

6.3. Avant-garde rock, or the defiance of traditional musical domains

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Abstract

Since the late 1960s, several “avant-garde” or “experimental” rock acts have started integrating heterogeneous aesthetic features (coming from classical and contemporary music, jazz or even ethnic repertoires). They did so to the point of challenging the traditional boundaries between musical styles and between socio-musical spheres. Representatives of this musical “no man’s land” can be found among the bands of the European collective Rock In Opposition (active between late 1970s and early 1980s) and their contemporary successors. While being virtually suitable for rock festivals as well as for contemporary music seasons, they never reached anything wider than underground niche audiences. In fact, on top of having occasionally displayed a lack of organisational skills, these artists can hardly fit the functioning patterns of the “mainstream musical spheres” because of the very nature of their output: being poorly concerned about the rock way of life, they cannot accommodate “the rock talk” and the structuring role it plays both for the music business and for public cultural policies focused on rock music. Furthermore, they lack the contiguity with artistic institutions that is a necessary feature of classical and contemporary music careers. My aim is to point out that the existence of such “avant-garde rock” does not solely constitute a hybrid between different “orthodox” musical tendencies; on the contrary, it represents the conscious outcome of a multicultural society, a production in which the access to all kind of musical stimuli has been developed into a coherent artistic synthesis. This music stresses the limits of social schemes, institutions and policies grounded on an opposition between musical domains that is taken for granted.

Keywords: avant-garde rock, musical styles, socio-musical spheres, underground and mainstream scenes.

Musical genres: a problematic notion

Musical genres are entities involving several different features. When asked to define a musical genre, say funk, music is of course the first feature we are likely to look at as we try to answer the question “What does it sound like?”. We try to explain what Allan Moore calls the *primary text* (Moore, 2001), namely the set of musical rules and conventions upon which every single style is organised. In the case of funk, we should talk about instrumental choices (for instance dry sounding and relatively high pitched drums, often slap bass...), principles for the organisation of rhythm (the importance of the downbeat, the frequent use of cross-rhythms, the notion of groove...), harmonic conventions (two or three chord 'shuttles', pedals...), melodic and formal conventions, and so on.

However, describing only the primary text would be insufficient to explain what funk — or any other musical genre — actually is. Music presupposes people making it and people listening to it: musicians and public. Sometimes the public of a specific genre shares the same social ground with the musicians producing it. In many other cases, while there are social differences between musicians and public, we can still trace a precise relation binding them to each other *in quite an exclusive way*.

Musical Genres as social representations

In his book *Les musiciens underground* (Séca, 2001), the french sociologist Jean-Marie Séca has defined musical genres (with regard to contemporary popular music) as *social representations*, with an effective explanation that I would like to quote in its entirety:

Music is often conceived as addressed to an idealised crowd or a public identifying with it. This latter is supposed to share some elements of the code which is transmitted. The message comes out in the feeling, from a free style or a jam session, an improvisation between friends or acquaintances. It is built with regard to codes, models, by experimenting with melodic or rhythmic lines which are more or less admitted in the milieu or in the trend the musicians claim to. They draw on a ground, on a memory (records, sounds, rhythms, experiences,

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poetry). But this memory is not just a space of inspiration. It is, literally, a social representation or, in other words, a hierarchized system of beliefs, knowledges, attitudes, opinions, verbal and non verbal units of which sounds are the part out of the water and “palpable”.

The emotional elements, along with the iconic, musical and para-verbal ones, create semantic entities which are parts of a social representation (= SR) and keep a strong link with its linguistic side (texts, beliefs, knowledges). A musical genre is a SR² (Séca, 2001, p. 97)

Séca points out clearly the connection between text and context which is at the core of what we call musical genres. Still, there are two important elements that I think should be emphasised further, namely the historical development through which these *social representations* evolve, and the influence wielded by the economy on the different activities involved around music.

