Modernism, postmodernism

Art & Culture, Art Movement

The youthcultureof the 1960s represents the threshold between modernism and what, in most circles, passes for postmodernism. On the one hand, it is clearly an extension and reinvention of the historical avant-garde, and, on the other, it signals the increasing obsolescence of the (modernist) divide between elite and mass culture, between the artisanal and the mechanically reproduced.

Reacting against the universalizing tendencies of high modernism (from abstract expressionism to the international style), and its dedication to seriousness, abstraction, and elegance, the new artists delighted in extending the range of art, in juxtaposing the exalted and the abject, the sacred and the profane, in being vernacular and relevant, and in rudely transgressing bourgeois norms.

From the point of view of post-modern theory, the recent history of popularmusiccan be seen to be marked by a trend towards the open and extensive mixing of styles and genres of music in very direct and self-conscious ways. Put very simply, the argument about the transition between modernism and postmodernism in pop music can be seen as the Beatles in the 1960s. The songs of the Beatles drew explicitly on diverse classical and popular forms and made a claim to what was for pop a new kind of musical and lyrical seriousness.

Postmodernism first emerges out of a generational refusal of the categorical certainties of high modernism. The insistence on an absolute distinction between high and popular culture came to be regarded as the 'unhip' assumption of an older generation. One sign of this collapse can be seen in the merging of art and pop music. For example, Peter Blake designed the cover of the Beatles' Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band.

Jameson (1991) distinguishes between modernist and post-modern pop music, making the argument that the Beatles and the Rolling Stones represent a modernist moment, against which punk rock and new wave can be seen as post-modern. In 'Popular Music and Postmodern Theory', Andrew Goodwin (1991) quite correctly argues that for various reasons this is a very difficult position to sustain. The Beatles and the Rolling Stones are as different from each other as together they are different from, say, the Clash and Talking Heads. In fact, 'it would be much easier to make an argument in which the distinction is made between the “ artifice” of the Beatles and Talking Heads and the “ authenticity” of the Rolling Stones and the Clash' (55).

Perhaps the best way to think of the relationship between pop music and postmodernism is historically. In most accounts, the moment of postmodernism begins in the late 1950s-the same period as the emergence of pop music. Therefore, in terms of periodization, pop music and postmodernism are more or less simultaneous. This does not necessarily mean that all pop music is post-modern. Using Raymond Williams's model of social formations always consisting of a hierarchy of cultures-'dominant', 'emergent' and 'residual'-post-modern pop music can be seen as 'emergent' in the 1960s with the late Beatles, and the rock music of the counter-culture, as principal examples, and in the 1970s with 'art school' punk, to become in the late 1980s the 'cultural dominant' of pop music.

It is also possible to see the consumption of pop music and the surrounding pop music culture as in itself post-modern. Instead of an approach concerned with identifying and analysing the post-modern text or practice, we might look instead for postmodernism in the emergence of particular patterns of consumption; people who actively seek out and celebrate pastiche. The notion of a particular group of consumers, people who consume with irony and take pleasure in the weird, is very suggestive.

Flirtations with Eastern mysticism in the 1960s brought new influences; the success of the Beatles, and George Harrison’s fascination with the Indian sitar, increased exposure to Indian music and to Ravi Shankar, probably the first distinct ‘ world musician’, unquestionably promoting musical sounds and structures quite different from those in the West. Prior to the successes of Miriam Makeba, Ravi Shankar and Manu Dibango, the first African musician to have an international hit, and whose music helped usher in the disco era (Mitchell 1996), musicians with exceptional local and regional popularity were otherwise largely unknown in the West, because their music was unfamiliar and inaccessible, and the words incomprehensible (hence Western recording companies took little interest).

The Beatles’ quest for mysticism, enlightenment and innovative sounds (which could be incorporated in Western musical structures, rather than being given a life of their own) was the forerunner of other Western performers’ similar searches for authenticity and difference. Paul Simon’s Graceland (1986) recorded English lyrics over tracks performed by black South African bands and the vocal group Ladysmith Black Mambazo.

As many critics noted, rock may have been the most popular and influential art form during the late '60s, “ the deepest means ofcommunicationand expression” that negotiated the incompatibility of the post-modern with the preindustrial by attempting to unite “ a mass culture” with “ a genuine folk culture.” In the mid-Sixties, electricity, poetry, sex, and rhythm mixed with another combustible element, drugs, to create psychedelia. Baby boomer parents worshipped doctors and high medicine and avidly ingested antidepressants and other medications to achieve altered states of mental and physicalhealth.

Likewise, baby boomers' drug experimentation aimed for transport to a new personal and world consciousness that would eliminate human barriers—class, race, ideology—dividing their parents' world. By 1965, a suite of drugs coursed through the rock community. Dylan andmarijuanainfluenced the Beatles' Rubber Soul (1965), a folk rock record of soft edges and personal introspection. Attracting a male following, The Who, the Mod heroes, thrashed through early singles such as “ Anyway, Anyhow, Anywhere” and “ My Generation” with amphetamine-fed punk fury.

