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Some notes on a possible direction for musical semiotics: An informal position paper

In this short paper, it is my hope to stimulate further discussion, and thereby enliven the Frontline section of the Open Semiotics Resource Centre. I take the opportunity here to present in a condensed and subjective form my own views on the best future direction for musical semiotics. I would never present such an informal paper in a public forum were it not for the prior existence of a much more detailed and academically-grounded review in which I approach the same themes in a more professional manner. [This earlier paper can be found here](#), and in it are presented many of the more detailed arguments not included in the present paper. Another reason that the present paper leaves many arguments undeveloped, and begs many questions, is that I hope it will be provocative! The goal of Frontlines is to become an interactive locus for the discussion of musical semiotics, and this present paper is intended mostly to begin the exchange.

I make four broad suggestions for future work and discussion. Two of these are narrowly theoretical, while the others may strike some readers as somewhat more political in motivation, and therefore not semiotic in a narrow sense of the word. However, there are crucial connections between my more political suggestions, concerning the manner in which semioticians locate themselves as and within a community, and the more theoretical suggestions, concerning issues of ontology and practice theory. In both cases the suggestions emerge from a particular view of the semiotician as a situated, socially-engaged actor.

I would like to emphasize that it is not my intention here to discourage any form of research, or to chastise existing work. If anything, my position hinges on selecting certain already-existing trends as especially fertile, and suggesting a particular model for their continuation. The suggestions that follow are made in a spirit of optimism, since I feel that they serve to show how much is already in place. Many of them will of course amount to an implicit critique or even apparent rejection of certain other possibilities, but that is not my primary intention. In the more polemical parts of what follows, when I strongly question a particular position, I am never thinking of particular works by particular theorists. Instead, I am questioning tendencies to be found widely within the literature, often within my own work as well as that of others. That said, a desire to avoid alienating anyone in particular partly underlies my decision to write this paper without making any direct reference to particular works by particular authors. [Again, these details can be found in my other recent survey paper.](#)

Suggestion One: Reflect upon basic ontological questions, perhaps within the rubric of practice

theory

If we look to Peirce and Saussure as the originators of contemporary semiotics, it becomes clear that we have been left with serious difficulties regarding the ontological status of the sign. It may be suggested that Saussure bracketed the entire question of ontology, developing instead a descriptive apparatus for analyzing certain kinds of linguistic social fact, without attention to their ultimate origins or mode of existence. Peirce was much more explicitly concerned with ontology, but over the course of his life drifted towards a variety of idealism which presents many problems for contemporary workers. In many ways, this trade-off has been a fertile one, allowing important insights into the general nature of cultural systems. However, it has also caused particular difficulties to remain firmly in place. In the case of music, for example, ontological fuzziness causes the problem of reference to persist. If we could be more definite about what we mean by a relational mode of existence, which is the only mode of existence that can be claimed by a sign, then it may be possible to say more about what, and how, music can mean. Similarly, our focus upon competencies and stylistic norms has been productive, but only so much can be claimed or said about a competence which has no particular instantiation, and which is not studied in action, in a variety of situations, as used by a variety of particular subjects.

In my view, there are two chief outstanding questions in this area. Firstly, there is the problem of specifying how cultural systems can be at once trans-personal, seemingly existing independently of the actions of any individual subject, but at the same time entirely reliant upon their instantiation in the actions of individuals. And secondly, there is the problem of the relationship between process and structure. I am aware that these are old questions, and that if anything most workers feel we have already spent enough time on them, or even that they are non-issues. However, I would suggest that many of the problems with existing work in musical semiotics can be traced to the continuing uncertainty as to how we should address these basic questions.

My own preference is for practice theories in the tradition of Bourdieu, and for dialogic enunciation theories in the tradition of Vološinov-Bakhtin. It is here that a balance, admittedly far from perfect, has been struck between transcendentalism and psychologism, and that the dynamics between structure and process been best explored. Although there is much work now existing on the place of the body in musical signification, for example, Bourdieu's model of *habitus* has not been in evidence. And while we have said much about trans-personal systems of competence, the fundamental challenges and explorations of Vološinov-Bakhtin in this area are not substantially incorporated. The recent hermeneutic turn in musical semiotics is welcome, in that it has brought a degree of social grounding that was lacking in earlier work. But such work has tended either towards an overly-individualistic perspective, lacking an analysis of how the subject is constrained by social formations, or by an overly-transcendental one, treating systems and norms as self-contained entities with some mysterious idealistic efficacy.

Suggestion Two: Press on with embodiment theory, and in tandem develop an explicit theory of temporality

The move towards a theorization of the body has been one of the most promising and fertile in recent musical semiotics. It has allowed a beginning to be made towards the kind of practice theory I mention above, and has also advanced the study of expressivity to a considerable degree. In this connection, however, there are at least three important directions still to explore. Firstly, it is important to pay attention to *particular* bodies, not just to ‘the body’ as an ideal (and therefore mostly ideological) construct. This follows in a fairly simple manner from what I have said above.