Musical genres evolving through history in social awareness

One of the most important popular music scholars and experts in genre studies, Franco Fabbri, suggest that “in many cases some of the most relevant conventions defining a genre tend to operate before a name for the genre is agreed upon, but (...) the ‘act’ of naming makes other conventions more ‘visible’ and helps to create new ones.” (Fabbri, 2014, p. 6). In the same paper, delivered in 2014 during a conference about progressive rock³ and focused on Italian prog, Fabbri explains that the style we know *now* as progressive rock was seldom referred to with this expression in Italy until the mid 1970s (actually when the progressive rock trend started to decline): other names were used and “progressive” was an adjective made popular in the 1980s’ “prog revival”. For instance, the word ‘pop’ was far more widespread: it could describe what the British press, public and musicians were already calling ‘progressive rock’ but it could include other repertoires, such as American rock and Italian *canzone*.

These observations mean to point out that the referential approach by means of which musicians and public deal with different repertoires is likely to change in time. Naming, labelling a group of artists or a series of musical productions as belonging to a specific genre allows us to consider those artists and those productions as a unit and to treat them as such in every respect. When a name is found to identify as an unified genre an artistic output which was heterogeneous and at least partially disjointed in the first place, a whole new *social representation* is likely to be born. This new social representation (and everything it conveys in terms of human relations, behaviours, practical solutions, etc.) does not necessarily need to have a direct bond with the *musical contents* of the genre: the name, the definition, the label provide a referent which can be used as an unit category without deeper analysis.

Musical genres and their relation with the economy

As for the relation between musical genres and the economy, french sociologist Bertrand Ricard argues that the proliferation of new labels to define (often rather preposterously) genres and sub-genres reflects the typical capitalistic strategy of atomising the market (and thus the community of the customers) in order to control it in a more efficient way (Ricard, 2006, *infra*).

Agreeing or not with Ricard's professedly anti-liberal analysis, this 'over-labelling' phenomenon is a fact. I recently consulted the on-line program of *La Laiterie*⁴, the principal concert venue in Strasbourg for popular music. There are two levels of classifying scheduled concerts and artists: normally two or three artists or groups play each night and a general classification based on five macro-categories informs the audience about the “type” of night.

² Original text (translated into english by the article's author): “La musique est souvent conçue comme s'adressant à une foule idéalisée ou à un public qui s'y entend. Celui-ci est censé partager certains éléments du code divulgué. Le *message* naît d'abord dans le *feeling*, au départ d'un *free style* ou d'un *bœuf*, d'une improvisation entre amis ou entre connaissances. Il se construit par rapport à des codes, à des modèles, par l'expérimentation de lignes mélodiques et rythmiques plus ou moins admises dans le milieu ou le courant dont on se réclame. On puise dans un terreau, dans une mémoire (les disques, les sons, les rythmes, le vécu, la poésie). Mais cette dernière n'est pas seulement un espace d'inspiration. Elle est, au sens propre, une *représentation sociale* ou, en d'autres termes, un système hiérarchisé de croyances, de connaissances, d'attitudes, d'opinions, d'unités linguistiques et non verbales dont les sons et les rythmes forment la partie émergente et « palpable ». Les éléments *affectifs*, *iconiques*, *musicaux*, *para-verbaux*, forment des entités sémantiques figuratives qui font partie d'une *représentation sociale* (= RS) et demeurent en forte liaison avec sa *dimension linguistique* (textes, croyances, connaissances). Un genre musical est une RS.”

³ *Le Rock Progressif!* Première Conférence Internationale du Réseau ACADPROG. Dijon: Université de Bourgogne, Centre Georges Chevrier. 10-12 December 2014.

⁴ <http://www.artefact.org>

Despite the fancy names (like *Furia* or *Vertigo*) we can easily identify these macro-categories as black music (rap, soul, r'n'b, etc.), rock, metal/punk/heavy music, electronic music, songwriters/*chanson*. A second classification defines the specific style of each group: here we can find definitions such as "rock jazz *chanson* trip hop", or "indietronica pop rock expérimentale" ...

