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Tonal Distortion in the Music of Radiohead

ABSTRACT

Background

Among the possible descriptions of those instances of popular song that fail to fully conform to some given musical standard, the metaphor of ‘distortion’ seems particularly apt, given the prominent role literal distortion plays in this repertory in the form of actual signal processing, as with, for example, the ubiquitous timbres of the distorted electric guitar. The metaphoric use of the term ‘distortion’ can be further justified in light of much of popular music’s past and present associations with various forms of social satire and defiance — the flouting of social standards perceived as unjust in some way — such themes often being expressed outright in song lyrics. This is to say, the analytical application of a notion of distortion affords us the chance to draw some easy parallels between lyrical and musical content, with the distortion of musical materials in itself understood as a form of protest, if only of a vague kind (Doll 2009).

Aims and Repertoire Studied

The lyrics of the celebrated band Radiohead habitually play with themes of distortion, at least to the extent that their songs have any decipherable subject matter whatsoever. It’s a natural analytical move, then, to cast Radiohead’s mix of strange-and-yet-familiar musical sounds as reflecting a general aesthetic of distortion that defines their creative output as a whole, with this general aesthetic including tonal distortion. I argue that Radiohead’s songs often evoke recognizable tonal structures only to defamiliarize them, an expressive strategy not unique to Radiohead but striking here in the originality of its implementation.

As a clear example of Radiohead’s overall distorted aesthetic, consider their 2000 song ‘Everything in Its Right Place’, which features, in the words of musicologist Joseph Auner, ‘layered vocal loops [that] move repeatedly across the boundaries of ‘live or Memorex’, constantly destabilizing our perception of what is real or manufactured’ (2003). It’s not just the postproduction manipulation of timbres, however, or the shifting hypermeter and phrasing, that helps to create this track’s disorienting, synthetic whirlwind of sound. It’s also Thom Yorke’s singing itself, especially his method of breathing. Yorke’s gasps for air in decidedly odd places in the text sound as if his voice were really that of a robot not yet fully mastered in its mammalian mimicry. I find the word ‘distortion’ appropriate in attempting to summarize the overall effect of the track’s timbral, rhythmic, and anthropic complexity.

Methods

Regarding tonal distortion, I make a case for two basic kinds, the first involving a generic tonal norm, and the second involving a specific tonal precedent. These two kinds of tonal

distortion roughly correspond to Robert Hatten’s (1985) binary of ‘stylistic intertextuality’ and ‘strategic intertextuality’, although these are not precisely the same. (For instance, I sometimes hear a song distorting passages heard earlier in the same song, which is a phenomenon that would not normally be covered at all under the term ‘intertextuality’.)

As an example of the first kind, I offer 1997’s ‘Paranoid Android’, a six-and-a-half-minute multi-sectional amalgam of more or less disconnected song parts, with a poignant middle segment (‘rain down’) that evokes a loose series of chords I identify as the ‘down’n’out schema’ (Doll 2017, 176–7), which I’ve named after the 1920s blues song ‘Nobody Knows You When You’re Down and Out’ by Jimmy Cox. My claim is not that Radiohead is channelling that particular song, but rather that ‘Paranoid Android’ is partially based on a free-floating tonal schema exemplified by that older song as well as several other songs. The schema is in three basic parts: the first part stretches upward from tonic I through a major III chord towards major VI; this is en route to a tonicization of ii in the second part, then onto a third part, which is less predictable than the previous parts but that contains some sort of #4 pushing upward to V, which then launches into the next iteration of the entire looping progression. Overall the schema is a large-scale version of the five-stop circle-of-fifths progression (III–VI–II–V–I) pervasive in American popular music of the 1920s, as exemplified by ‘The Charleston’ or the bridge of ‘I Got Rhythm’. Some other examples of the down’n’out schema include Gabby Pahinui’s Hawaiian-language song ‘Kaua’i Beauty’ (released in 1973 but originally dating also from the 1920s), and the verses to Billy Joel’s ‘New York State of Mind’ from 1976. All these examples of the down’n’out’ are centred on C.

Heard against the down’n’out schema, the slow section of ‘Paranoid Android’ does almost everything wrong. We start with C minor instead of major; the upward stretching motions inherent to the sequence of secondary dominants are replaced by descents in various voices; the strong circle-of-fifth motions become jumbled, with the characteristic motion of EM III to AM VI shoved to the end of the series in place of a strong dominant V, and the dominant V arriving where the EM III should have occurred, near the beginning; and we are denied any preparation of a large V by a chord containing #4, instead receiving a tonicization of plain diatonic FM IV. The generic model *does* hold, however, with regard to the starting position of C, moving through AM toward a two-bar emphasis on Dm ii, then exploring various other harmonies in the third part as the schema is prone to do, and the diatonic bass descent echoes that heard in ‘New York State of Mind’.

