VOLUME !

Volume !

La revue des musiques populaires

10 : 1 | 2013

Écoutes

Listening With their Eyes: Problems for Radical Intertextuality

« Ils écoutent avec leurs yeux » : sur quelques problèmes de l'intertextualité radicale

Theodore Gracyk

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/volume/3633>

DOI: 10.4000/volume.3633

ISSN: 1950-568X

Translation(s):

« Écouter avec les yeux » : sur quelques problèmes de l'intertextualité radicale - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/volume/3724> [fr]

Publisher

Association Mélanie Seteun

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 December 2013

Number of pages: 24-44

ISBN: 978-2-913169-34-0

ISSN: 1634-5495

Electronic reference

Theodore Gracyk, "Listening With their Eyes: Problems for Radical Intertextuality", *Volume !* [Online], 10 : 1 | 2013, Online since 30 December 2015, connection on 24 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/volume/3633> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/volume.3633>

All rights reserved

Listening With their Eyes: Problems for Radical Intertextuality

par

Theodore Gracyk

Minnesota State University (Moorhead)

Abstract: Every cultural product has antecedents and influences, and popular music is no exception. Consequently, the meaning of a rock song or recording is no less intertextual than any other meaningful communication. This paper argues that we should resist the racial conclusion that every intertextual link is of equal importance, for if that is the case then the experience of listening to music is of limited relevance to its meaning. Focusing on rock music as an example of popular music, the paper argues that a less radical intertextuality makes better sense of why fans listen to rock music.

Keywords: *adaptation – appropriation – borrowing, aesthetics, collective creation – interaction, cover version – pastiche – parody, intertextuality (musical), listening – auditor, philosophy, reception, representation (visual), text.*

Résumé : Tout produit culturel implique des précédents et des influences, et la musique populaire ne déroge pas à cette règle. Dans le cas du rock, le sens d'un disque ou d'une chanson ne dépend donc pas moins de l'intertextualité que dans celui de tout autre cas de communication signifiante. Cet article soutient qu'il faut refuser la position radicale selon laquelle tout lien intertextuel est d'égale importance. Si cela était vrai, alors l'expérience consistant à écouter de la musique n'aurait plus qu'une importance limitée pour en déterminer la signification. L'auteur défend une version moins radicale de l'intertextualité : prenant le rock comme exemple de musique populaire, il montre que cette version moins radicale rend mieux compte de la raison pour laquelle les amateurs de rock écoutent cette musique.

Mots-clés : *adaptation – appropriation – emprunt, esthétique, écoute – auditeur, création collective – interaction, reprise – pastiche – parodie, intertextualité (musicale), philosophie, réception, représentation (visuelle), texte.*

MTV was only playing big-haired bands, and we wanted to get our stuff accepted...

People were listening with their eyes instead of their ears.

Chip Z'Nuff of Enuff Z'Nuff in Ali 1997: 119

As with all culturally embedded communication, the meaningfulness of an instance of popular music depends on its intertextual connections to other meaningful texts. To paraphrase Paul Ziff, what any given song or recording means depends on what various other songs and recordings in the same language mean (Ziff 1967: 7). For purposes of the following argument, “the language” will be the broad sweep of popular music classified as rock. In short, intertextuality is as indispensable to the meaning of a U2 song as to a high art text such as Richard Wagner’s Ring cycle. However, intertextuality connects a U2 song to many different types of texts, including a wide range of visual texts and material objects. The meaning of U2’s “The Fly” (1991) is associated with the distinctive wrap-around sunglasses that Bono wore when performing it during the ZOO TV tour. Such examples encourage the conclusion that musical and non-musical texts have equal priority in fixing the meaning of rock songs and performances. But if aural intertextuality has no special significance, *listening* to the music has no special priority as a mode of understanding it. Thus, Lawrence Grossberg notes, for a broad swath of popular music studies, “It seems to make little or no difference ... that we are talking about music” (Grossberg 1999: 106).

The following arguments challenge the idea that listening to rock’s aural properties is incidental to understanding it. This challenge draws on twentieth

century philosophers’ inquiries into language, particularly in relation to the doctrine of meaning holism. Also known as semantic holism, meaning holism appears to underlie one prominent approach to intertextuality, which I will call radical intertextuality. This position fails because it denies the possibility of meaningful communication.

Radical intertextuality consists of the joint endorsement of three theses. The first thesis is that every text imitates prior texts and is in some sense “about” those texts. Since we will never have access to all of the texts involved, the meaning of any text is fundamentally indeterminate. In Terry Eagleton’s summary of this idea, the modern text “is plural and diffuse ... [and] every word, phrase, or segment is a reworking of other writings ... A specific piece of writing thus has no clearly defined boundaries: it spills over constantly into the works clustered around it, generating a hundred different perspectives which dwindle to a vanishing point” (Eagleton 2008: 119). Although he is discussing literature, the idea can be extended to other media. Second, there is the idea that none of the various “works clustered around it” is more relevant than any other in contributing to its meaning. As Eagleton articulates the proposal, there is “no hierarchy of ‘textual’ levels to tell you what is more or less significant.” Third, there is Roland Barthes’ frequently cited notion of the death of the author: “there is one place where this multiplicity

is focused, and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author" (Barthes 1977: 148).¹

I endorse a more moderate model of intertextuality, rejecting the second thesis and modifying the first and third. Recognizing "author" (musician) and "reader" (listener) as equally significant to meaning is both more plausible and pragmatically more desirable. Since I have elsewhere defended the importance of attributing intentions and a cultural location to the musicians "authoring" a musical utterance (Gracyk 2001, 2007), my current target is the second thesis.

Radical Intertextuality and Listening

Richard Middleton's diagnosis is that "cultural studies neglects [music] because of the forbiddingly special character of music" (Middleton 1990: v). (We might regard this negligence as the theoretical triumph of the Replacements' great line, "I hate music/It's got too many notes.") Unfortunately, when radical intertextuality downplays musical intertextuality as of no special importance, it supports the view that rock fans do not respond to the music as music and that many or most do not listen for specifically musical qualities. Songs and recordings function as mere placeholders in the play of culture. Such views support the stereotype that rock is musically trivial.