The *need* to provide a label, possibly a cool and trendy one, *before* the audience can have an idea of what the music *does sound like*, is palpable. Moreover, this need indicates that genre, considered as a keyword, can be used as a powerful advertising tool, even regardless of the musical content and of the musical value that stand 'behind' it. This assertion involves that if a band is recognised as belonging to a specific genre, its 'share of visibility' — according to the spaces of communication devoted to that genre — will be enhanced. It is a basic advertising strategy: when a product has a name (simple, non problematic, unequivocal or, even better, simply catchy) it is easier to trade. Furthermore, the musical market is organised according to such categories and musicians have to fit this "grid" in order to promote their music, to play it or just to make it survive. Of course, I use the notion of market in a broad sense, covering not only record companies and private music promoters, but also public institutions appointed to oversee musical activities: each in its own way and with its own rules, they follow the afore mentioned strategy.

Rock: a unitary category?

I already mentioned the possible shift between *text* and *context* which can take place in the articulation of a musical genre: this idea implies the possibility that for a given unitary musical code (the *text*) we would not be able to match its 'expected' *context*, considered as the coherent ensemble of audience, social responses, market, etc. The shift can occur as a result of different causes, for example time, as underlined by Fabbri, or marketing processes, as in the case of genres' names used as advertising tools "apart from the music". Moreover, the situation is often far more complicated, since there are musical genres that cannot be described as unitary, with regards to the *text*, nor coherent, with regards to the *context*. Rock is an excellent example of such genres.

Rock's aesthetic inclusiveness

Despite its unquestionable african-american roots, rock music, which is now more than sixty years old, can hardly be described as stylistically homogeneous. More than one authoritative scholar (for example Allan Moore, 2001, and Theodore Gracyk, 1996) have underlined that trying to define rock only as a musical style would be irremediably insufficient. Rock is a story, a genealogy, more than a style. Furthermore, rock showed, at least from the mid 1960s, a tendency to include musical elements that were extraneous to its origins (for instance rhythms, harmonies and instruments coming from traditional repertoires all over the world), with a pragmatic attitude that took care of aesthetic effectiveness far more than of theoretic coherence.

We could actually argue that this very attitude defines rock as a specific cultural entity more than any description about its style. In fact, the aforementioned inclusiveness can be found also in other musical scenes, such as classical music. However, whereas in classical music history the main tendency has been that of shedding its repertoire's legitimacy upon 'lower' musics by re-interpreting their codes, rock, which was always presented and perceived as a 'lower product', sought its own legitimacy (as well as its own appeal) by 'stealing' ideas piecemeal from everywhere.

In many cases, what we consider as rock music or rock artists *because of their belonging to the rock context* (in terms of origins, audience, market or just look), cannot be forced in a singular stylistic category. This statement is true for an important part of The Beatles' production, or Zappa's, for The Beach Boys' *Pet Sounds* (The Beach Boys, 1966), for The Soft Machine, for several progressive or psychedelic rock acts, and so on.

If rock *music* cannot be forced in only one category, why should its *context* be considered a unit?

Considering this account, one could wonder why this heedlessness of genre's boundaries, showed by rock musicians *in the stylistic field*, never found a proportionate reaction towards the genre's *contextual* boundaries. Why, for instance, rock musicians do not question systematically the fragmentation of the audience into niche groups unable to understand and to enjoy each other's music? A possible answer can be found in the pragmatic attitudes I outlined above as one of rock's main features. All the different actors involved in the *social representation*

known as 'rock' are historically not concerned by any kind of systematic theoretical reflection, which would be the starting point for a coherent approach to these issues. Rock musicians are interested first in producing and playing music, rock recording companies in selling it, rock audiences in enjoying it. In this case also, the comparison with the classical music scene and especially with contemporary music would be revealing.

The *Rock In Opposition* singularity

Although the tendency I just outlined is by far prevailing, it is possible to single out some cases of rock artists actively (not just ideologically) committed to change the context in which their music operates, regardless of social and economical rules as well as of stylistic rules. One of such cases is that of *Rock In Opposition*, a collective of European bands active between late 1970s and early 1980s. The founding members of the collective were Henry Cow (UK), Stormy Six (Italy), Univers Zero (Belgium), Etron Fou Leloublan (France) and Samla Mammas Manna (Sweden); they were joined later by Art Bears (UK), Aksak Maboul (Belgium) and Art Zoyd (France), while other bands and artists gravitated around these "official" members.

