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Slogans, Prayers and Mantras : Popular Song as Role Play and the Experience of Singing Along

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In popular song, who is addressing whom and why ? Who is doing what, and why?

I would like to present here some initial reflections on experience and communication when consuming popular song (although consuming may not be the best word to use). They are thoughts about what is repetitive, what is participative and what is collective in audience musicking.

I will be looking above all at examples where people are singing in groups, but I consider that the individual use of a song – singing along to the radio or to youtube, singing in the shower or whistling, is linked to an imagined collective – I shall come back to this.

REPETITION

Popular song, as Philip Tagg has complained, has been insufficiently studied from points of view other than those of the creators. When reception is studied it is often with a sociological lens – consumers as a group rather than as individuals. Today I

want to look at the individual, not so much as decoder as a participant.

If we look at the listening career of any individual in today's industrialized societies, one element is immediately evident – repetition.

We may listen hundreds of times to a favourite song; we may sing a favourite chorus to ourselves thousands of times. This means that the song is an exceptional type of cultural product. Films, novels, plays or paintings generally do not attract this level of repetition.

Repetition is particularly present in the chorus – the refrain – of a popular song. If one thinks of

“I can't get no satisfaction”,

“Talking 'bout my generation”

“You're gonna throw your arms around me”

“I'm gonna swing from the chandeliers”

“I wanna hold your hand”

“We're so pretty vacant”,

“Je ne regrette rien”

“Ne me quitte pas”,

We often sing the choruses without knowing the lyrics to the entire song. And of course the refrain by definition is repeated a number of times as the song goes along.

So what is the effect and import of repetition – what does repetition do?  

Repetition transforms communication. Repetition transforms communication. Repetition transforms communication. You see what I did there?

When there is much repetition, the role of the transfer of information is almost eliminated within a communication situation, whether we are in the presence of a slogan, a prayer, a mantra, or a song.

We know that in ordinary conversation, transferring information is often not the central objective. There are also ritual, phatic and other elements. This is even more the case when repetition is involved.

Where else do we find repetition in everyday activity. Work is often repetitive, but often not chosen. In sport, dance or yoga, repetition is important and nourishing, but these are activities without text.

Yet repetition with text is important in our lives. Take for example the commercial slogan

Nespresso what else?

Just do it!

Quality Street, made for sharing

Kentucky Fried Chicken: Finger licking good!

Not happy, Jan!

The commercial slogan is repeated but does not generally impose active participation, repetition in chorus, or repetition in the shower.

The advertiser is satisfied if their slogans are memorized, even if the consumer does not often repeat them.

A slogan with music – a jingle – may be more likely to be repeated outside the original advertising situation.

Carglass répare carglass remplace

Haribo c'est beau la vie, pour les grands et les petits

Aussie Kids are weetabix kids!

But even without music, this can happen.

Eh oh, C'est pas marqué La Poste!

Just Do It

Political slogans are also repeated, on posters or during rallies and demonstrations.

In the latter case, they are participative, and may be humorous, and normally have a rhythmic or musical aspect. The demonstration slogan resembles in some ways the refrain of a popular song, an articulation of an emotionally charged message.

Here are a couple of examples of collective sloganing.

VIDEO CLIP 1 SLOGANS

[Australian demonstration chanting “Always was, always was, always will be, aboriginal land!]

What kind of communication is going on here? Of course passers-by or television cameras might discover the demand as the demonstration goes by, but it is hard to imagine this as the main event. The use of the slogan is also very much for the chanters themselves. A micro-encouragement to counterbalance the micro-discouragements which flood the everyday lives of activists.

We have here a collective and emotional expression which is difficult to experience in everyday life outside the demonstration situation. In our everyday lives we may think that Donald Trump should be given another job with less responsibility, but we probably do not walk down the corridors chanting joyously “hey hey! ho ho! Donald Trump has got to go!”

VIDEO CLIP TWO .

[Video of UK political demonstrations singing “We hate tories and we hate tories, we hate tories and we hate tories. We hate tories and we hate tories. We are the tory haters!”]

The demonstration allows us to chant emotively demands which often we have to keep quiet about. Demonstration slogans are not normally consensual throughout society and everyday life. This is because we have demonstrations when things are not right for us. Indeed, when there is a march which is completely consensual –

like marches in honour of murdered children, they are generally silent and without slogans.

The demonstration slogan, then, lets us feel our attachment to a wider group and to let out an emotional expression unavailable elsewhere.

Des mantras

If we move on from slogans to prayers, we see another striking example of collective performance of repetitive text.

VIDEO CLIP 3 PRAYER RECITATION IN CHURCH

[Priest recites the first half of a “Hail Mary” and church congregation recite the second half”]

This is a ritual collective repetition which links the group to a centuries old tradition and community.

And if we look briefly at hymn singing...

CLIP 4. HYMN: Then sing my soul

[A church congregation singing the chorus of “Then sing my soul!”
“The sing my soul, my saviour God, to thee; How great Thou art”]

In many ways, hymns are a genre of popular music. They are written to allow collective singing, putting emotion before virtuosity.



What is the communication positioning of the person who sings along with “Then sing my soul” The words appeared to be addressed directly to God, but we should note that in its classic apparition, one does not sing the hymn alone. It is an individual incantation performed in a group, just like the demonstration slogan. The community of believers is reinforced by mutual sharing of the incantation.

