

changing worlds & signs of the times

Selected Proceedings

from the 10th International Conference
of the Hellenic Semiotics Society

EDITORS

Eleftheria Deltsou

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The Beatles Paradigm. Transcending a collection of 'ropey', scrappy, multi-cultural breadcrumbs into a whole new semiosphere

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Abstract

A research concerned with the Beatles' conduct – artistically, socially and commercially – revealed the band's exemplary approach to communicative interaction. A comparative study of incidents revealed their manner of interaction with all agents involved in the communicative interplay that occurred in the process of creation, promotion and presentation of the band's message – their work and image. The information, extracted from an extended bibliography, was evaluated according to communication theories related to production, media and creative processes, aesthetic theories and popular culture, and studies on communication practices related to society, politics and the media. The conclusion highlighted the Beatles' comprehension of the concept of contexts as a crucial factor. Appropriating an odd variety of signs and codes met along their path, the Beatles proceeded in transcending them into semiotic breadcrumbs, which guided towards a semiosphere millions of people identified with, or in any case, recognized as such.

Keywords

semiotics , intercultural communication , pop culture , the Beatles , society , media

Introduction

The Beatles managed to appropriate a whole decade. They turned the world's attention away from h-bomb angst, and hot war incidents bursting all over the globe in a terror balance against cold war realities. In the uncertainty of a changing world, people were in need of a distraction. The Beatles did a lot more than simply offer a decent, entertaining distraction. They re-directed the focus towards creativity, experimentation, cultural variety, acceptance of the Other, peace and love. As a result, they achieved to capture collective memory in recalling a rather tumultuous decade as the world's symbolic era of civil hope and eternal youth.

The Beatles laid their interested gaze upon the world. They observed and noticed. What kind of semiotic breadcrumbs did they collect in the process? How did they recognize which codes to choose, when they reached out to people, welcoming them all to join and take a giant leap of faith along with them? Everybody – irrespective of gender, age, color, social background – was invited to this magical mystery tour. But how did the Beatles achieve to write the invitation in a multi-modal language millions of people seemed to comprehend?

The Beatles used both intuition and intellect not only in the choice of the words they used in their lyrics, and the soundscapes they incorporated in their melodies, but also in the way they readily navigated throughout their collective career amidst a busy, changing world that seemed to hold its breath, waiting for their every move.

Times and readings

The Beatles appeared in an era of global turmoil. The end of colonization in its traditional sense meant 'Emerging Worlds'. The Cold War and the hot conflicts taking place around the world at that time spoke clearly of 'Worlds in Conflict.' So did the civil rights movements, as well as various conservative and reactionary forces that caused religious, ethnic and racist clashes. So did also the military coups and juntas being established here, there and everywhere, and the fear of nuclear accidents. And yet, where does our mind travel when we recall the era of the sixties? The switch from black and white to color, the passing from modernism to flower power, the negation of 'square' society in preference of emerging counter-cultures, peace movements, the birth of our 'global village' with a little help from the media. "By the device of the context, we may see how activity receives its fundamental organization and how even creativity is context bound. Stated differently, the concept of the context explains how culture intrudes on behavior encouraging us to reproduce society" (Wentworth, 1980, p. 105). Or, as composer Aaron Copland has been cited stating, "If you want to know about the Sixties, play the music of The Beatles" (in MacDonald, 1997, p. 1).

The socio-political and economic forces of the era promoted the notion that society's members should exchange their role as citizens for the role of consumers. The me-

dia were shifting their goal from informing to entertaining. “The private media are major corporations selling a product (readers and audiences) to other businesses (advertisers)” (Herman & Chomsky, 1988, p. 303). Approaching the Model of Communication (Shannon & Weaver, 1963) from a metaphorical viewpoint – indeed a category error, nevertheless a common one in society and commercial life where business organizations aim at functioning as ‘well lubricated engines’ – we may see media owners as senders, the artists’ work as channel, profit gained as message, and the advertisers as receivers. Apparently in this model the artists and the audience play the role of noise. A sound technician recalled, in the class-divided society within EMI studios “the pop people were looked down upon by the classical people, even though it was the money coming in from the sales of pop records that paid for the classical sessions” (Emerick & Massey, 2006, p. 56). Let us attempt another reading, where the artist is the sender, the media are the channel through which the artist’s work—the message passes through to reach the receivers—that is the audience. In this variation advertisers are the noise. “As they interact, social discourses engage in processes of domination, resistance, and negotiation; in each of these processes, cultural meanings are produced, circulated, and consumed” (Geertz, 1973, in Rodriguez, 2005, p. 381). Signs may relate to more than one systems and bare more than one meanings at the same time. Any metaphorical reading of the Model of Communication we might attempt, we should keep the political implications in mind. The channel functions as a gatekeeper. The organization that manages the channel decides which message is valid, legitimate, and thus deserves to pass through. Unfortunately, as Powdermaker noted, after having observed the situation in the entertainment industry, “the executives who technically have the freedom of choice do not actually have it, because they usually lack the knowledge and imagination necessary for making such a choice.” (Powdermaker, 1950, p. 165).