David Shumway explicitly endorses the consequences of radical intertextuality: "I want to say more than merely that rock and roll is an impure musical form; it is not even mainly a musical form" (Shumway 1991: 759). Shumway's remark

is a generalization of one critic's claim that "the key to the Pretenders' music has never been their music" (Carson: 93). But if rock audiences are not really responding to the music, there is no priority to listening for intertextual links. Roxy Music becomes its album covers, and we cannot fault this assessment of them by Duran Duran's John Taylor: "In pop music, the photograph is important. By the time Duran Duran made records, videos were even more important ... Roxy Music was important to post-'70s English bands because of their album covers" (Cohen 1994: 137). Personally, I always liked Bryan Ferry's voice and Phil Manzanera's guitar solos.

Instead of music, Shumway encourages us to regard rock as "a historically specific cultural practice" involving a unique combination of specific social conditions, such as the youth culture of the 1950s and thereafter, and various technological developments (Shumway 1991: 755). Despite some rather lackluster music and some bad weather, the original Woodstock festival is beloved as a symbol of the end of the sixties (as in "the Woodstock generation"). But it is now recast as a complex conjuncture of youth culture and modern technology (Shumway 1991: 754). I grant that the eternal recurrence of Woodstock in the subsequent documentary film is part of the Woodstock myth, but Shumway's stance goes farther and proposes that this whole conjuncture of music, people, and film constitutes an "instance" of rock and roll. In other words, Woodstock was not a rock festival that happened to get on film. Woodstock is a paradigm case of "rock and roll" precisely because it involves both youth culture and dissemination through

film. It is also noteworthy for the way it exemplifies the cultural practice of interplay between audience and performers in a participatory event. In Barthes' terms, Woodstock was a writerly text (*scriptible*, challenging the audience to "write" their own text in piecing it together) rather than a readerly text (*lisible*, constructed to lead the audience to concentrate on the writer's intended meanings). It sounds suspiciously as if the festival would not be classified as a rock and roll event if the crowd had been smaller and better behaved and played a lesser role in the documentary film.

As illustrated by the specialized field of Madonna studies, another tendency is to treat performers as the central texts conveying meaning (Shumway 1991: 765). Madonna and R.E.M. are carriers of specific meanings, "distinct from all other bands and performers of rock and roll" (Shumway 1991: 760). However, the artist is never the flesh and blood human. The artist is yet another intertextual construct: "Madonna is ... a web of intertextual meanings crossing media boundaries, 'she' is a sign formed by television, film, records, the press, and the publicity industry" (Fiske 2011: 110). Madonna is the intertextual space involving "the aggregate of all [appearances] and an essential part of the reading of any one." Or consider Pamela Wilson's splendid analysis of multiple meanings embodied in the persona constructed by Dolly Parton (Wilson 1995). Unfortunately, there is not a word in it to suggest that singing and musicianship play any central role in the intertextual construct that is Dolly Parton.

Furthermore, general intertextuality takes precedence over *specific* intertextuality.² Although

Madonna's video for "Material Girl" is a hyper-text of a famous song and dance number featuring Marilyn Monroe, Fiske regards that source text as dispensable. The video "refers to our culture's image bank of the sexy blonde star ... and upon its intertextuality with all texts that contribute to and draw upon the meaning of 'the blonde' in our culture" (Fiske 2011: 109). However, this emphasis redirects us from textual details to symbolic types. By this reasoning, one must suppose that a Lenny Kravitz video draws upon and contributes to every text involving "the" African-American male in American culture. Due to the interracial sexual dynamic generated by the presence of Heather Graham, Kravitz's 1999 video for "American Woman" seems to have as much intertextual play with *The Birth of a Nation* as with the film *Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me* (its specific intertextual connection) or the original Guess Who song that Kravitz is covering.

Here we have the second thesis. Music is merely a staging ground for exploring a range of associated texts, *all* of which are equally relevant for grasping the music's meanings. However, if every intertextual link is of equal importance, then the experience of listening to music is of limited relevance to its meaning. *Musical* discovery plays little or no role in finding meaning, rendering irrelevant whatever eludes textual commentary (for only the web of intertextuality bears meaning, not the details that evade that web). Little or no meaning attaches to a listener's sense of the musical gestalt or to her interest in the wealth of detail that remains ever ineffable.³ Meaning depends on locating a song or recording within a larger cultural apparatus,

assigning it to a place within the ongoing play of texts. If some other “text” or form or discourse had caught on with the same convergence of technology and youth culture in the formative years, then that would be fully equivalent to rock and roll. Suppose Elvis had been a professional wrestler, and suppose pro wrestling played the same role – as a cultural practice disseminated by diverse resources of mass media – historically played by the music that we know as rock. This “text” would serve as well as rock music, for it would *mean* the same thing. We might therefore say that radical intertextuality treats the actual music as the pre-text and not the text of rock.

Global Holism

I would go to interviews where, literally, not a song was mentioned. And I realized some people were not interested in our music but just Living Colour as a symbol.

(Guitarist Vernon Reid, quoted in Breskin 1993)

Probably what hurts the most with my relationship with the media or music critics is the lack of attention to the music ... the discussion rarely gets to the music or the songwriting. According to the perception of the press, the actual work that I do is incidental.

(Ani DiFranco, quoted in Hamilton 1997: 150)

One of the main lessons of ethnomusicology is that music is a meaningful cultural practice because it is a key element “whereby individuals are collectively moved to think and organize themselves” (Shepherd 1991: 113). Concerts and clubs are often attended as social arenas, as places to see and be seen, rather than as outlets for music. And this

is not a criticism; music played an ancillary role in culture for thousands of years before it gained enough prestige to command our undivided aesthetic attention, and in many contexts music is still the sideshow, not the main event.

However, I want to challenge Shumway’s hyperbolic claim that rock “is not even mainly a musical form.” As Peter Van der Merwe has said about the blues, the fact of its triumph in the realm of popular music leaves “the musical question unanswered.”

