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Popular Music: The Lyrics Strike Back

Abstract

Popular song lyrics are a very important object of study, although they are sometimes not appreciated properly. The last third of the twentieth century saw popular song receding from its lyrics by the image, namely the video – the image-based legislator of popular music for a few decades. However, the lyrics have found their way to strike back, and this article outlines some manifestations of their importance in contemporary culture(s). With the rise of lyric videos, popular music made a turn toward the interpretative challenges of written poetry because watching such videos involves a process of reading while listening. Further literaturization of popular music comes from the transformation of song lyrics into books – under certain conditions, reading the lyrics as written poems includes hearing them internally as songs.

Keywords: popular music, popular song, lyrics, lyric videos, literaturization

The words are and remain for the music a foreign extra of secondary value, as the effect of the tones is incomparably more powerful, more infallible, and more rapid than that of the words. If these are incorporated in the music, therefore, they must of course occupy only an entirely subordinate position, and adapt themselves completely to it. (Schopenhauer 1966, vol. II: 448)

I would like to use this thought from Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation* as a starting point to illustrate a very long line of thinking that has privileged music above language for many reasons. For Schopenhauer himself, music stands far above all other arts – whereas all the other arts exhibit the *ideas*, music exhibits directly the *will itself* and “[f]or this reason the effect of music is so very much more powerful and penetrating than is that of the other arts, for these others speak only of the shadow, but music of the essence” (vol. I: 257). Consequently, music has extraordinary effect: because it directly exhibits the will itself, music also

acts directly on the will; that is, the feelings, passions, and emotions of the hearer (vol. II: 448). The idea of musical perception as an emotional response takes one back at least to the Ancient Greek philosophy. In Schopenhauer's orderly system, there is no doubt that "it has always been said that music is the language of feeling and of passion, just as words are the language of reason" (vol. I: 259). For him, lyrics should never have the leading role; they should always be subordinate to music. Such is also the opinion of Nietzsche, musical formalists, and many other thinkers, musicians, theoreticians, and even poets.

Nowadays, when popular music studies have entered the new century with a strong and ever-growing web of interdisciplinarity, popular song is hardly ever seen as just music with additional subordinate elements. Lyrics have attracted serious theoretical attention, and so have many other aspects, such as vocal, social, psychological, visual, and other features. Nonetheless, popular music lyrics are far from being the primary subject of scholarly research – in popular music studies they are still often seen as subsidiary, while in literary theory they are often perceived as popular, and therefore of poorer quality compared to "real" literature.

It is interesting that during the socialist period (1944–1989) and partly also later, for Bulgarian popular music – in both its most prominent directions, *estrada* (light music or pop music) and rock (mostly in a "tamed" form, pop rock) – there was a pronounced tendency to use preexisting poetic works as lyrics for songs, and even more often new ones were created by professional lyricists. Bulgarian popular song lyrics of the period are in a way a sung volume of poetry, and many of them have excellent literary qualities. Among the best-known authors of lyrics are the poets Pavel Matev, Evtim Evtimov, Alexandar Petrov, Bogomil Gudev, Lyubomir Levchev, Damyan Damyanov, Nedyalko Yordanov, Mihail Belchev, Miryana Basheva, Margarita Petkova, Petya Dubarova, Georgi Konstantinov, Petar Karaangov, Rumen Leonidov, Radoy Ralin, Victor Samuilov, as well as many others. With poets writing lyrics for various performers and bands, the role of lyrics in Bulgarian popular music during the second half of the twentieth century is definitely not as subordinate as it is in other cultures and periods.

Naturally, in some popular music genres lyrics have a more important role than they do in others.¹ Without being exhaustive, these include country music (with its narrative songs, closer to epic); singer-songwriters, who focus notably on lyrics (popular figures such as Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, and many others, but also bards, cantautori, chansonniers, etc.); hip-hop/rap music (based on rhythm and extensive rapping of

¹ Thanks to Marko Juvan for pointing this out in a presentation of an early version of this article.

words); and progressive rock and metal (based on complicated musical structures, and often on elaborate lyrics as well). However, in general, in its most popular and globally commercial forms, popular song lyrics have indeed played a subordinate role for a long time. Whereas philosophers, theoreticians, and musicians explain that secondary role with the (according to them) higher essence of music as a supreme art, the last third of the twentieth century saw the song receding from its lyrics by the image – namely, the video. Music videos established themselves as the image-based legislator of popular music for a few decades. However, the lyrics have found a way to strike back, and here I would like to outline certain manifestations of their importance in contemporary culture(s).