The Beatles succeeded in proposing a narrative, which aimed from the bottom up, instead of the canonical top down approach, and spearheaded a penetration into the social and cultural ‘fabric’, which had been weaved by the establishment. “We were the first working class singers that stayed working class and pronounced it. Didn’t try and change our accents which in England were looked down upon” (Lennon in, *The Beatles Anthology II*, DVD, 0:22:34 - 0:22:45). The Beatles achieved what was termed the Provincial Breakthrough in England. “Northern became chic [...] we found that there were other people out there” (Martin, 1977, p. 137). Next followed the cultural British Invasion in the USA. “Until the Beatles emerged, British pop was seen as a pale imitation of its American counterpart” (Blaney, 2008, p. 74). “Before the Beatle breakthrough, in America very few records of British origin had been pressed in the USA in any case” (Martin, 1977, p. 186). If we consider the hegemonic role USA held in the field of media, and attempt another metaphorical reading of the Model of Communication, the US became the channel via which Beatlemania spread all over the world. “As Index of Censorship stresses, limiting free expression only leaves room for protecting the ideas or prejudic-

es that those in power approve or don't find threatening" (Allen - Stremmlau, 2005, p. 219). Perhaps we should add the factor of profitability, since "The Beatles had become a huge money-making machine." (Blaney, 2008, p. 157). After all, Edward Heath, president of the Board of Trade in Britain at the time, has been quoted admitting, "The Beatles have boosted our reserves" (Time 1964-10-02, in Blaney, 2008, p. 114).

The Beatles with their very ambitious agenda to reach "the toppermost of the poppermost" accepted that their work would play the role of a channel through which financial profit would change hands, "the Beatles' arrival revolutionised pop publishing. Boyfriend's Big Beat No 2 (autumn '63) promised "12 colour pages and all the mod pop that's popping".(Savage, 2009-09-06). However, the Beatles recognized and exercised the power they gained in every step they took. They declared and actively promoted the various cultural origins their inspiration was drawing from. "They made clear African-American musicians were among their major influences" (Skinner Sawyers, 2006, p. xlv), and invited a female, African-American artist from Motown to join them on their UK tour. They openly opposed the idea of racial segregation and stated that they would refuse to perform in front of a segregated audience, when they realized that promoters had ordered seating by race for a scheduled concert at the Old Gator Bowl in Jacksonville, Florida (Kane, 2003; Frontani, 2007). The specific performance took place in front of a fully integrated audience. The Beatles' legitimized authority—as the ultimately successful popular artists, facilitated various cultural messages to pass via the media and get distributed to their receivers, the audience. "The fact remains that when the Beatles talk—about drugs, the war in Viet Nam, religion—millions listen, and this is a new situation in the pop music world" (Porterfield – Birnbaum in Frontani, 2007, p. 158). The Beatles' public actions spoke of and realized the possibility of an alternative reality than the established one of "the manufactured pop idol, single, boyish, white, good-looking, and replaceable, so allowing for swings in fashion both in terms of music and image" (Whiteley, 2006, p. 57).

The Beatles disregarded the pattern, which dictated that pop musicians act like string puppets, and are to be handled as industrial products. They embodied an image, where pop musicians were actual creative human beings, designing and deciding their own steps. The Beatles' supportive producer observed, "Once you start being taught things, your mind is channeled in a particular way. Paul [McCartney] didn't have that channeling, so he had freedom, and could think of things that I would have considered outrageous. I could admire them, but my musical training would have prevented me from thinking of them myself" (Martin, 1977, p. 139). The Beatles re-wrote the code for pop music elevating it to art; revealing a possibility where a single song, but even an entire album, could be approached and presented as an opera, or a collection of short stories, and where the song order could be dictated by musical keys according to their representation of emotions, equally well as it was done by content (Cooper, 2006).