The teenage rock and roll fans of the 50s may have been exerting their newly acquired spending power. They may have been expressing rebellious attitudes towards their parents’ bourgeois cultural values. But they were also expressing a liking for twelve-bar blues, for blue notes, for certain types of syncopation, for certain melodic contours. (Van der Merwe 1989: 214)

Precisely. Musical qualities ground responses to rock as a cluster of related and overlapping musical traditions. Among the most fundamental pleasures of rock music are musical pleasures. I cannot theorize myself into abandoning my belief that the aural experience of the music – listening to it while attending to its *specificity* – should be central to any account of rock’s power and popularity. I worry that radical intertextuality implies that listening is marginally relevant to rock music’s reception and power.

Earlier, I indicated that my primary problem with radical intertextuality is that its second thesis assumes meaning holism. Holism says that the meaning of any individual utterance or text arises only through its role in the whole language: “The meaning of an expression depends consti-

tutively on its relation to all other expressions in the language” (Peacocke 1997: 227).⁴ Many global holists additionally allow the importance of an expression’s relations to the non-linguistic world. The essential point is that the *system* is meaningful rather than its basic units.⁵ The most radical version of holism, global holism, underwrites the second thesis of radical intertextuality. Against them, I endorse the moderate position of local holism and a correspondingly limited appeal to intertextuality. Local holism says that the meaning of an expression or utterance depends on the meaning of *some* others in the same language.⁶ Seeing that local holism is more plausible than global holism supports the view that *musical* intertextuality takes priority in listening for meaning.

In Favor of Local Holism

Readerly texts have long been accused of putting meaning out of reach in an inner, *private* realm of artistic intention. I am not convinced that every appeal to artistic intention shares this failing, but I fear that accounts that privilege writerly texts do so. Radical intertextuality either appeals to the whole system (and thus puts meaning out of reach on a synchronic, abstract plane) or it appeals to each reader’s “rewriting” to secure a temporary basis for meaning. This emphasis on the audience generates a well-known problem for global holism and so for radical intertextuality.

Let us again consider the idea that differences between *artists* are fundamental: “while most listeners to ‘Radio Free Europe’ haven’t any idea

what the song is about, they have already come to understand the meaning of R.E.M. as distinct from all other bands and performers of rock & roll.” (Shumway 1991: 760). Since Michael Stipe’s enunciation was so cryptic on early R.E.M. records that the words are anybody’s guess, we are invited to conclude that, like opera sung in a foreign language, the audience knows that the words have meaning and so seek a “narrative” in the performance. This narrative meaning is supplied, it is generally supposed, by the band’s image. The “meaning” of this image, in turn, arises only in relation to the whole rock and roll apparatus.

Taking the theory at face value, how could a global holist ever learn meanings in the first place? The notion of intertextuality presupposes that audience members find meaning, yet it also seems to deny the very possibility of ever *entering into* an “alien” language. This problem has been raised against Quine’s classic defense of holism, which famously asks us to imagine the case of a linguist cast into an alien culture and assigned the task of producing a translation manual. Quine defends global holism by arguing that two incompatible translation manuals might be equally successful at translating the same language. Quine concludes that there is never any “natural” English expression for any foreign one, so there can be no factual determination that one translation is the “correct” one.

However, Quine’s field linguist already knows English and can articulate complex hypotheses in order to evaluate unfamiliar expressions. Wittgenstein identifies the same assumption in Augustine’s discussion of names and reference, and recognizes

that it unfairly dodges the question of how we ever got started in the language system (Wittgenstein 1953: Remark 32). How does the language user acquire the background information to engage in writerly rewriting, much less to engage in readerly interpretation? Yet each language user “entered” a language once, in infancy (one’s native language). A one-year-old in an English-speaking household comes to understand an emphatic “No!” in advance of understanding the whole of English grammar and her society. At some later point rock fans master the *musical* basics of rock. So there must be a way to identify utterances as meaningful units with genuinely stable meanings. And there must be a way to do so in advance of grasping the entire language (Dresner 2002). If we were free (as “readers”) to “rewrite” every text, then we would never assign any meaning to any text in a way that could guide us in our later, more complex explorations of intertextuality.⁷

In short, if global holism is true, then radical intertextuality cannot explain how anyone could become interested in any area of popular culture in the first place. It must be possible to retrieve *some* meaning from an early R.E.M. song (or an R.E.M. video, a particular book, or episode of a TV show, or whatever) in advance of grasping its place in the whole system. Granted, R.E.M.’s “Losing my Religion” features allusion and complex polysemy, and in actual practice fans do not *begin* by grasping all of the possible meanings of such texts. But to grasp *some* meaning is to grasp something that is not negligible. Understanding may be sufficient without being exhaustive (Genette 1997: 397). We should not apply a theory of

radical intertextuality to all rock texts just because we must appeal to intertextuality to account for the more complex and interesting texts.

Consider the case of Billy Corgan and the Smashing Pumpkins’ cover of “Dreaming.” Like Pete Townshend, Lou Reed, and Johnny Rotten/John Lydon, Corgan is intelligent and articulate. Yet he does not pretend to carry the whole culture of rock music in his head. While one would have to ask him to know for sure, it is safe to say that he has listened to the Beatles and Cheap Trick more than the Vaselines, and to Led Zeppelin more than Aztec Camera. Corgan describes the limited perspective available to him given his Midwestern roots and initial entry point into rock:

We didn’t grow up hanging out, being cool, going to concerts ... our exposure to alternative music was the Smiths, the Cure, and some Bauhaus. We weren’t aware of some underground scene, or a punk-rock movement in L.A. We weren’t surrounded by a culture that supported experimentation. We were supported by a culture that was like, “I can’t come see you play because I’ve got to be at work at nine in the morning.” (Marks: 56)

Corgan’s formative source of music was the radio, so he naturally covers Blondie’s “Dreaming” rather than a more obscure track like “Kidnapper.” The fragmentation of commercial radio, juxtaposing isolated and unrelated chunks of music, requires listeners to draw meaning from music with few clues as about its place in the overall culture of rock. Ignorant of most of the music that led others into alternative music and cut off from the subculture that fostered the music, Corgan nonetheless “got” the core implications of the

new wave to which he was exposed. His slow, menacing cover version of Blondie's "Dreaming" brings out its dark, neurotic undertones. Ironically, the music is closer to Bauhaus than to Blondie. He caught some of the meaning of both the lighter and heavier sides of new wave through exposure to a very small sample of that larger musical movement. Corgan did not grasp the text's position in relation to every other text in the language. He merely grasped enough to get the basic inferences correct.

