

## Music, journalism, and the study of cultural change

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### Abstract

Music journalism is a practice that concerns the production of judgements and evaluations about music. As other forms of criticism, it deals with 'culture' in the sense of 'the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity' (Williams 1993, pp. 87-93).

Both music journalism and criticism are receiving growing attention in the social sciences and humanities. Indeed, they allow scholars to study the ways in which cultural commodities (and their users) are made 'meaningful' for readerships of different social groups. Criticism also provides useful data to study larger socio-cultural processes (like the changing boundaries between the arts and popular culture) and to study the socially acceptable ways through which the boundaries of 'legitimate' cultural preferences are drawn and justified, sometimes reproducing existing social boundaries (e.g. class and gender).

However, studies of criticism and music journalism are predominantly focused on the US and UK, and tend to underestimate the relationships between the practice of criticism and different national-historical spaces.

My paper will discuss the methodological implications of studying criticism from a 'transnational perspective'. Introducing my research on Italian music journalism, I will show that criticism can be studied looking at the institutional contexts and social spaces which *mediate* between meanings, journalists' practices, and the national-historical space. Also, I will discuss journalists' *cosmopolitan imagination* and the ways in which they link music to wider understandings of other countries, places, and cultures, but also to new conceptions of their own 'ethno-national' space (Regev 2007).

What is music journalism? What is 'sociological' about it? And why it is receiving growing attention in the social sciences and humanities? More generally, what can music journalism - and other forms of criticism - tell us about the global circulation of cultural commodities?

In this paper I will present my ongoing research on the emergence of music journalism in Italy. I will first introduce the topic, providing a definition of music journalism and an overview of the ways in which it has been approached by different fields (especially sociology of culture and cultural studies). I will then point to the original contribution of my research in relation to several questions, which remain unexplored in recent studies of music journalism, cultural criticism, and in wider fields of debate (e.g. studies of cultural production, intellectual fields and cultural 'mediators').

### **1. Music, criticism, and society**

Music journalism is a practice that concerns the production of judgements and evaluations about music. As other kinds of criticism, it deals with 'culture' in the sense of 'the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity' (Williams 1993, pp. 87-93).

However, a number of researches have shown that judgements about the arts (and other cultural goods) are frequently entwined with judgements about the social (i.e. specific social groups and communities). For example, evaluations of so-called 'popular' music have historically supported stereotypical assumptions about the people that music, as a 'culture' in the anthropological sense<sup>1</sup> - was supposed to represent.

Such *fantasies* or cultural myths (Barthes: 1972) are usually made about producers and consumers of different music genres, and imply assumptions about the *nature* of certain social groups. For example, 'black people' have historically been considered as naturally predisposed to music-making, and 'fanatic' or compulsive music consumers are frequently represented as female (Thornton 1995). Similar stereotypes have also been made about institutions like the music industry, which has been conceived as exploitative of both musicians and their audiences in a number of social narratives (see Frith, 1981).

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<sup>1</sup> Still according to Williams (*ivi*), anthropological notions of culture indicate 'a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, a group, or humanity in general', rather than the restricted domain of artistic production.

These questions, which we may call of *representation*, are among the ones that have recently raised the interest of scholars for music journalism. Indeed, it allows researchers to study the meanings through which cultural goods (and their users) are made socially meaningful. Also, music journalism has been used to study larger historical and socio-cultural processes, like the ways boundaries between the arts (i.e. high culture) and popular culture have changed and are redefined (Lindberg et al. 2005).

More recently, sociologists of culture have addressed criticism to further explore the connections between social position and cultural preferences or 'taste'. Following the work of Bourdieu (1984), some scholars have analysed criticism to study the meanings through which objects as different as food (Baumann and Johnston: 2007) and music (Cheyne and Binder 2010) are made meaningful by the 'quality press' (i.e. prestigious national newspapers) for an upper-middle class readership. Indeed, criticism shows the socially acceptable ways through which the 'symbolic boundaries' of legitimate cultural preferences can be drawn and justified, sometimes reproducing existing social boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002, Lamont and Pachucki 2007).

## **2. Beyond American and English criticism**

Despite such a picture, however, studies of criticism and music journalism are predominantly focused on the US and UK, and tend to underestimate the relationships between the practice of criticism and different national-historical spaces.

