HARD ROCK, HEAVY METAL AND PUNK: COMPARING PSYCHOLOGICAL FINDINGS WITH CULTURAL STUDIES ACCOUNTS

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ABSTRACT

Hard rock, heavy metal and punk sometimes cause great public concern which has led to a fair amount of research from the perspective of music psychology as well as from the tradition of cultural studies. Psychological findings quite often result in a rather negative picture since many studies have observed problematic tendencies in the psychological constitution and the behaviour of musicians and fans. As opposed, cultural studies have more than once drawn pictures of coherent and acceptable scenes, even if the preferences and values expressed might not be shared by everyone. These divergent research results can be partly explained through the different methods that are used. While psychology, for example, correlates findings from personality tests with those on musical preferences, the primary tool of cultural studies is that of participant observation. This paper is the attempt to open up an interdisciplinary perspective where both approaches would start learning from each other.

1. PSYCHOLOGICAL FINDINGS

Hard rock, heavy metal and punk and their common characteristics such as distorted guitars and very high volume, quite often paired with lyrics containing offending statements, appear as very aggressive means of cultural expression – on purpose. It might thus not be surprising that a tendency towards psychoticism or neuroticism as well as sensation seeking could be observed among musicians and fans in many studies (Arnett 1992, Rawlings et al. 1995, Rubin et al. 2001).

There are three possible explanations for these findings. First, there is a straightforward belief that these problematic characteristics are actually *caused* by the music itself, and this is the starting point for initiatives such as the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC) aiming at banning or censoring music of problematic content (Gore 1987). Second, if background information about the life and the social situation of hard rock, heavy metal or punk fans is taken into account, it becomes obvious that many of them have shown problematic personality traits or behaviour long before they came into contact with the genres in question (Gardstrom 1999, p. 211). One could thus argue that subjects are attracted by this music because of their problematic background. A third perspective asserts an interactive process of socialisation where music is seen to both reflect and shape social reality (Hansen, Hansen 1991, p. 338).

While the last option sounds most acceptable, many of the results from music psychology still seem inappropriate or missing the point for those who know hard rock, heavy metal and punk

scenes a little better. Researchers sometimes not even manage to correctly spell the name of well-known bands ("Metallicus" instead of "Metallica", Rawlings et al. 1995, p. 66) and keep these errors when quoting from each other (Kemp 1996, p. 135). There is also an uncertainty concerning styles and genres, e. g. if the song "Cop Killer" from ICE-T's band "Bodycount" – unmistakably of hard rock or heavy metal style – is identified as a "rap" (Gardstrom 1999, p. 210). In addition, the whole procedure of applying personality tests such as the NEO Personality Inventory or the Myers-Briggs-Type Indicator (MBTI) appears too reductionist to actually grasp the cultural complexity of 'what is really going on'.

2. WHAT IS AGGRESSIVE MUSIC?

In this section, I would like to play a music example from a most obviously aggressive genre: right fascist rock music created in Germany in the early nineties. The first thing that might be surprising is fact that musical elements and sounds from the primarily Anglo-American tradition of (hard) rock are taken up by German Fascist Bands to signify questionable and rather old-fashioned German nationalist ideas. However, this can be explained through the notion that musical meaning is never inherent in the sound just by itself; instead, it is always the result of cultural conventions and constructions (Tagg 1990). We might concede that the sound alone represents a high level of arousal; however, it could just as well serve as a tool for an anarchist or else a pacifist anti-Iraq-war message. Thus, the explicit aggressiveness and political direction of this music is exclusively defined by its lyrics.

If we listen to the music more closely, a few more things become obvious. First of all, the drummer is bad and plays quite out off beat and also, the other musicians are not quite 'masters of their instruments' – something typical for an amateur band. Although the band has existed three years at the time of the recording of this song, they can't do any better. This hints at the fact that the hard rock sound was not chosen by the musicians because it already contains the intended political message; instead, this genre is simply the best match of their "cultural capital" – while they are usually unable to access other forms of musical or cultural expression. And although much of this music may sometimes sound quite alike for outsiders, the potential, mostly adolescent audience is capable of clearly distinguishing the political meanings of the various subgenres: A right extremist young man will most certainly stay away from declaring the punk song "Anarchy in the UK" his anthem…

3. CULTURAL STUDIES ACCOUNTS

The difference of the cultural studies approach to hard rock, heavy metal and punk can be illustrated by one of the basic premises of participant observation: one needs to get involved to a certain degree to be able to carry out objective research: "If heavy metal had only meant 'noise' to me, fieldwork, especially at concerts could only have been carried out with great difficulties. Conversation with fans would have failed without knowledge of the musical genre. Thus, an appreciation of heavy metal music was an important pre-condition for an objective access to my area of study" (Roccor 1998, p. 7-8). Other well-known cultural studies of (hard) rock scenes are those of Willis (1978), Walser (1993) and Berger (1999). However, even if these studies contain a number of interviews or observations in the 'scene', an empirical verification is neither included nor intended. Instead, the problem is raised that the results from empirical studies can be instrumentalised in favour of certain political or ideological interests, sometimes even resulting in a call for censorship (Walser 1993, p. 137-171). A 'link' seems to be missing: while cultural studies approaches frequently appear as too speculative for psychologists ('without an empirical basis'), researchers in cultural studies are often turned away by the results from empirical studies which they consider as reductionist and frequently missing the point. I will thus argue that both sides will need to open their perspective in order allow more interdisciplinary exchange in the future.

4. REFERENCES

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