The Beatles transformed the recording studio into a lab “where songs would acquire their shape and characteristics making use of sampling, loops, and sound effects from EMI’s library for novelty recordings, or sound effects created on the spot, and which were incorporated during the production in the studio and because of it” (Vlachou, 2012, p. 34). As Escobar noted, “Any technology represents a cultural invention, in the sense that it brings forth a world; it emerges out of particular cultural conditions and in turn helps create new ones” (Escobar, 1994, in Granqvist, 2005, p. 290-291) Thus, “studio technique abounded and functioned as an instrument itself, wholly integrated into the art of the music” (Zolten, p. 45). And so the interest shifted from the song to the “folk-technological artefact of the record” (MacDonald, 1997, p. 21). According to the Beatles, such an artefact deserved an equally engaging packaging, therefore they collaborated with jazz photographer Robert Freeman, and artists, Klaus Voorman, Peter Blake, Richard Hamilton, for the creation of their album sleeves, and as a consequence they achieved to elevate the design of the album sleeve into art.

Breadcrumbs (signs, and indices, and symbols) and meanings

The Beatles’ insect-inspired name paid tribute to their hero, Buddy Holly and the Crickets, but in changing the second ‘e’ of the ‘beetle’ spelling with an ‘a’ they promoted their identity as a beat band and made a reference to the freewheeling Beat Poets, while their provincialism could allow them to be identified with England’s own Angry Young Men. This choice suggested that a commercial product like pop music could stand side by side with literature. These working class and low middle class youngsters from the bleak north of England, looked up to Elvis Presley, but affirmed the possibility of success with closer to home version of skiffle star Lonnie Donegan. They identified with country, rockabilly, bluegrass, the blues and R&B due to the humble social origins of those genres, and incorporated in their work various elements from them: their directness of the lyrics, the lively beat, the performative honesty, the stitchwork-detail craftsmanship demonstrated by the skillful popular musician. As Marwick observed, “a Beatles song was always instantly recognizable, yet the variety of styles they essayed seemed almost endless” (Marwick, 2002, p. 139). One of their peers noted, “[...] what was inspiring about the Beatles in their Cavern days was the certainty with which they claimed American music for themselves, and the most striking sign of this confidence was John Lennon’s voice. The Beatles sang American music in a Liverpool accent—nasal rather than throaty, detached, passion expressed with a conversational cynicism” (Frith, 1988, p. 225).

The Beatles studied the structures of songwriting from the Great American Songbook to their contemporary Brill Building Sound, incorporating Motown influences in the process. While recording at EMI’s Studios situated at Abbey Road (known after the Beatles’ last recording as ‘Abbey Road Studios,’ and eventually, officially renamed ‘Abbey Road Studios’), they got acquainted with classical instruments and showed keen interest in the experimental methods contemporary composers used. The studio equipment

and its techniques became their playground, and the potential of the studio as a creative instrument was revealed, giving shape to works like *A Day In the Life* (Lennon & McCartney, 1967) – a co-written poem ‘dressed’ in an experimental composition, presented in the ephemeral form of a pop song. Tape loops randomly put together *For the Benefit of Mister Kite* (Lennon & McCartney, 1967) aimed to invoke the feeling of walking among fairground attractions. The scratching-sound of a damaged 78rpm record, used in *Honey Pie* (Lennon & McCartney, 1968) further ‘authenticated’ the feeling of listening to a 1920’s song besides the era specific instruments and the singer’s performative style.

The Beatles exploited their position and fame to familiarize with cultures they came across, but they never failed to acknowledge their peers, their background, and the public, as their source of inspiration. They humored the fans, who believed that their songs were transmitting secret encoded references, by writing *Glass Onion* (Lennon & McCartney, 1968); its lyric a word after word string of references of their own songs. In a world that promoted the American Dream, they accentuated the validity of symbols for anyone’s ‘home’ recoding the semantics of US-born surf sound on a flight *Back in the USSR* (Lennon & McCartney, 1968), which incidentally was a spoof reference to *Back in the USA* (Chuck Berry, 1959). They secretly broke the South Africa embargo, offering their apple label to a record company (Gallo) to release their own South African bands. Probably a lot of African people recognized the Yoruba expression *Obladi Oblada* (Lennon & McCartney, 1968), and winked in acknowledgement when that little expression of their culture became known worldwide, same with the rhythm of the song which introduced Jamaican ska to the mainstream white audiences. Perhaps we should wonder, would India’s culture be the most famous cultural escape for the western world, if it weren’t for the Beatles?