Secondly, study of the body allows an opportunity for a unified view of musical representations of physical situations and configurations more generally. The existing work on the body in music draws convincing parallels between energetic configurations in music and particular states of the body. The connections between this perspective and musical narratology are also well on their way to being adequately theorized. However, it is important to consider the ways in which very similar processes underlie the many other sorts of real-world spatial, material, and energetic objects often central to the perceived meaning of music, for example weather conditions, landscapes, and a wide variety of non-human subjects. It is unlikely that radical new theoretical advances are required to do this work. Rather, it seems to be strongly invited by the theory of embodiment already in place. One important caveat is in order here, however: almost no engagement has taken place in musical semiotic work on the body with potential charges that the theory succumbs to essentialism and a naive biological determinism. Without a credible answer to critiques along these lines, semiotic theories of the body and music will be profoundly lacking.

Thirdly, and more pressingly, advances in embodied theory only throw into sharper relief the almost complete lack of a strong general semiotic theory of time. Music is an especially fertile area for the development of such a theory, as is suggested by some fascinating but still fragmentary existing work. Although existing theories, for example those found in the growing literature on musical gesture, have acknowledged the irreducibly temporal nature of musical signification, and have sketched some important varieties and effects of musical temporality, we are very far from a general theory. The development of such a theory needs to be a top priority.

Suggestion Three: Foster a greater level of mutual awareness and acknowledgment between workers in different repertoires and disciplines

One strength of musical semiotics, and of semiotics more generally, has been its ability to interest a wide range of workers in different disciplines studying a wide range of repertoires. The drawback has been a tendency to become fractious, or simply to be unaware of each others’ work. To stay with the field of embodiment theory, for example, there are major works in classical music studies, popular music studies, and ethnomusicology which cover similar ground and yet make no mention of each other. The same has been true in some works dedicated to the study of competencies and genre codes, and in other areas as well.

Of course, each researcher has the right (even obligation) to choose those works which they find useful, and to pass over those which they deem to be of lesser worth. However, it is unfortunately in the nature of semiotic theory that it can sometimes allow a rush to dismissal. There are few hard facts or agreed norms in semiotics, and no commonly-shared means for judging the strength of arguments. There is also a strongly entrenched tendency towards dogmatism in much existing semiotic work in all disciplines. I suggest that we redouble our efforts to resist this tendency, and to do what we can to foster a healthy inter-disciplinary and inter-genre community of semiotic research into musical practices and texts.

Suggestion Four: Convey a clear message about where semiotics fits into the contemporary intellectual scene

Frequently, new theoretical models are taken up more slowly in musicology than elsewhere. This has been something of an advantage, in that musicologists have had the luxury of sifting through more developed debates before committing themselves. It has also been a drawback, in that musicologists often seem to be just hitting their stride with particular methodologies when other disciplines have moved on. This is somewhat the case with semiotics. While there is certainly a healthy community of non-musicologist semioticians, the field is still perceived by many as somewhat dated. I would not suggest that we should let this change our mind about the usefulness of semiotic theory, and I certainly do not wish to endorse or strengthen the tendency of academics, taken as a group, to move on to new methods and problems before existing ones have been properly explored. However, there are certain legitimate questions about the place of semiotics in the contemporary intellectual landscape.

For example, many problems of representation and meaning have been taken up very strongly by cognitive science. Is there still a need for a distinctively semiotic theory of representation in this context? Should semiotic theory become more cognitive? Similarly, the great influence of post-colonial studies, and other disciplines with strong political engagements, has caused semiotic theory to seem overly individualistic and abstract. How should we respond? It is important to address these questions not only for reasons of disciplinary survival, but because the challenges are genuine and important. Semiotic theory has been enormously influential in the 20th century, and for much of that time has also been on the cutting edge of inquiry. But that position is not guaranteed, and from the perspective of musicology it would be especially disappointing if semiotic theory were to become truly passé just as it is coming into its own.

There are at least two areas in which semiotics remains the best methodology, at least so far as musicology is concerned. Firstly, semiotics remains central in the examination of sign use as a lived experience melding affective response, social codes, and formal organization. From cognitive science we can learn much about the mechanics underlying these processes but their phenomenological particularity, and the ways in which they combine in practice, are best addressed from a semiotic model. Secondly, semiotics can be enormously useful in the study of trans-subjective social formations and institutions, and in the mutual dependence of structure and process. Here I am clearly returning to my suggestion regarding the adoption of practice theory as

a rubric. Not only would such a move allow for ontological clarifications, but it would also allow the unique strengths of semiotics to come through, and furthermore it draws close enough to institutional and political concerns that these can be convincingly addressed without moving outside of a recognizably semiotic framework.

I do not suggest these two directions in order to pre-empt others, but only to emphasize that *some kind* of answer is needed to those who may question the continued usefulness of a semiotic perspective.

Conclusion

By now I have probably said enough! Again, my hope for this paper is that it will stimulate debate, and that the Frontline portion of the Open Semiotics Resource Centre can become an exciting and provocative site for musical semiotics. The specifics of our future direction are perhaps less important than the vigour and openness of our community, and it is in this spirit that responses to this paper are sincerely invited.

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