Music videos: watching while hearing

In the 1970s, the music industry/ies came up with a very effective promotional tool: short films accompanying songs and substituting for performers in places where they could not be. Soon they gained popularity and, through art approaches toward the visualization of music, a new synthetic synesthetic art appeared: the video. Vision turned out to have a unique way of making the arguments between lyrics and music pointless; in this spirit, through the years, many complaints were heard blaming the video for setting limits on the openness of song interpretations. In 1981, the huge American conglomerates American Express and Warner Communications Inc. created four new television channels, and the third of them had the following promise as a slogan: “You’ll never look at music the same way again”. In a few years, this promise indeed came true: not only music was not the same, but also radio, television, fashion, popular culture, and the entire music world. As a regionally oriented global media with a flawlessly prepared marketing strategy, MTV became a uniquely powerful phenomenon – in its strongest years, it reached the rank of a legislator: raising and dethroning stars, constantly rearranging the map of the most popular performers and genres, setting new categories and redefining the old ones, and even determining what classical popular music is. In fact, MTV turned out to embody the music industry in the centralized sense, in which Adorno saw the culture industry and feared and despised it as an industry that “intentionally integrates its consumers from above” (Adorno 1975: 12).

In all its branches, products which are tailored for consumption by masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufactured more or less according to plan. (ibid.)

I will not discuss here the potential visual value of videos, nor their undoubtedly significant cultural role. What I would like to emphasize in the frame of our discussion of image and text is that videos tend to distance the song from its lyrics – as it is well known, “the closer the match between setting and lyric, the more banal the video” (Frith 1996: 225). An example of literal matching between setting and lyrics is the music video for Dire Straits’ song “Tunnel of Love”, in which the imagery quite literally follows the lyrics – and it is no accident that the song appeared on their 1980 album entitled *Making Movies*.² In order to avoid the banality of the literal setting, artists and directors have put a lot of effort into creating new video artifacts – based on images, not on other popular song elements, and certainly not on lyrics. As Carol Vernallis (2002: 28) emphasized, “[m]ost commonly, the image does not follow the progress of the lyrics, nor does it respond with the same intensity at the lyrics’ moment of culmination”. Videos “enable musicians (or their record companies) to translate their performing ideals into televisual terms directly” (Frith 1996: 225), and they also allow directors to further and further explore their visual and technological fantasy.

Lyric videos: reading while hearing

Then came the internet era, and especially the YouTube era, and gradually this became the main way many people listen to music – by watching it on YouTube, not even so much on music television stations (although those still have their importance too). Once crowded into album sleeves of long-playing records, compact cassettes, and compact discs, lyrics appeared in printed form as part of any musical format. With the establishment of the MP3 format, lyrics stepped back and appeared just as an additional option on limited music players or as catalogues on either lyric-specialized websites or the official websites of the performers. No one would expect lyrics to overcome music (which they also should not), let alone vision – after all, the contemporary digital world is predominantly, if not entirely, visual. However, the need for lyrics is evident even in a predominantly visual world, and so the lyrics came back in the very space of image: the video. With the rise of lyric videos, the lyrics found a way to strike back after decades of visual dictatorship.

A lyric video is a video clip based on “the visual reproduction of the lyrics of the song” (Selva 2014: 347, cited in Pérez Rufi 2018: 5). Or, as another definition would put it, “[l]yric videos are animated music videos that showcase the words of a song, animated in time to the music. These can

² Of course, it is also possible to consider “Tunnel of Love” as a meta-video, thanks to Jernej Habjan for pointing this out in a presentation of an early version of this article.

range from simple words on screen to fully animated and illustrated creations” (Reeve 2017). The visual presence of text within videos could be traced back in time throughout the entire history of videos, the most significant example perhaps being Bob Dylan’s 1965 “Subterranean Homesick Blues”, in which Dylan consecutively drops cue cards that highlight certain words. Lyric videos contain the entire lyrics though, not only highlights; as a concept, lyric videos are also related to karaoke videos, only without the exclusion of the vocal parts. Such videos have become immensely popular in recent years, and the top three most-viewed lyric videos on YouTube have over two billion views each: The Chainsmokers’ “Closer (Lyric) ft. Halsey”, Frozen’s “Let It Go Sing-along”, and The Chainsmokers & Coldplay’s “Something Just Like This (Lyric)”. The last even broke YouTube’s record for the most single-day views of a lyric video, being streamed more than 9 million times in its first 24 hours of availability (Stutz 2017). In the first two videos, the visual reproduction of the lyrics merely accompanies the actual video, whereas in the third one and in numerous other videos (like the new videos by ABBA from their 2021 reunion: “Just a Notion”, “When You Danced with Me”, “I Can Be That Woman”, etc.) the focus is only on the text, not on a parallel visual story as well. Originating from fan creativity, lyric videos have also become an instrument of the record companies; they are far simpler, cheaper, and more direct than “regular” videos. Gradually, lyric videos have turned into a real popular culture phenomenon – in a 2017 article promoting RMV Productions, Pete Reeve stated that searching for the words “lyric video” yields 72,400,000 results, whereas at the moment in 2022 it is already 183,000,000. The Internet is full of tutorials and websites of the type “How to make a lyric video”, “lyric video makers”, and so on. These clearly appeal to the creative designer side of the fans and listeners, they bring forward the visual aspect rather than the textual one, and they are presented as design, animation, specific art.