Such cases count in favor of local holism. As Quine ultimately recognized, meaning arises in relation to "chunks" or relatively small clusters of the language. Nothing is gained by appealing to the whole apparatus (Quine 1991). Crudely, what 'gift' means in English can be shown to differ from what 'Gift' means in German only by seeing that the range of sentences into which each is inserted occurs in the face of very different observations; an English speaker uses it in sentences regarding wrapped packages at Christmas and weddings and birthdays and so on, while the German speaker uses it with respect to arsenic and strychnine. One can then understand that the German 'Gift' means poison, without having to know any biochemistry. Similarly, Corgan's exposure to the Cure and Bauhaus – contrasted with his general exposure to FM radio – was sufficient to provide him with a good idea of their meaning. Their basic meaning did not depend on his ability to distinguish them from the Germs and the VaseLines, nor on his ability to articulate the particular form of rock that they represented.

I grant that recontextualizing a recording may produce new meanings (Gracyk 2001: 51-66). But not every shift of context leaves meaning equally up for grabs. Local holism does not preclude better and worse readings of meanings, particularly when related, as in Quine, to the problems of translating meanings into another language (Quine 1960). If we agree with Wittgenstein's insight that what looks to be one language (e.g., English) is really a plethora of language games, then it is plausible to treat most metatexts (Genette 1997: 4) as truncated translations (e.g., whenever we describe music). But when speakers remain within the musical language, listening without generating any further text, there is no "translation" and so no indeterminacy of meaning. If one responds that this experience is always a "rewriting" but the new text may remain a "private" text, then one either retreats to a silly belief in private meanings or there is, in principle, a method to publicly express that new text. It therefore looks as if "rewriting" generates a metatext in a different language, and we can evaluate the translation for adequacy.⁸ A postulation of writerly musical texts does not imply that musical meanings are really all that slippery.

The next section examines one formulation of radical intertextuality in greater detail.

The Substitution Problem

Support for moderate intertextuality and local holism is unfashionable, in part because some major work on popular music presupposes the radical version with its assumption of global holism.

Some theorists make much of the fact that we can never read any social implications directly from the music (Grossberg 1997: 5, 67). Indeed, if we could do so, we would not have to turn to the audience to stabilize meaning. Radical intertextuality claims that the audience constructs the rock text by assigning each instance of the music to a place within the larger web of cultural practices and assumptions. In short, the music's meaning is always a function of context. But how large is the "web" of intertextuality that provides meaning to rock? According to global holism, it must be the whole language. But how do we draw a boundary around the "language" of rock music?

Grossberg implies that there is no boundary:

To treat rock and roll as a set of musical texts whose effects can be read off their surface or to be located within the isolated relation between music and fan is already to assume an interpretation of its place within a particular rock and roll apparatus. Instead, the music's effects and identity can only be described within the apparatus which connects particular fragments of heterogeneous domains of social, cultural and material practices. (Grossberg 1984: 236-37)⁹

Grossberg's label for this apparatus is "the rock formation" (1997: 16-17). In Shumway's version, rock is a discursive practice, a cultural practice, and a sign system (Shumway 1991: 756).

But at least three distinct problems face the proposal that meaning depends on the totality of this heterogeneous supporting apparatus (which includes but is not restricted to the music-oriented activities of its specific audience).

First, there is a circularity problem that arises if we try to specify what counts as the "language" or "the rock formation" that assigns the meaning(s) of particular texts. Global holism says that every text in the language is relevant to the meaning of every other, supporting radical intertextuality's claim that individual texts have no clear boundaries. However, to count as a text, something must exemplify a language or discursive formation. Textual status therefore requires boundaries for languages. With global holism, the process of locating texts within the language (deciding which other texts are intertextually relevant) threatens to become vacuously circular.

Second, there is the question of *whose* "descriptions" of the music's effects are at issue. Grossberg may choose to ignore them, but perhaps some meanings *do* arise "within the isolated relation between music and fan," meanings that *are* "read off their surface" by fans in the right cultural context – meanings that *are not to be read at all* from without it. As such, our theoretically informed perspective *substitutes different meanings* when we link fragments in light of a larger rock and roll apparatus. Our theoretically informed descriptions may be an informed interpretation of a text without being an interpretation of a rock text. They are usually interpretations of the supporting cultural apparatus or language. I will call this the substitution problem.

Third, Grossberg postulates an overarching, historically evolving architext (what Genette calls the "architextuality of the text" or the sum total of general categories needed to locate text within the totality of texts (Genette 1997: 5)). But

appeals to architextuality undercut the second thesis by prioritizing some things in the interpretation. The interpretive “apparatus” can only frame interpretation if it can be cited without reference to every other text in the language, which is to say that it must be understood through some form of local holism.¹⁰ These three problems call for further explanation.

Global Holism Impoverishes Explanation

The circularity problem will be familiar to anyone acquainted with criticisms of the institutional theory of art (Dickie 1974 & 1984). Making the rock formation or any other cultural formation essential to textual status as rock is to adopt an institutional theory of rock: rock is whatever the rock formation confirms as such.¹¹ As has been noted many times, institutional theories of art must remain mute about the character of the works in question. The “definition” is hollow insofar as absolutely anything might be admitted as an instance. The same is true when applied to a popular art. A theory that fixes boundaries by deference to social negotiation may be able to tell us *which* things are included, but it does not account for why those things (rather than something else) came to have that status.¹² We may follow Grossberg in allowing that a text’s “functions are determined in part by its shape and appearance” (Grossberg 1997: 11), but we strip the theory of any ability to predict which aesthetic properties will matter to the audience, facilitating their incorporation into the rock formation.