Sociologists of culture, for example, have frequently privileged contemporary American newspapers, like *The Los Angeles Times* (Cheyne and Binder 2010) and *The New York Times* (Schmutz 2009). Indeed, just few studies provide data (but mostly quantitative ones) about different countries (Janssen et al. 2008, Schmutz 2009, Schmutz et al. 2010).

Contributions coming from cultural studies feature a similar national bias. In this field, a great deal of attention has been given to the so-called rock journalism, studying its emergence in US and UK and the ways it reshaped distinctions between high and popular culture since the late 1960s (Lindberg et al. 2005).

Overall, the development of music journalism in other national spaces, and its role in mediating the global spread of several music cultures (like pop-rock and jazz), have been scarcely considered.

### 3. Criticism from a transnational perspective

A *transnational perspective* on criticism, therefore, is much needed, and calls into question several methodological problems.

For example, studies that approach critics as the taste-makers of specific social group (e.g. the upper-middle classes) usually imply that the cultural distinctions made by 'elite' newspapers are worth studying because they reveal the ways social inequalities may be reproduced through culture. However, the distinctions and narratives supported by wide-circulation media - like 'popular' magazines and newspapers - in relation to cultural consumption remain largely unaddressed. As a result, the meanings through which cultural goods are received by a wider population or different social groups (e.g. lower classes, secondary and high school students, female consumers, etc.) remain unaddressed.

Another question that needs to be considered is the institutional 'embeddedness' of criticism. There is still much to say about the more or less complex (and more or less established) institutions, organisations or groups in which journalists work, and the ways they support or constrain different critical practices.<sup>2</sup>

Speaking of *practices*, then, studies of criticism give a great deal of attention to a very specific 'genre': the review. Reviews can be defined as articles that evaluate single cultural objects or experiences (for example an album, a movie, but also a concert, a restaurant, etc.). However, critics perform different *evaluative practices*. In the case of music journalism, for example, interviews, the mediation of readers' letters and complains, and the construction of wide-ranging historical and social narratives, are among the practices most commonly performed. These more or less institutionalised *critical practices*, therefore, are an analytical dimension which is worth considering.

All these issues can be fruitfully addressed in the study of music journalism as a transnational practice.

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<sup>2</sup> Criticism as an institutional practice has been partly explored by Blank (2007). His work, based on several American case studies, reproduces the national 'bias' already discussed.

#### 4. Meanings and practices: music journalism and the cosmopolitan imagination

My research is looking at the ways Italian music journalism mediated new or 'foreign' music genres during the 1970s. Also, I am studying the ways the reception of such genres changed journalists' understandings of 'national' cultural forms, institutions and social groups. This analytical level is what I previously defined as the one of representations (or meanings).

Indeed, music journalism mobilises a great deal of *cosmopolitan imagination*, linking music to wider understandings of other countries, places, and cultures, but also to new conceptions of one's own 'ethno-national' space (Regev 2007). In this respect, a cosmopolitan imagination can be defined as the sets of meanings attached to foreign and national music cultures, to the social milieux they are supposed to represent, and to the perceived differences between 'here and there' - or 'us and them' - in social and cultural terms.

My ongoing research is showing that the mediation of popular music genres as culturally and socially 'valuable' has been charged with similar meanings in 1970s Italy.

Here is an example coming from a larger sample of articles about jazz music. It shows a trend that is emerging from my preliminary analyses. Namely, the different ways in which journalists framed black (mostly African-American) jazz musicians and white (mostly European) jazz musicians, charging the former with specific social meanings and, in some instances, expectations of political engagement.

'When he [Sam Rivers] plays *energetically irrational*, we get back the [...] ghosts of *the black rage and sensuality, the blood and not just the colour of an archaic origin* [...] but apart from these moments of salvation, Rivers can't escape the ambiguity of most part of contemporary Black Music: the ambiguity of a discourse that screams desperation and nostalgia [...] rather than *tackling intentionally the present's contradictions*'.<sup>3</sup> [emphasis added]

The first italics lines emphasise the relationship between Sam Rivers' music and its 'black' sexuality and blood, so that the difference of 'being black' sustains the value of his music. However, in the last lines the critic expresses some disappointment for black music's lack of engagement with 'the present' (i.e. contemporary social reality).

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<sup>3</sup> Delconte, P. 'Riflessi sul nuovo mito Sam Rivers. L'urlo sommerso', pp. 12-13, *Gong* n. 10, 1976.

