches to the 'problem of space', and since the mid-1950's the conception, production, contestation and performance of 'social spaces' have been widely discussed (Shields 2006). A recent occurrence in the social sciences and humanities has been that of a 'spatial turn' resulting primarily in

[3] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5sMKX22BHeE

the identification of an increasingly expanding ‘universe’ of different spaces and territories. Nigel Thrift, ex-Professor of Geography at Oxford University, describes the world as “made up of all kinds of things brought in to relation with one another by this universe of spaces through a continuous and largely involuntary process of encounter” (Thrift 2006a). Thrift claims that the ‘spatial turn’ has led to the recent dismissal of hitherto assumed spatial concepts and characteristics. In particular, due to increased computational power, and a simultaneous enhanced ability to perform vast quantities of calculations on an increasingly numerous and pervasive scale, numerical flow has integrated with space and has become merged into an abundance of other activities: in other words, it has become part of the epistemic background through which humans move, as a temporally fluid and animate ‘absolute space’ (Thrift 2004).

This calculative background has had multiple effects regarding the constitution and cultural circuit of capital: it has instigated a knowledge economy and labour with enhanced innovation as a priority and goal; it has increased circulation of economic ideas and theories within different forums, highlighting desirable states to which social and economic life should conform; and due to the fluidity of informational structures, it has led to new discursive domains of capital accumulation (Leyson, French, Thrift, Crewe, Webb 2005). Other recent attempts to generate further revenue streams have appeared and become focused around refiguring and extending the commodity: the advent of project working, allowing products to be continuously developed, the creation of ‘long tail’ products whose reach extends beyond a specific target market, and the creation of products spanning multiple sensory registers have all gone some way towards achieving this goal. A final manoeuvre has occurred in drawing the consumer more intimately into the process of production, and therefore into the processes of innovation and invention. This increasing democratization of innovation and invention, made possible through the propagation of information technologies, has resulted in new and autonomous consumer communities that evolve beyond a firm’s control and, in doing so, generate value. This has led to a reworking of the meaning of a commodity from that of individual objects to the entire configuration of spaces and communities into which commodities are inserted (Thrift 2006b). As we shall now see, this view has interesting implications when applied to the music industry.

Double your pleasure, double your fun

These composite spaces have led to that which Timothy Tailor, author of *The Sounds of Capitalism* (2012), calls an 'interarticulation' between symbolic and economic processes which have culminated in an increasingly culturally inflected economy, and similarly, a culture that is more economically inflected. In other words, economic acts are increasingly undertaken using cultural means of propagation and dissemination, and cultural acts increasingly signify capital interest. In this regard it is therefore very hard, perhaps impossible, to isolate the purely socio-cultural act of music from economic interest, as music's meaning is conceived from the relative social spaces in which individual actors live, and therefore by implication in the epistemes governing absolute space, which are increasingly economically inflected.

Returning to Chris Brown's vastly successful[4] 'Forever', the lyrics "Double your pleasure, double your fun" may not appear to have significance outside the immediate context of the song; and the opening sequence of the music video in which Brown drives into a warehouse, exits his car, unwraps and places a stick of chewing gum in his mouth, may seem inconsequential. The song, however, was commissioned by the confections company Wrigley: the words "Double your pleasure, double your fun" were the slogan for the company's Doublemint Gum brand, which were 'seeded' into the song. Later in the same year as the song's release, a Doublemint Gum commercial appeared featuring Chris Brown singing the lyrics "Double your pleasure, double your fun; It's the right one, the Doublemint Gum"[5]. The aesthetic production of the advert is intentionally similar to the 'Forever' music video: beads of light emanating from a packet of Doublemint Gum circling Chris Brown as he dances are similar to effects employed in the music video, as are other effects including his dancing style and the obfuscated background. In addition the lyrics are set to the melodic line from the 'Forever' chorus, all over the same background music: on a casual listen, there is very little difference between the commercial and the original 'Forever'.