We might think that we can use unambiguous examples of rock music to identify the audience, and then look to the audience to identify the contextual factors generating meaning. (Quine’s field linguist can only assign meaning to expressions by interacting with the locals and by observing their interaction with their environment.) Unfortunately, Grossberg contends that our identification of the music as rock “is already to assume an interpretation of its place within a particular rock and roll apparatus.” But if a text is meaningful within the language (within the rock formation) because the audience already interprets it in light of the rock formation, we arrive at the banal thought that what is appropriated by the rock audience is whatever is appropriated by the rock audience. We must consult the audience to know what counts as a text within the rock formation; when the audience itself consults that formation, does it do so directly, or by observing the rest of the audience?

An obvious response is to endorse architextuality as an essential element of meaning while simultaneously denying that each text is always already assigned a place within the language. In short, we should allow that there are identifiable genres and conventions with objective properties, with different texts exemplifying the conventions in different degrees. Yet informed decisions about the presence and absence of these features do not presuppose awareness of the musical text’s precise location in the total language. For example, when the Beatles first appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show* (February, 1964, and a singular event in rock history if anything was), the audience sat through

a lot of non-rock, too. Whole families gathered to watch; kids and parents literally made up a single audience. But in seizing on the Beatles performance while the older generation made jokes about their hair, the rock audience recognized itself in the performance, just as the members of the Beatles had earlier recognized themselves in the music of Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry and Little Richard. Few teens and preadolescents recognized themselves in Ed Sullivan's parade of trained animals, Catskill comics, acrobats and plate jugglers. Each member of the audience separated the rock from the non-rock, and discovered meaning in doing so, without looking to the larger rock formation. For that apparatus was still evolving. If the rock formation is a language, then we must take account of its capacity to evolve.¹³ That evolution must involve deviations from the pre-existing language or formation. To achieve originality, new texts will violate the rules of the pre-existing-language.

In sum, we should be very suspicious of any version of intertextuality as *déjà*, in which every text is already written and read (Barthes 1974: 20-21). Watching the Beatles on *Ed Sullivan*, the audience recognized that the Beatles were different from the other acts they saw that night, and that the Beatles were different from American rock and rollers like Elvis Presley. The real properties of the music were as central as any postulated apparatus, for the audience had a direct apprehension of the music in advance of the maturation of the rock formation. Therefore a local holism (some level of intertextuality short of global holism) must sometimes be

sufficient to secure meaning for rock texts, including texts departing from the pre-existing language.

Unlike global holism, local holism assumes that there are limits on what the rock audience can accept as rock at that particular time. (Think of the scene in the film *Back to the Future* where Marty, Michael J. Fox's character, starts playing a Chuck Berry tune at a high school prom and then embellishes it with a heavy metal guitar solo. The assembled teens respond as if he were a visitor from Mars, which, in a sense, he is.) At least some of the music's own qualities (and these may include "invisible" or imperceptible properties such as the year a recording was made or who wrote it) are relevant to its being put forward as a rock text. Handling of tempo and beat were particularly crucial to the music's initial reception as rock and roll (Willis 1990: 50-52). We would be dumbfounded to find Bing Crosby's recording of "Try A Little Tenderness" *ever* being accepted as rock by Led Zeppelin fans. Fans respond to aesthetic differences, yet the relative poverty of our verbal discussions of such qualities renders them all but irrelevant. (Whatever is not reflected in other texts is of no intertextual significance and so drops out as irrelevant to meaning.)

Paradoxically, global holism must accept Bing Crosby's music as part of the rock apparatus if it has *any* intertextual links to the rock formation. In fact, there are intertextual links between Crosby and rock music. David Bowie once appeared on a Bing Crosby Christmas program in 1977 (for a duet of "Little Drummer Boy"). Crosby and Otis Redding both sang "Try A Little Tenderness." More than one academic has discussed Elton

John's achievement of outselling Crosby's "White Christmas." So Crosby's 1946 recording of "Don't Fence Me In" is already as firmly within the web of rock music as is David Byrne's 1991 recording of the Cole Porter song. We should not be surprised when theorists committed to radical intertextuality conclude that rock is not primarily a musical form.

Consider a closely related problem. Rock music receives verbal commentary. Because the thesis of global holism says that every text in the language is relevant to the meaning of every other, it follows that the "language" giving rock music its meaning must include both all rock music together with every statement produced in English. For that matter, it should include all statements made in any language in which any comment has been made about rock.

The resulting absurdity is best diagnosed in terms of the difference between the meaning and the reference of the label "rock music." An institutional account presupposes a border between a set of objects and everything else and succeeds if it accurately captures the class of instances to which the term *refers*. Global holism similarly draws a boundary line between what is in the language and what is in a different language. But a holism that will embrace *every* intertextual reference erases all boundaries. We can discuss "rock music" and point to a "rock formation," but the term "rock" has been stripped of any classificatory function. "Rock music" designates an utterly arbitrary class of entities. It is like the auctions where the government disposes of sealed boxes whose contents are not open to inspection. The auctioneer can call

for bids on "the contents of box 42." We can refer to them successfully under that description, but the success of our reference lies entirely in our singling out the container. Aside from guesses based on the dimensions of the box or its weight when we move it, we don't know what is in the box; the description is without meaning apart from the act of ostension. But an act of ostension that gestures to everything is an empty gesture.

Under the assumption of global holism, "rock" functions as a name rather than a general noun. It cannot describe without invoking the whole language, perhaps all language. However, ostensive definition is useful only if there are empirical manifestations to which one is meaningfully directed. With global holism, everything with any intertextual link appears to be within the scope of the act of ostension. Worse still, many formulations of radical intertextuality deny even this much, for they deny that the endless play of texts can denote a non-textual reality. Global holism means abandoning any explanation of what rock is, or of its attractions or meanings for its audience.¹⁴

Local Holism and the Immediacy of Meaning

Finally, let us return to the idea that texts have no hierarchical order and so each audience member's interpretive act constrains and constitutes the text, temporarily securing meaning. This inference from global holism to a theory of "rewriting" creates a substitution problem.