***Rock In Opposition*: an European self-managed collective**

Before the collective was founded, most of these bands were poorly recognised in their homelands and were almost completely unknown in foreign countries. The reasons of this lack of visibility must be searched in their uncompromising and experimental repertoires (which often mixed rock instruments and sounds with contemporary music techniques, free improvisation or electro-acoustics, just to give some examples), as well as in the fact that they used their respective native tongue — which in most cases was not English — when not playing instrumental music. Establishing the *Rock In Opposition* collective, which was totally self-managed and based upon mutual support between the members, provided these bands the necessary organisation to tour and to be 'visible' outside their home countries. It also left them unconstrained by the promotional mechanisms of the majors and their restrictions. In order to achieve these goals, *Rock In Opposition* Festivals were organised across different European countries. In addition, the collective was the starting point for Recommended Records⁵, an independent record label created the same year as Rough Trade (1978) and still run today by Chris Cutler, the drummer of Henry Cow (and Art Bears). Other than fairly "traditional" record production, the activity of this label puts into practice one of the basic objectives of the collective, namely the autonomous distribution of music that is not widely available, based on the principle of recommendation: in other words, via a mail order catalogue (later a newsletter), Cutler recommends to his network of contacts (which have already shown some interest in the label's releases) other discs which in his opinion might interest them. These discs are not necessarily produced by Recommended Records but the label is responsible for distributing them.

It is important to point out the role played by one of *Rock In Opposition* bands, Henry Cow, to understand how the collective was put together and how it functioned in its peculiar way. As a British band, Henry Cow had the chance to tour through several European countries on the continent since the early 1970s; during these travels they got in touch with local bands that they felt an affinity with and decided to help them get known outside their respective national borders. From a certain point of view, the *Rock In Opposition* phenomenon could sound like a charity operation. It was not. Henry Cow had been under contract with Virgin Records until 1975, but the label did not meet the band's expectations in terms of promotion (the music was too 'radical' and the label did not want to take risks by overcommitting). Thus, Henry Cow's members started managing themselves to fill the promotional gaps left by Virgin: they built a democratic method inside the band which allowed them, when the contract with Virgin came to an end, to control all the aspects of their professional life, from touring to recording to nourishment. It was a case of D.I.Y. ahead of punk days⁶.

This method was transferred to the *Rock In Opposition* collective which, during its brief existence, regulated its different activities by a series of meetings where every decision was discussed collectively by the ensemble of the members. Although some semantic confusions arose even during the first days of the organisation⁷, it's important

⁵ <http://www.ermegacorp.com>

⁶ For a detailed chronology of the activity of Henry Cow see: Cutler, C. (2008).

⁷ See Fabbri (1982), p. 133.

to stress that this *method* is the main feature allowing us to discuss about *Rock In Opposition* as a unit: we are not dealing with a musical genre, since each *Rock In Opposition* band had its specific and often really idiosyncratic style.

The collective's self awareness

Another point worth to be outlined, is the fact that through the constant discussion punctuating the meetings first of Henry Cow, then of the entire collective, these artists developed a reflection and a degree of self-awareness, actually a whole theory about all the aspects of their artistic lives, which are very rare in the rock sphere. Among other goals, their activities had the explicit aim to demonstrate the possibility of a context where odd music, music that cannot be classified according to the usual genre categories, could be produced and spread.

According to this last statement, it could sound contradictory that the collective chose to name itself *Rock In Opposition* and not, for instance, *Music in Opposition*. Yet, it is important to understand that for these artists *rock* did not indicate a style of music but a way of producing music (which involved a peculiar approach to the recording studio and to the process of composition in general), as well as a music with a specific artistic status (*low*, in contrast with the *high* culture) and a history involving popular and oppressed classes and social groups.

***Rock In Opposition* then and now: born as a collective, survived as a musical genre**

Today the expression *Rock In Opposition* survives as a genre label for some avant-garde progressive rock bands claiming to be carrying on the artistic legacy of the original collective. These present day bands lack the principles and the method which were the essential features of *Rock In Opposition* as a collective, and represent a niche inside the niche of progressive rock which, as a context, does not function differently from others pigeonholed genres, just on a very smaller scale.