Let us move on now to popular song as such

With popular song, we are in a very special area of communication. One researcher suggested that we find ourselves in a magical ritual space. What is sung is not what is said. This is why, if we are wondering whether our new acquaintance is serious about a romantic relationship, the fact that the person sings to us the well-known song “I love you just the way you are” at the karaoke will not be sufficient to win us over. We will at the very least expect him or her to repeat similar sentiments in their own words and without music.

Although it often uses conversational language structures, song does not transmit information in the same way that conversation does.

For political songs in particular I think that there has often been a misunderstanding: it is extremely rare that the objective of a political song be to inform the audience about politics. No one reads a political leaflet a hundred times! The ritual, the affective and the performative are at the centre of these songs.

Song as participatory theatre

I have been working in recent years on the idea of popular song as participatory theatre. When we sing along with the radio, at a concert, or in the shower, for a few minutes or a few seconds we play at being someone else. In this role play, we can play at being the star, at being the singer or at being the narrator. These options can be taken consecutively or in parallel.

When we are the star, we imagine ourselves as cool as they are, applauded by the crowds. Our air guitar is electrifying

When we are the singer, we imagine ourselves with a beautiful communicative virtuoso voice.

When we are the narrator we imagine things are happening to us which happen rather rarely in our everyday lives.

Thanks to the song we manage to be louder or more revolted or more tender or more honest and in any case more poetic than in our everyday conversations. The narrators of our popular songs live more intense, love filled and action-filled lives than us, which is why we want to play at being them.

The work of the creators of songs, from this perspective, is to try to calculate or guess who audiences would enjoy pretending to be, what original experiences they would enjoy pretending to have.

The roles involved partly determine our musical tastes. People who do not enjoy pretending to be street wise petty criminals chased by cops will not like gangster rap. Those who don't like to imagine themselves in the role of the sarcastic loser may well not enjoy punk rock. If you don't fancy yourself as wise troubadour or mother nature, a lot of English folk music will pass you by.

Let us concentrate now on the case of concert singalong.

Singalong is used in the concerts of many genres, from music hall to rock, from folk to rap, being more or less highlighted in the different genres.

“High art music” generally forbids it. I was at a performance of Beethoven’s ninth symphony last month and singing along was not on the menu. Do not attempt this at the opera either.

What happens when the audience sings along? It may be a part of the audience who sing the entire song but cannot be heard above the sound system, or a much larger section who sing the chorus, with or without the encouragement of the singer. Or in a fascinating ritual, the singer may stop and hand over to the audience for the chorus, perhaps signalling this by holding out the microphone, and taking over again afterwards. The refrain may be repeated a number of times.

Video Clip five SPRINGSTEEN HOMETOWN

[At a Bruce Springsteen concert, Bruce encourages the audience to sing the chorus of “Home Town”, holding the microphone out to the audience.]

The audience are a group led by springtseen. He holds out the microphone not because they need amplification but to symbolize the importance of their voices and feelings.

The repeated words “your Home Town” refer to a central popular emotional value of modern life, in the United States and elsewhere. Your hometown, the song recognizes, has moulded you and is

important even if it is small and it does not have the grandeur of Paris or Berlin or Beijing or Istanbul or Canberra.

When one looks at Springsteen leading this singing and one compares with the gentleman we saw leading the hymn singing a moment ago, one might wonder which of the two is leading a more religious experience!

At the concert, we build temporary communities or we make concrete for a moment existing virtual communities or affective alliances. We are not alone.

But we are also still playing: the people singalong with Springsteen may or may not feel deeply attached to their own home town. They may be celebrating home towns everywhere or imagining from the point of view of an isolated city dweller or rover what it would be like to have a place which was really a home town, since internal and international migration have vastly influenced or shaken our feelings of home, as we can be very much moved around .

There is a stunning variety of role plays available in singalong. Many of them are romantic fantasies, often more fiery, assertive and poetic than our real experiences with our boyfriends and girlfriends.

CLIP SIX hunters and collectors

[Mass chorus singalong at concert to Hunters and Gatherers singing “Throw Your arms around me”]

Video Clip Seven

[Knock knock knocking on heaven's door]

CLIP SEVEN. Paul McCartney: Hey Jude

CLIP EIGHT. Jolene

[Singalong at a White Stripes concert]

Here we have a complex series of masks and roles. In the best known version, by Dolly Parton, a woman narrator begs another woman, who she recognizes as more attractive than she is, not to seduce her man. A surprising and original narrator role in popular music. In this version, by palimpseste we are allowed to see irony.

CLIP NINE. Bohemian rhapsody without the band

This final example shows that the collective can be as important as the star. While waiting for the stars to arrive, the crowd takes up a classic rock song from another group.

Conclusion

I think this experience of participatory theatre is repeated, in our imagination, a thousand times more frequently outside the concert hall than inside it. Listening to the live album, singing with the radio, I think that embodying the sing is an important part of our lives. We use our breath and our voice and our ears and our body – intimate and physical parts of ourselves, and we experience

something which is more multisensorial and participative than in many other instances of artistic consumption.

But these are initial reflections, and I would be very pleased if people had suggestions of writing which could mesh in with these ideas.