A Yellow Submarine (Lennon & McCartney, 1966), was appropriated from the logo of a group which promoted environmental issues, to become the second most famous fictional submarine in the world. In it they dove deep in a sea of green and off to an Odyssey and an Iliad, which unfolded backwards, and where, instead of belle Helene it was the Music that had been taken away and in need of saving. The film *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967) may have been inspired by the Merry Pranksters’ road trip (manned by an eclectic mix of hippies and beat poets) across the US on a bus named *Further*, but the Beatles invited everyday characters for their ride, and the love story unfolding was between Ringo Starr’s middle aged, constantly nagging, very chubby aunt and a tiny Nowhere Man. The musical composition of *Penny Lane* (Lennon & McCartney, 1967), takes the childhood-memory lyrics for a ride on a merry-go-round, enhancing the listener’s experience with the use of cinematic soundscaping codes. “They set out to surpass what had gone before them in youth-oriented popular music, but also had a conception of songwriting as a craft older and more widely established than what had immediately preceded the Beatles. [...] As songwriters, John and Paul had no snobbery, drawing on a variety of traditions without creative compromise” (MacDonald, 2003, p. 47-48).

An American psychiatrist noted: 'The Beatles, I think, are perhaps Presley multiplied by four, and represent a manifestation of sexuality among teenagers' (Hill, 2007, p. 78), but, unlike Elvis, they disregarded the existing norm of homosociality (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1985, in Laing, 2009, p. 20) and covered girl group songs. They addressed women openly questioning the social roles where male patronizes female as norm, "I once had a girl, or should I say she once had me?" in *Norwegian Wood* (Lennon & McCartney, 1965). "What a relief! Their voices did not have that authoritarian baritone of a lot of male singers who declared, with every note, the supremacy of the male point of view." (Tompkins, 2006, p. 216-217). *Lovely Rita*, the working girl in uniform was not considered manly, but sexy, reversing the stereotype of the 'man in uniform being sexy.' The Beatles raised attention towards social issues of the day which affected women, the generation gap and runaway teenagers (*She's leaving home*, Lennon & McCartney, 1967), single mothers (*Lady Madonna*, Lennon & McCartney, 1968), lonely people (*Eleanor Rigby*, Lennon & McCartney, 1966). "The Beatles were never characterized as 'cock rock,' [...] the Beatles come across as being acceptable" (Whiteley, 2006, p. 61), however, "the Beatles were sexy; the girls were the ones who perceived them as sexy'. In short the girls were the pursuers" (Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs, in Whiteley, 2006, p. 56). These members of the proposed dominant gender seemed to be 'playing along,' mocking the established distinctions. Frontani suggests that according to Adorno's observations on the effects of media – and Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs do not oppose to that fact – the girls were exhibiting conformity; however, he notes that the importance of their observation lies in the exhibition of a conformity against the dominant social values (Frontani, 2007, p. 38).

The Beatles questioned the politics of politicians, and citizens (*Taxman*, Harrison, 1966; *Revolution*, Lennon & McCartney, 1968; *While My Guitar Gently Weeps*, Harrison, 1968). They questioned the convention of royalty, "*would the people in the cheaper seats clap your hands and the rest of you if 'd just rattle your jewellery*" (J. Lennon during the Royal Variety Performance, London, 4-11-1963), the convention of the church "*Jesus was alright but his disciples are thick and ordinary*" (Cleave, 1966), and they questioned themselves, "*How does it feel to be one of the Beautiful People, now that you know who you are what would you like to be?*" (*Baby, You're a Rich Man*, Lennon & McCartney, 1967). The Beatles recognized and exercised the power they had over the media, experimenting with it to see how far they could go. *All You Need Is Love* (Lennon & McCartney, 1967) was specifically written for the first global satellite television broadcast. Witnessed simultaneously by approximately 500 million people, the live performance with an audience doubling as chorus, was recorded and released in vinyl, thus immortalizing the aura of the global village in the making. The Beatles' next major media experiment, the filming of their art in the making – an innocent prequel of contemporary reality shows – *Let It Be* (1970) demonstrated the detrimental effect of approaching human personalities as spectacle, leading to the band's dissolution.

“And in the end...”

The Beatles, inspiring their peers en masse, redefined the role of pop music “from a stable medium of social confirmation to a proliferating culture of musical postcards and diary jottings: a cryptic forum for the exchange of individual impressions of accelerating multifocal change” (MacDonald, 1997, p. 22). Revolutionary and entertaining, ground-breaking and familiar, exhilarating for youths and accepted by older generations, topping the popular charts and receiving raving reviews by serious music critics and composers alike, they addressed in their work and statements the socio-political affairs of their day. The Beatles instinctively collected a vast variety of cultural information with the insight of an exceptional archivist and classifier, and they exploited the rules of the market, in order to make use of its tools and deliver the best artistic product their abilities and sensibilities allowed “The revolutionary mix that marks the Beatle product is as complex as a computer – with soul.” (John Cage, in Frontani 2007, p. 156).

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