Rock In Opposition as an underground music scene

I would like to examine now the reasons that kept this music underground over the years, considering the semantic change that the expression *R.I.O.* underwent; I will use the notion of "underground" with reference to these bands' poor visibility and to their marginality in comparison with the "mainstream". Of course, organisational problems and a lack of resources did not allow the original collective to be recognised by an audience of significant proportions. As for the present day so called *R.I.O.* bands, we should add to these difficulties the aforementioned lack of an overall project which could free them from the closed circle of progressive rock.

Moreover, because of its very nature, this avant-garde rock music cannot fit the unspoken rules and criteria regulating both the mainstream rock context and that of "legitimate" avant-garde music.

***Rock In Opposition's* difficulties to fit "the rock talk"**

In an interesting thesis about policies towards rock in France (Teillet, 1992), Philippe Teillet underlined the important role played by what he calls *le discours sur le rock*, an expression we could translate as "the rock talk", namely the ensemble of what is said or written about rock, which helps creating a socially shared idea of what rock is or should be. Teillet points out that a constant of the rock talk is the double opposition both to mass culture and to high, legitimate culture: though claiming its independence from these two domains, rock always leans on one of them (Teillet, 1992, p. 136-143). If, especially until the late 1970s, the rock talk favoured the aspects of rock culture which could assimilate it to high culture (profundity, experimentation, aesthetic openness), later on the rock talk gave priority to the assumed true 'core' of rock, that is directness, thoughtlessness, even frivolity (features that actually deal more with attitude than with music). When *Rock In Opposition* was founded and active as an organisation, the rock talk had already turned its back to the kind of reflection, engagement and overall 'seriousness' which distinguished *Rock In Opposition's* bands and which their music demanded to the the audience.

***Rock In Opposition's* difficulties to integrate in the contemporary music milieu**

With few exceptions, *Rock In Opposition's* musicians never integrated either in the contemporary music milieu and generally in the institutionalised avant-garde music scene, despite the interest many of them showed towards the artistic outputs of this scene and the musical ideas they borrowed from it. The institutional nature of this sphere is precisely the reason why a reality such as *Rock In Opposition* can hardly fit it. In fact, if we put aside the romantic

idea of the “serious classical composer” creating in total artistic freedom (while the rock musician is bound to “commercial compromise”) we could easily realise that this “freedom” is the result of a strong connection with institutions such as conservatoires, music academies, theatres. This connection is organised in the form of a career with a precise schedule and several off-the-record rules concerning both the legitimate aesthetic approach and the appropriateness of social contexts to present this music. *Rock In Opposition's* musicians (in the 1980s like today) are hardly the offspring of institutions such as those mentioned above, and in any case they hardly would renounce their independence (in terms of aesthetics as well as of organisation and overall control on their work) to be part of this “system”. Moreover, they still *are* rock artists since they show the inclusive, omnivorous, unprejudiced attitude towards all kind of music materials that I already listed as one of rock's peculiar features.

To summarise, *Rock In Opposition's* music could be played during contemporary music seasons as well as during the most open-minded rock festival because of its content, of its *text*, it is actually excluded from both types of event because of the way it is conceived, because of its *contextual* features.

Conclusion

In conclusion, if we observe the case of *Rock In Opposition* we are confronted to the problem of the visibility of a music - which I decided (in fact rather arbitrarily) to call *avant-garde rock* - that is *structurally* indifferent towards genre's boundaries. If such music can hardly get known by the public and find its space inside the musical market, we could wonder whether it is because of its inability to fit the pigeonholes provided by the genres (in the sense of social and economical contexts), or, on the contrary, whether these pigeonholes are too stiff to contain a musical reality which transcends them. In other words, *avant-garde rock* proves that the shift between musical *text* and *context* is sometimes a fact we cannot evade. As remarked by Fabbri, musical genres (and, I add, all they imply as *social representation*) are likely to evolve in social awareness: *avant-garde rock* actually rises the challenge for a rediscovery of the traditional musical boundaries and domains, an evolution that will help all kind of repertoires to be recognised by a larger and undifferentiated public.

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