José Patricio Pérez Rufi (2018: 16–17) differentiates within the conception of lyric video “two different options linked to the functionality of the composition and the application of graphic or textual resources”. The objective of the second one is “the application of creative and artistic techniques in which the text is a graphic resource, where the optimization of its readability will not prevail”, whereas the first one’s main objective is “to transmit the textual message in the most effective way”. To simplify this even more, some lyric videos develop the visual side, and try to process the lyrics into visual effects, whereas others keep the images simple, less dynamic, and graphically neutral, in order to communicate the text message. An example of the latter is George Michael’s iconic 1990 “Praying for Time” with plain and simple words on black background, outlining the message of the socially charged lyrics. By pushing away the dominance

of the image, the text emphasizes its own textual meaning, and it does so by becoming an image. It is one of those cultural mechanisms in which something defeats another thing by becoming this other thing. Text defeats image by becoming an image.

Simon Frith speaks of three aspects in listening to lyrics:

But in listening to the lyrics of pop songs we actually hear three things at once: *words*, which appear to give songs an independent source of semantic meaning; *rhetoric*, words being used in a special, musical way, a way which draws attention to features and problems of speech; and *voices*, words being spoken or sung in human tones which are themselves “meaningful,” signs of persons and personality. (Frith 1996: 159)

With the rise of lyric videos, one should definitely add another aspect: reading the lyrics in the dynamics of a lyric video not only privileges the textual component of the song, but it also involves a process of *reading* while listening, hence a process of *literaturization* of popular music. Always carrying within itself the essence of oral poetry, popular song now shows another tendency – of turning to the written poetry – with all its interpretative challenges.

Lyric books: hearing while reading

Another way that lyrics have found to strike back is their transformation into books. Reading lyrics printed in books also presents the recipient with a very interesting challenge: once familiarized as part of the synthetic whole of the song, lyrics tend to be inseparable from this whole, and *reading* the lyrics as written poems includes actually *hearing* them internally as songs.

Several aspects could hinder this synthetic reading–hearing reception. One of them is when the lyrics are published in translation. In the 1984 Bulgarian book *Джон Ленън. Поезия, проза, интервюта* (John Lennon. Poetry, Prose, Interviews), while reading the translated lyrics of John Lennon with or after the Beatles, the recipient mainly finds himself or herself occupied with a comparison between the original and the translation, rather than with a reading–hearing reception. “Norwegian Wood” for example, rather than evoking its original melody while reading, puzzles the reader instead with the translation of “wood” as “roпа”, thus privileging the forest aspect of the word “wood” over the material aspect, which should be translated as “дърво, дървесина” (Ленън 1984: 61). And it is actually the cheap wooden wall panelling (trendy at that time) that the singing I “lit a fire” to. Naturally, translation of poetry is always a most challenging task, and in the case of lyric books the reception of the lyrics in a language dif-

ferent from the original one is definitely an obstacle to reception as inner hearing while reading.

When the lyrics are printed in the original language with their corresponding metadata, hearing the song is almost inseparable from reading it. Such is the case of the Bulgarian book *Кажу, че ме обичаш. Златни стихове в музиката* (Say You Love Me. Golden Poetry in Music), in which all the poems are printed with information about the lyricist, the composer, and the performer (e.g., “СНЕГЪТ НА СПОМЕНА”. Lyrics by Alexander Mihaylov. Music by Petar Stupel. Performed by Georgi Minchev. Сб. 2012: 4). The year, album name, and record company are missing, but the information is still enough to unlock the inner hearing reception.