The last lines make more sense if we look at their meaning in relation to the changing practices of music journalism in 1970s Italy. Indeed, in the middle of the 1970s, an emerging 'alternative' music press started differentiating itself from a more widely read 'weekly' music press in several ways, like privileging experimental music styles (in spite of pop music) and making public interventions in the political field. As a result, some journalists frequently linked the aesthetic value of 'avangarde musics' to the possibility of social change, stressing the idea that people can not 'change society' without 'changing culture'. Forms of avant-gardist jazz were therefore mediated as both aesthetically and politically valuable by magazines which tried to re-define the notion itself of cultural criticism and its practices.

## **5. Spaces of mediation between critics and society.**

Political engagement as a critical practice was also made possible by the wider national-historical context. However, a straightforward link between meanings, practices and society at large, runs the risk of taking criticism as reflecting the public values of a whole society. What we need to take into account, on the contrary, are different *spaces of mediations* between journalists' practices, the musics they encounter via transnational 'flows' of communication (Appadurai 1990), and a given national-historical space.

### ***5.1 The 'social movements' within and among fields***

One of these spaces can be provided by the notion of 'field' coined by Pierre Bourdieu (1993, 1996). Although I can not provide an exhausting overview on this concept, I will point to the ways it can be employed and re-worked for the study of criticism in a transnational perspective.

According to Bourdieu, a 'field of cultural production' emerges when the production of culture is performed by different institutional actors (or 'positions') in competition between each other. Such a field is shaped by alliances and struggles, and the strategies of each actor contribute to the definition of the possible practices, objects and knowledge (what Bourdieu calls the 'space of possibles'). As a result, cultural fields are 'social structures' in the sense that they provide the 'objective' conditions from which cultural production emerge. Also, the field is a structure in the sense that it is placed in the larger 'field of power'. This means that differences between producers - for example 'quality' magazines and the wide-circulation or 'popular' press - tend to reproduce differences between social classes, so that different critics and magazines would speak for different social groups.

The Italian context problematises this view in several ways.<sup>4</sup> However, here I want to indicate the ways the notion of field can be employed to study the transnational dimension of criticism and cultural mediation. Field theory has usually been employed to study the internal structure of cultural fields (i.e. relations and hierarchies between different positions). However, taking Bourdieu's notion of social field at large, criticism can be analysed at least from five different perspectives:

- a) the internal differentiation of the music press as a field.
- b) the relationships of the field at large (or some of its actors) with *other social fields situated in the same national space* (e.g. the political field).
- c) the ways the field at large (or some of its actors) mediate *transnational flows of cultural commodities* (e.g. American jazz and pop music).
- d) the similarities and differences between fields situated in different national spaces (e.g. differences and similarities between comparable forms of Italian, British and American music journalism at given historical moments).
- e) the ways the field at large (or some of its actors) mediate the possible *fields of consumption* (e.g. the social construction of readers and 'consumers', but also the actual engagement with the readers' feedback and complaints, and the ways journalists 'justify' their choices vis-à-vis the readers).

As a result, the notion of field makes it possible to analyse *the 'social movements' within and between different fields*. For example, the alliances or struggles between cultural producers and others institutions or actors, the interventions of specific actors in different social fields, the ways different positions mediate similar media flows (e.g. similar music genres), and the ways cultural producers engage with consumers' claims or the claims of specific social groups.

## 6. Conclusion

To get back to the Italian example, the 'politicisation' of 1970s music magazines can be seen as a 'symbolic strategy' employed only by a range of emerging 'actors' in the field. Moreover, political interventions were a very specific practice, performed along with a range of different (and not

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<sup>4</sup> For example, the 1970s Italian music press makes it difficult to maintain a too straightforward relation - what Bourdieu calls 'homology' - between positions in the cultural field and positions in the 'field of power'.

necessarily politicised) critical practices. As a result, positions in the field also showed a relative *organisational and performative complexity*.

To conclude, the transnational dimension of criticism can be fruitfully analysed taking into account both a range of *spaces of mediation* between journalists' practices and the national-historical context, and the *movements* between and within different social fields. In this light, the national space appears as a more complex, structured, and structuring reality. At the same time, the agency of cultural producers can be analysed in relation to different and even conflicting contextual demands.

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