Listening With their Eyes

Radical intertextuality claims that meanings are indeterminate until stabilized by the audience. Because the rock formation generates too many intertextual relations to permit either musicians or corporations to control the readings given by the audience (the second thesis), every “reading” must be selectively partial, *constituting* or co-creating the text (the third thesis). Thus Fiske notes that younger Madonna fans have never seen Marilyn Monroe movies, so Monroe is irrelevant to their interpretation of Madonna’s “Material Girl” video. It seems that young fans must interact with a different text (an image bank) than do older fans who’ve seen Monroe sing “Diamonds are a Girl’s Best Friend.”

Recall that global holism grounds the inference that if radical intertextuality is true, then the audience’s “rewriting” supplants its originating authorship, which was, in any event, a stitching together of many texts. By simple logic, an attack on the consequent of this statement is an attack on its antecedent. So the consequent, that audiences stabilize meaning by “rewriting,” is a critical test case for radical intertextuality and global holism.

We thus arrive at my final criticism: “rewriting” stabilizes nothing, for it involves the substitution of a second “text” for the music itself. Surprisingly, it will not be any individual text (whether artist or song or recording), for global holism tells us that we cannot isolate any individual text as a bearer of meaning. Interpretation will have to focus on abstract *types* rather than on instances or tokens of that type. Recall Grossberg’s claim that the goal is to describe “the specific effects (and popularity) of particular forms of rock and roll” (1984:

226). One consequence, for music or for any other system of signs, is that the basic unit of meaning must be that of a type: we interpret the structure of the general rock formation, not specific recordings, songs, or performances. (Remember that Saussure instructs us to consider the word “cat,” *wherever it may appear*, rather than any specific instance. Grossberg also wants us to examine the language, the rock formation, rather than individual communications.) Of course, this move confirms a commitment to prioritize architextuality at the expense of special intertextuality, a move that flatly contradicts the anti-hierarchical doctrine of the second thesis. Theory sends us in search of a text that is different from the texts we set out to explain.

A related problem is that an ability to read specific texts (e.g., seeing them as instances of some regular practice or of some genre) “does not mean that the participant natives also read the texts that way” (Schudson 1987: 64). In the case of rock, the participant “natives” would be many of us and the fans who came before us! The fact that low-grade 1950s science fiction films can now be read as expressions of cold war hysteria does not mean that their original audiences understood them in that way at that time. Or consider Altamont, the free concert thrown by the Rolling Stones near Livermore, California, on December 9, 1969. It has come to symbolize the collapse of the utopian vision of the Summer of Love and the Woodstock Nation but this does not mean that anyone at the concert understood it as such. I lived in the area at the time and talked to people who were there; they merely regarded it as a lousy

show on a cold December day, with limited view of the stage, bad sound and inadequate parking and toilets. Had it not been for the investigative reporting of *Rolling Stone* and the documentary film shot by David and Albert Maysles, the stabbing death of Meredith Hunter would not have come to symbolize the collapse of the Woodstock dream. But those are different, interpretive texts, abstracted from the audience's text.

We can avoid the radical theory's retreat to abstraction by challenging the assumption that a fan's immediate relation to the music demands interpretation. In daily practice, fans respond to musical performances and recordings, not to an abstracted "particular form" of rock. I will defer to Wittgenstein: "What happens is not that a symbol cannot be further interpreted but: I do not interpreting, because I feel at home in the present picture. When I interpret I step from one level of thought to another" (Wittgenstein 1967: 43e Remark 234). When the audience is at home with the music, texts yield their meanings directly, without a distinct process of interpretation. If you want "the meaning of R.E.M.," local holism recommends listening to a bunch of R.E.M. But when a music critic or cultural theorist expounds on that meaning, an act of translation is taking place, requiring the mastery of two "languages" and a juggling act between them. A large chunk of each system must be taken into account in order to get anything like a trustworthy reading. But every discussion of the audience calls attention to an expanded swath of intertextual linkages. It therefore redirects attention to a different text, different from the text that ordinarily engages the fan.

The Madonna fan is interested in the new video. Critical interpretation focuses on the meaning of Madonna. Global holism demands even more: consideration of the whole apparatus that serves as the context of interpretation.

In contrast, much of the audience hears music and responds. The cultural theorist observes the web of intertextuality and describes these responses or *effects*. But effects are not meanings. A stop sign does not mean "stop" because it causes motorists to stop; motorists stop because they know what the sign means. The meaning is an object of attention, not a response. To repeat a frequently borrowed quotation that makes the point: "the sadness is to the music rather like the redness to the apple, than it is like the burp to the cider" (Bouwsma: 166). Bouwsma's point is not that the music is inherently sad or meaningful in any other way; Bouwsma argues that it's sad if we have the right kind of musical background and if we know how to use an appropriate range of other sentences about sad things. We need specific intertextualities.

Global holism is an extreme conclusion to draw from the fact that audiences cannot respond *appropriately* in total ignorance of the cultural practices involved. The red signs at street corners would not really mean "stop" if nobody in the culture paid any attention to them. At the same time, the meaning of those signs is independent of the meaning of Shakespeare's obscure line in *King Lear*: "Cry you mercy, I took you for a joint-stool." There are webs of relevance in understanding meanings, as well as levels of interpretation. Consequently, we will find different levels of competence when extracting meaning from

any complex system, quite apart from attempts to paraphrase and translate meanings. The primary thing that must be in place to understand rock music is *musical understanding*: the audience feels “at home” with the way the music is constructed, with no recourse to thoughts about how the rest of the audience will respond.

We have circled back to the question of audience entry into an evolving language. There has to be some entry level that does not presuppose any broader meaning, a point at which it is common for the audience to make errors (which are genuine errors and not evidence of a writerly text). One attraction at this level will be aesthetic: “When they do not enjoy the first story in a new genre, they do not read the second” (Roberts 1990: 214). But excessive disorientation is painful; one must at least partially understand. With music, we must (partially) understand the musical contribution *as* a musical contribution.