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[4] Forever was first released in November 2007, reaching the top ten charts in both the UK and the USA in 2008, and was nominated for an MTV Music Video of the Year

[5] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=enJbXlb4zqo

In this example, it becomes difficult to conceive of 'Forever' as a cultural product independent of external economic interest: it's meaning is intricately intertwined with the seeded product. Similarly, it is difficult to conceive of Chris Brown as unrelated or separate from the commercial interests of the company he has been commissioned by. To an extent, the 'Forever' song and Doublemint Gum commercial have become synonymous, as has the musical brand of Chris Brown with Wrigley. This example of product seeding within a song is one of many techniques employed by companies using cultural means to advertise products. It would seem that popular musics are increasingly conceived through advertising practices, and therefore that there is ever less meaningful distinction to be made between 'popular music' and 'advertising music' (Tailor 2012). This merger of significance has very interesting implications surrounding popular music's role in the creation and alignment of aural communities. For example, on the song's release club-goers and popular music fans may well have considered 'Forever' to be emblematic of their social identity; they may well have collectively danced to the music, and sung memorized lyrics as do the crowds at Brown's live performance in Las Vegas; and as mentioned, the song has had colossal exposure, with over 119 million Youtube hits online. As a result, in commodifying the song's meaning, the Wrigley commercial already had an enormous and ready-made consumer community upon its release, namely Brown's fan base, who were to an extent predisposed towards the commercial due to their group and individual relationships with Chris Brown's music, and by implication, Doublemint Gum.

Reflections: rethinking symbolic capital

Over recent years the music industry has been beset by numerous crises, mainly stemming from the introduction of reproduction-enabling technologies, which have made it easier to circulate music privately and in contravention of copyright laws. The mp3 format has allowed music to be imported and encoded digitally, compressed and transferred via portable storage devices or through peer-to-peer networks across the Internet (Leyshon 2003). This is a clear danger to the survival of the mainstream musical economy and, combined with the economic downturn in the early 2000's,

translated to enormous financial losses made by companies in the music industry[6]. The emergence of competing market sectors, notably mobile phone and gaming industries, have compounded the industry's problems. The music industry has been reacting to this downturn by restructuring business models to allow for changes surrounding music consumption in society: primarily that value in music lies increasingly in its association with other commodities and communities. This view is not unique to advertising executives or to music label employees, but is a view that is increasingly pervasive among practicing musicians. That 'commercializing' is increasingly seen as an acceptable and creative way of furthering a musical career or enhancing a profile is a remarkably different attitude when compared to that described by Pierre Bourdieu twenty years ago.

In Bourdieu's field of cultural production, artists were afraid of being exposed as "deeply self-interested": and rightly so, for damage to symbolic capital and therefore one's income stream was potentially incapacitating. Twenty years later, the definition of 'selling out' no longer holds the meaning it did, as the fundamental background space has reconfigured around the principle of capital gain. In fact, "creating an inauthentic relationship between popular culture and a product" (Tailor 2012), and misrepresenting a commodity's relationship towards popular culture risks damaging relationships with the consumption community. Similarly, Wrigley terminated their relationship with Chris Brown after he was convicted of domestic violence: opinions on Brown suddenly became volatile, he and his music became to an extent synonymous with violent and immoral behaviour, and the relationship between Wrigley and Brown became not only irrelevant, but damaging to the representation of the product and it's relationship to the community.

It could now be postulated that, with regard to the music industry, the field of production is moving towards functioning so that economic interest is no longer 'disavowed' by artists, but is integral to the conception and maintenance of network relations in which symbolic value or economic interest lie. This symbolic value is translated into economic value through the commodification of cultural identities that are informed and maintained by the continuous manufacture and reinvention of

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[6] For figures see Leyshon, Webb, French, Thrift, Crewe 2005

emblematic popular musics: the extent to which they are representative both of a product and of a community therefore quantifies their value.

Conclusion

In this paper I have shown that changes to absolute space resulted in altered social compositions and outlooks, and that these are often shaped by a music in which meaning has been commodified by economic interest. This has resulted in an evolution of Bourdieu's symbolic capital, which is clear in many contemporary musicians' attitudes towards advertising music. These conclusions highlight certain methodological issues, namely that we should take into account economically interlaced spaces in which we move to base the foundations of our analyses, either when studying contemporary musics, or to take into account when pursuing historiographical concerns, as these will influence our conceptions in this regard. They also point to interesting questions surrounding the use of other media, in particular personal mp3 players[7]: their role in solidifying a sense of 'de-localized community' and in promoting geographically disparate networks; their role in zones of diminishing geographically proximate interaction, namely in public transitive spaces; and to what extent, insofar as they play music with a commodified meaning, they propagate and entrench consumer communities.

[7] Perhaps analysing the work of Michael Bull (2004, 2006, 2013) and reframing his views of the anti-social nature of music listening on personal mp3 players as social in this light

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