Acid rock borrowed sounds, scales, chords, and rhythms from around the world to distort space and time. The Beatles adapted Indian ragas and modal jazz to dislodge the rhythmic anchor and erase the four cardinal directions. In England, the Beatles were introduced to acid in 1965; they recorded Revolver a year later. Their variable tape speeds, tape loops, backward guitar and voice lines, and other experiments transformed basic rock and roll chords, beats, and voices into a tableau of acid-soaked sound, rhythm, and poetry. Especially disorienting was “ Tomorrow Never Knows,” an early trance-rock number. Ringo Starr's bass drum figure, a human heartbeat, kicked time in reverse, while John Lennon's filtered vocals, chants inspired by the Tibetan Book of the Dead, seemed piped in from creation.

In a key contribution, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', Jameson overviews postmodernism as the cultural expression of a new phase of capitalism, characterized by communications technologies facilitating the virtually instantaneous shifting of international capital, the emergence of new centres of capital (e. g. Japan) in a global economy, new class formations breaking with the traditional labour v. capital division, and a consumer capitalism which markets style, images and tastes as much as actual products. The commoditization of culture has resulted in a new populism of the mass media, a culture centred around the marketing and consumption of surfaces and appearances, epitomised by the ubiquity of commercial television.

Despite its obvious plausibility as a general explanation of developments in popular culture, postmodernism suffers from a number of difficulties. To heavily generalise, these are: its frequent lack of specificity; its overpreoccupation with texts and audiences at the expense of locating these within the economic and productive context within which cultural products reside; its reduction of history and politics and its ignoral of 'traditional' sociological notions of production, class and ideology.

The postmodernist view of rock music regards it as exemplifying the collapse of traditional distinctions between art and the commercial, the aesthetic and the unaesthetic, and the authentic and unauthentic. This view is most prominent in discussions of music video, with its affinities to advertising

(Kaplan 1987). Popular cultural texts of the Beatles are regarded as dynamic not static, mediated both by patterns of economic and social organisation and the relationship of individuals and social groups to these patterns. This puts politics in a position of central importance, as culture is viewed as a site of conflict and struggle, of negotiations which constantly confirm and redefine the existing conditions of domination and subordination in society.

Against the backdrop of these cultural studies signposts, the construction of meaning in rock can be seen as embracing a number of factors: the music industry and its associated technologies, those who create the music, the nature of rock texts, the constitution of rock audiences and their modes of consumption, and attempts to influence and regulate all of these. The role of the music industry, in its drive to commodify rock and maximise profits, is the starting point for understanding rock.

In film or in rock a certain historical logic can be reintroduced by the hypothesis that such newer media recapitulate the evolutionary stages or breaks between realism, modernism and postmodernism, in a compressed time p, such that the Beatles and the Stones occupy the high modernist moment embodied by the 'auteurs' of 1950s and 1960s art films.

Although animation was used in the early days of filmmaking and became just another form of studio production, it underwent big changes in the late twentieth century. A major break in such style occurred with the Beatles' animated film, Yellow Submarine (1968). Not only was the colour startling - a psychedelic experience of sorts, as some commented - but the animation also used a mixture of media that inspired what was later called the “

blendo” style in which cels, cut-outs, clay figures - and more recently - computer graphics are blended (Cohen 1998).

The application of postmodernism to popular music is primarily based on two perceived trends: firstly, the increasing evidence of pastiche, intertextuality, and eclecticism; and, secondly, increased cultural fusion and the collapsing of high-low culture type distinctions in rock. However, rock history demontrates that the first trend frequently actually reaffirms the distinctions supposedly being broken down in the second trend. Post-modern music clearly contributed to the increasingly global nature of cultural and economic linkages, mapping out new networks of commodity flow and entrepreneurial activity.

At least at a surface level, all countries’ popular musics were shaped by international influences and institutions, by multinational capital andtechnology, by global pop norms and values. Even the most nationalist sounds—carefully cultivated ‘ folk’ song, angry local dialect punk, preserved (for the tourist) traditional dance—were determined by a critique of international entertainment. The rise of rock ‘ n’ roll, the success of the Beatles, alongside transitions in other cultural forms, ensured some measure of ubiquity.

References

Centore, F. F. (1991). Being and Becoming: A Critique of Post-Modernism, Greenwood Press: New York.

Goodwin, Andrew. (1991). “ Popular Music and Postmodern Theory”, Cultural Studies, 5.

Jameson, Fredric (1991). Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism, Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Kaplan, E. A. (1987). Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture, New York: Methuen.

Mitchell, T. (1996). Popular Music and Local Identity, Leicester University Press, London and New York.