I have followed R.E.M. since I first stumbled across the *Chronic Town* E.P. just after its release in 1982 (now available on the 1987 compilation *Dead Letter Office*). So I am alternately puzzled and amused by the idea that there was a text in 1982, “R.E.M.,” with a meaning, “the meaning of R.E.M.,” and that the latter depended on R.E.M.’s position within the total rock formation. Was this text really intact in 1982, with the release of “Radio Free Europe” and *Chronic Town*? Why did anyone in California (where I was) care about R.E.M. if not for their music? The handful who listened between 1982 and their commercial breakthrough at the decade’s end heard a strong vocalist, inventive melodies, and an off-kilter rock band. There

were also a lot of incomprehensible words. To the extent that R.E.M. had an image, it was generated by the contrast of open music and opaque words, of propulsive, melodic music and moody vocals.

Intertextuality was in play, of course, but it was not simply a matter of recombining fragments of the pre-existing language of rock. The gestalt was something new. (Or does every song necessarily sound fresh to listeners who “rewrite” every text?) We can push the problem of entry into a new genre back to the roots of rock music; Elvis and Keith Richards and John Lennon and Bruce Springsteen were fans of a certain type of music before they could master and reshape it. If they had not enjoyed the music that they heard, apart from their grasp of any broader meaning, why would they have listened long enough to become its interpreters?

One problem is that the audience is usually “at home” with a different text than the cultural analyst or radical interpreter. Recall Grossberg’s words: “a particular music exists as ‘rock and roll’ for an audience only when it is located in a larger assemblage which I will call ‘the rock and roll apparatus’” (Grossberg 1984: 236). Similarly, the words on this page exist “as English” only because there is a larger assemblage of the relevant sort. However, let us take care not to confuse the broad *conditions* for meaningfulness with the specific *meanings* of my words as arranged on this page: *having* the “assemblage” in place is a necessary condition for meaningful communication in English, but *being aware of* that assemblage is not a necessary condition.

In conclusion, if every text referenced in the interaction between audience and music is equally relevant to meaning, then interpretation always adds yet another text, changing every other text's meaning. Perhaps global holists desire this consequence, as the very meaning of the thesis that audiences "rewrite" texts. However, I am suggesting that this result does more than defer meaning. It implies that the interpreted text is not even the text that interests most members of the audience. Worse, the key text is ultimately always the same text: the whole language. Furthermore, there is a steep price to pay in granting that "the holistic interpretation of commercial cultural products lies not in the analysis and reading of reified 'texts,' but in contextualizing such entities in the processes of production, dissemination, consumption, uses,

re-uses and varying idiosyncratic popular interpretations" (Manuel 1993: 13). I don't mean to be dense, but I see nothing attractive about a theory of meaning that does not elucidate successful, non-idiosyncratic interpretations (e.g., my understanding of your request to pass the mustard, or my success in understanding the instructions for programming my DVR). But if holistic interpretation cannot shed light on mundane interactions of audience and text, then I conclude that the theory is not a theory about the interpretations of those texts, reified or otherwise. Global holism treats native interpretations as misguided or mysterious, and substitutes richer texts for discussion. However, that is a special and unusual case, and sheds no light on what we are doing when we listen to most music.¹⁵

References

- ALI Lorraine (1997), "Devil's Haircut," *Rolling Stone* (21 August): 29-30, 119.
- BARTHES Roland (1974), *S/Z*, Richard Howard (trans.), New York: Hill and Wang.
- (1975), *The Pleasure of the Text*, Richard Miller (trans.), New York: Hill and Wang.
- (1977), *Image - Music - Text*, Stephen Heath (trans.), London: Fontana.
- BILGRAMI Akeel (1998), "Why Holism Is Harmless and Necessary," in J. E. Tomberlin (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives 12: Language, Mind and Ontology*, Malden, Blackwell, pp. 105-26.
- BOUWSMA O. K. (1961), "The Expression Theory of Art," in Morris Philipson (ed.), *Aesthetics Today*, Cleveland, Meridian Books, pp. 145-68.
- BRESKIN David (1993), "Voodoo Child," *Rolling Stone* 660/661 (8-22 July): 88.
- CARSON Tom (1981), "Chrissie Hynde Wants to Be Rock & Roll's Number One Heroine," *Rolling Stone* (1 October), p. 93.

Listening With their Eyes

- COHEN Scott (1994), *Yakety Yak*, New York, Fireside.
- DAVIES Stephen (1991), *Definitions of Art*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
- DICKIE George (1974), *Art and Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press.
- (1984), *The Art Circle: A Theory of Art*, New York, Haven.
- DRESNER Eli (2002), “Holism, Language Acquisition, and Algebraic Logic,” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 25, pp. 419-52.
- DUMMETT Michael (1991), *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press.
- EAGLETON Terry (2008), *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- FISKE John (2011), *Television Culture*, 2nd ed., New York, Routledge.
- FODOR Jerry (1986), “Banish Discontent,” in Jeremy Butterfield (ed.), *Language, Mind and Logic Cambridge*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-23.
- GENETTE Gérard (1997), *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, C. Newman & C. Doubinsky (trans.), Lincoln, NE & London: University of Nebraska Press.
- GRACYK Theodore (1996), *Rhythm and Noise : An Aesthetics of Rock*, London & Durham, Duke University Press.
- (2001), *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press.
- (2007), « Allusions and Intentions in Popular Art », in W. Irwin & J. J. E. Gracia (eds), *Philosophy and the Interpretation of Pop Culture*, Lanham, MD, Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 65-87.
- GROSSBERG Lawrence (1984), “Another Boring Day in Paradise : Rock and Roll and the Empowerment of Everyday Life,” *Popular Music*, 4 (1984), pp. 236-37. (Reprinted in Grossberg 1997)
- (1997), *Dancing in Spite of Myself : Essays on Popular Culture*, Durham & London, Duke University Press.
- (1999), “Same As It Ever Was? Rock Culture. Same As It Ever Was! Rock Theory,” in Karen Kelly & Evelyn McDonnell (eds), *Stars Don’t Stand Still in the Sky : Music and Myth*, New York, New York University Press.
- (2002), “Reflections of a Disappointed Popular Music Scholar,” *Rock Over the Edge: Transformations in Popular Culture*. Edited by Roger Beebe, D. Fulbrook & B. Saunders, Durham & London, Duke University Press, pp. 25-59.
- HAMILTON Jill (1997), “Ani DiFranco,” *Rolling Stone* (13 November), p. 150.
- HARRISON Bernard (1979), *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language*, New York, St. Martin’s.
- LAMARQUE Peter (1990), “The Death of the Author : An Analytical Autopsy,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 30, pp. 319-31.
- MANUEL Peter (1993), *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India*, Chicago & London, University of Chicago Press.
- MARKS Craig (1996), “Zero Worship,” *Spin*, June, p. 56