The lyrics of ‘Paranoid Android’, like those of most Radiohead songs, do not participate in a coherent narrative. Rather, they create an atmosphere of ominously confusing imagery, as though we were viewing a macabre story through a glass darkly.

But the incessant voice-leading descents are easily connected to the repeating message of ‘rain down’; the broken narrative enhances, and is itself enhanced by, the tonal norm evoked in distorted form, even though the meaning of each, and the meaning of both, are not easily articulated.

I’ll now turn to the second basic kind of tonal distortion, that involving evocation of a specific precedent. Radiohead’s ‘Karma Police’, also from 1997, features a fairly conspicuous quotation of the Beatles’ 1968 song ‘Sexy Sadie’. I call this an outright ‘quotation’, rather than, say, a mere similarity, because I believe it is a deliberate borrowing. What’s more, I’m willing to consider it not just a quotation but also an *allusion* to the Beatles’ song, which is to say I find it plausible that Radiohead is conscious of the connection and intends us the listeners to recall the precedent, so that we can hear ‘Karma Police’ in distorted dialogue with that earlier song. I say all this based on the variety and strength of the similarities between the two tracks, although I have yet to find any confirmation of this conscious intent in interviews with the band members. (However, other Radiohead songs-titles signal at least an awareness on the band’s part of their connection to older music, with titles like ‘Paperbag Writer’ — an obvious allusion to the Beatles’ ‘Paperback Writer’ — and ‘Subterranean Homesick Alien’ an indirect reference to Bob Dylan’s ‘Subterranean Homesick Blues’.) Radiohead’s four-syllable opening refrain of the words ‘karma police’ is set with the same melodic contour as the four syllables of the opening refrain of the words ‘sexy Sadie’ — up, down, down. John Lennon’s repeated warning, ‘you’ll get yours yet’ is echoed by Thom Yorke’s repeated warning, ‘this is what you get’. Delving into the tonal structures of the two songs, we can see The Beatles’ briefly looped progression of the harmonies CM, DM, GM, F#⁷ is copied so precisely by Radiohead that the two tracks can easily be mashed up without any manipulation. And just in case we missed the similarity, Jonny Greenwood arpeggiates his GM and F#⁷ piano chords in much the same manner as Paul McCartney arpeggiates his.

It’s important to note that the tonal distortion in ‘Karma Police’ works differently from that in ‘Paranoid Android’, not just in that it’s a specific song under consideration versus a generic norm. There’s also a difference in the role that the tonal structure plays within the distortion. In ‘Paranoid Android’, the down’n’out schema is itself considerably distorted, so much so that we must undertake some detective work even to recognize the underlying schema. In ‘Karma Police’, the chordal loop is essentially intact, but there are various other tonal details that we could hear as disfigured: the exact notes of the refrain (even though the basic contour is intact), the precise rhythmic and phrasal positions of the chords and the melodic notes, the function of Bm as a fleeting tonic in the Beatles song but not in Radiohead’s, et cetera. All these tonal details, combined with Radiohead’s general aesthetic of distortion, make it reasonable for us to hear ‘Karma Police’ as a case of tonal distortion, beyond mere quotation or allusion. Our sense of what counts as distorted versus undistorted, or even simply altered versus unaltered more generally, is ultimately a matter of interpretation, governed by no hard rules.

Implications

I conclude by making appeals on two fundamental issues. The first regards composition. Although I guess that with

‘Paranoid Android’ the artist intends to distort and that with ‘Karma Police’ the artist is consciously aware of distorting (which is an even stronger claim), I don’t believe analytical interpretation, distortion included, need be dictated by such concerns. There’s nothing wrong with interpreting music in any way we like without regard to compositional intention or awareness so long as we are clear in what we are claiming. I would make a similar argument about the second fundamental issue, which has to do with which structures we are willing to consider distortable. North American music theorists, because of their training, are fond of comparing popular music to classical norms and precedents. I myself am not especially interested in this approach, but I respect it as a possibility so long as, again, it is clear in its claims. Uncritical appeals to the universality of classical models does no one any good, not the least of whom those of us interested in uncovering models specific to the popular repertory or those scholars working toward finding true musical universals, even universals limited to the universe of Western musical culture.

Keywords

Radiohead, The Beatles, Tonality, Harmony, Text-Music Relations.

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