Various approaches have been chosen by Bulgarian scholars and journalists in their examination of popular music, which include the reprinting of lyrics. Rumen Yanev and Emil Bratanov (2014), for instance, included in their book about Bulgarian rock music of the late 1980s the lyrics of the groups as the foundation of the study, thus emphasizing the political and cultural importance of song lyrics as part of the transition from socialism to aspiration for freedom.³ All the songs are presented in their historical, social, and cultural context, and the reprinting of lyrics is combined with interviews, pieces of reporting, and multiple photos. Another approach appears in Daniela Kuzmanova’s 2011 book about the (progressive) rock band FSB: random (or at least not explicitly orderly) poems appear throughout the book, reproduced artistically against the background of nature photos (e.g., seascapes, sunsets, etc.). This is a different method of combining image and text within a cultural study.

In Paul McCartney’s brand-new collection *The Lyrics. 1956 to the Present*, the MPL team has devised “standardised metadata” with the song’s first album appearance and single release in the UK and the US (McCartney 2021: xxxiii), so that each song has the following information: writer, artist, date recorded, and date released. The lyrics were also standardized by the book team, so that the volume presents “the definitive lyrics for these 154 songs” (p. xxii). This book is unique because of another fruitful combination as well: McCartney’s commentaries on each song are illustrated with various images and objects from the archives.

For me it’s a trip down memory lane, but in putting together this book, I wanted to make sure we illustrated the commentaries with objects and pictures from

³ It would be interesting to compare this approach to certain Bulgarian song lyrics of the period with the intense scholarly attention to the lyrics of Russian rock songs from the 1980s. Yngvar Steinholt (2003) criticized this inclination of Russian rock critics and academics to examine the “Soundtrack of Perestroika” as primarily literary achievement and to overlook the interdisciplinary approach to it.

my past so that readers could immerse themselves in the period when the songs were written. It's all to give a sense of what was happening then. (p. xix)

This combination of lyrics, McCartney's stories about them, and images related to the songs presents the reader with a unique museum-like experience, in which the book grows into a rich visual–musical–literary reception.

Another very interesting approach is chosen in the book *Бъди какъвто си. Рок поезия* (Be Who You Are. Rock Poetry), collecting the most popular and valued lyrics of the Bulgarian lyricist Alexandar Petrov that were sung by various Bulgarian bands and performers (Петров 2020). In this book, all the lyrics are printed as poems: no year, no performer, no album, and absolutely no attachment with the song as a synthetic whole. With the complete absence of metadata, the reading–hearing reception works only when the reader is able to recognize the song from just its lyrics. If not, then lyrics are perceived as a written poem. And a written poem is, of course, much more open to interpretation than are the lyrics in a song – in a way, a song is only one of many possible interpretations of a poem. It is a common stereotype to look at music as endless, divine, and unlimited, whereas its accompanying lyrics are often considered secondary, inconsiderable, and limited, but it is also of benefit to look at the reverse side. Many scholars (especially those from the side of musical semiotics or literary scholars familiar with the broadness of literary interpretation) would strongly disagree with the qualification of musical semiosis as less definite and verbal semiosis as more precise. Composers also have objected to this view; for example, Felix Mendelssohn:

People often complain that music is too uncertain in its meaning, that what they should be thinking as they hear it is unclear, whereas everyone understands words. With me it is exactly the reverse, and not only in the context of an entire speech, but also with individual words. These, too, seem to me so uncertain, so vague, so easily misunderstood in comparison to genuine music that fills the soul with a thousand things better than words. The thoughts expressed to me by the music I love are not too indefinite to be put into words, but on the contrary, too definite. (Schwarm)

Or, in the words of the most significant popular music composer of the last sixty years, Paul McCartney:

Musicians get only twelve notes to work with, and in a song, often you use only half of them. But with the words the options are limitless, so it dawned on me that I, just like my dad, could play with them. It was as if I could toss them up in the air and then see when they all came down how language could become magic. (McCartney 2021: xvii)

It is indeed beyond curiosity that McCartney became an interpreter of his own texts, while developing the book *The Lyrics. 1956 to the Present*. He admits that while working with the editor Paul Muldoon he was able to “discover patterns that I never knew were there” and that “new meanings and patterns suddenly emerged” (McCartney 2021: xiv). Muldoon for his part praises McCartney’s “capacity for textual analysis” developed, in his opinion, under the influence of his high-school English teacher Alan Durband, a student of F. R. Leavis (p. xxvii).

There are many aspects in which popular song lyrics have announced and proved themselves as a very important cultural as well as literary phenomenon. And of course, when speaking of lyrics striking back, what should definitely be mentioned is the loudest and most discussed manifestation of their importance in contemporary culture(s): Bob Dylan’s 2016 Nobel Prize in literature.

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