- MIDDLETON Richard (1990), *Studying Popular Music*, Milton Keynes, U.K., Open University Press.
- PAGIN Peter (2006), "Meaning Holism," in Ernest Lepore & Barry Smith (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Language*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 213-32.
- PEACOCKE Christopher (1997), "Holism," in Bob Hale and Crispin Wright (eds), *A Companion to the Philosophy of Language*, Oxford, Blackwell Publishers, pp. 227-47.
- PUTNAM Hilary (1990), "Meaning Holism," *Realism With a Human Face*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 278-302.
- QUINE W. V. O. (1953), "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," *From a Logical Point of View*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press (reprinted 1963 Harper Torchbooks), pp. 20-46.
- (1960), *Word and Object*, New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- (1991), "Two Dogmas in Retrospect," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 21, pp. 265- 274.
- RAFFMAN Diana (1993), *Language, Music, and Mind*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press.
- ROBERTS Thomas R. (1990), *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction*, Athens & London, University of Georgia Press.
- SCHUDSON Michael (1987), "The New Validation of Popular Culture : Sense and Sentimentality in Academia," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 4 (1987), p. 51-68.
- SHEPHERD John (1991), "Music and the Last Intellectuals," *The Journal of Aesthetic Education* 25, pp. 95-114.
- SHUMWAY David. (1991), "Rock & Roll as a Cultural Practice," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 90, 4: 753-69.
- VAN DER MERWE Peter (1989), *Origins of the Popular Style*, New York, Oxford University Press.
- WILLIS Paul (1990), "The Golden Age", in Simon Frith & Andrew Goodwin (eds), *On Record : Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, New York, Pantheon, pp. 43-55.
- WILSON Pamela. (1995), "Mountains of Contradictions : Gender, *Class*, and Region in the Star Image of Dolly Parton," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 94, pp. 109-34.
- WITTGENSTEIN Ludwig (1953), *Philosophical Investigations*, G. E. M. Anscombe (trans.), New York: Macmillan Publishing.
- (1967), *Zettel*, G. E. M. Anscombe (trans.), Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- ZIFF PAUL (1967), "On H. P. Grice's Account of Meaning," *Analysis* 28, p. 1-8.

Notes

1. For a cogent criticism of “the death of the author,” see Lamarque 1990. We must also reject Barthes’ assertion that “No significance (no bliss [*jouissance*]) can occur ... in a mass culture” (Barthes 1975: 38) or with popular song (40).
2. I attack this assumption in Gracyk 2001: 58-66 and Gracyk 2007.
3. See Raffman 1993.
4. See also Dummett 1991 and Pagin 2006. One critic reduces it to “the doctrine that whole theories are units of meaning” (Fodor 1986: 12). Fodor argues that holism is a “dubious doctrine of skeptical import” that gets most of its support from confusions with a parallel but different doctrine, epistemic holism (the idea that isolated propositions cannot be confirmed as true or false). We can only evaluate a web of intertwined beliefs. But epistemic holism does not secure meaning holism, a point that applies to doctrines of intertextuality embracing meaning holism.
5. Quine (1953) is an important source of meaning holism. A summary and response is Putnam (1990: 278-302). Quine subsequently abandons global holism; meaning depends upon “clusters of sentences just inclusive enough to have critical semantic mass” (Quine 1991: 268). For a review of several varieties of holism, see Peacocke (1997).
6. For an independent defense of local or molecular holism, see Bilgrami (1998).
7. See Harrison 1979: 121-26.
8. Adherents of global holism might respond that the text and metatext are necessarily utterances of the same language, a response that I consider below.
9. For Grossberg, the “rock and roll apparatus” involves three organizing axes: youth as a distinct generation, celebration of bodily pleasure, and post-modernity. He re-examines these in Grossberg 2002.
10. This problem does not imply that every form of radical intertextuality is flawed, for one could consistently embrace the second thesis by refusing to recognize and prioritize any such apparatus. Although Grossberg’s contextualism may fall short of endorsing radical intertextuality “threatens to make all analysis futile” (Grossberg 1997: 11). He therefore prioritizes a specific architextual apparatus while downplaying the other intertextual relationships that dominate most other discussions of rock.
11. For a review of the literature generated by this theory, see Davies 1991: 78-114. His proposals for breaking the circularity do not seem to be viable alternatives here.
12. Shumway therefore reasons that all music played at the original Woodstock festival, “regardless of its formal diversity, is properly identified as rock and roll” (755). But what is true of Woodstock is presumably true of the 1969 Isle of Wight festival, which would make a Miles Davis jazz performance into rock. Unfortunately, putting an apple into the cabbage bin at the grocery store does not make the apple into a cabbage.
13. Grossberg accepts this point (1997: 17-23; 2002). But because he does not conceptualize his project in terms of intertextuality and holism, he does not think of the rock formation as a language system. Thus, his “obsession with the notion that rock is dead” (1997: 17).
14. My point is adapted from Davies 1991: 111.
15. I thank Serge Lacasse for his help in the development of this essay.