Music, the word and the world; or the banality of (South African) classification

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Abstract
Systems of classification pervade all aspects of our lives, prescribing our moral and aesthetic worlds, constructing our values, shaping our identities, creating the perspectives in which we view ourselves and others. Yet despite the fact that these systems impact so powerfully on people's lives, they remain largely invisible. This is a problem everywhere, but especially in societies whose conflicts are fuelled by issues arising from categories such as “race”, gender, class or nationality. Is music – and the study of music – exempt from these concerns? If not, then how is it implicated, and with what consequences? What is its role? This paper examines the banality of classification in general and its entanglement with music in particular. Though the issues are of the broadest relevance, the paper focuses specifically on post-apartheid South Africa.

Keywords: classification; categories; genre; race; South Africa.

In a classic understatement, Judith Butler (2004, p. 17) has remarked that “[w]hat makes for a livable world is no idle question”. What’s more, she says, “[i]t is not merely a question for philosophers”. Clearly not: in my view, it is – or should be – also a question for music researchers. Let me try to say what I mean, by addressing this issue from an unusual perspective: that of classification.
All societies classify their world, and everything in it. Apartheid – and let’s be clear that the term refers precisely to class-making and to classification – did so in ways that were especially brutal and dehumanising. So when South Africans went to the polls for the first time in 1994, they set out to reclassify their world as a precondition for recreating it. This new world would surpass the old one, with its wretched orders of things, its categories of people, its ways of including and excluding, of enabling and disabling, of conferring and denying... Not just privilege, but even life itself. There would be new ways of classifying, of course; but these would be an enhancement: they would set people free, help them thrive. With hindsight, we can now see that we seriously underestimated this task: that we let our guard down; in short, that we did not pay sufficient attention to what we might call “the banality of classification”.

It’s a strikingly apposite term. And it is so for reasons linked, not surprisingly, to the philosopher Hannah Arendt (1963), whose term “the banality of evil” it immediately brings to mind. Let’s recall that Arendt wanted the term to convey her insight that Adolph Eichmann became a willing participant in the Nazi programme of genocide – not because he was intrinsically evil, but rather because of a profound failure of thought and judgement. Eichmann wasn’t malevolent, Arendt argued; he simply took the world as it was presented to him, unthinkingly, without interrogating its classifications and categories: banally, in fact.

This has broader relevance. If systems of classification are banal insofar as their sheer given-ness makes them nearly invisible, then urgent questions arise. What opportunities does any ordained system of classification make possible? What possibilities for human flourishing does it shut down? Do our own classificatory systems enhance our powers, set us free, make us (in Roberto Unger’s terms) bigger and more equal human beings? Or do they – again in Unger’s terms – play into the “dictatorship of no alternatives” (Unger 2009)?

One way to approach these questions is to consider classification in relation to its arbitrariness – or if that’s the wrong word, then at least its historical constructedness. Situate yourself outside your own classificatory system, and its terms, references and meanings slip towards the absurd. This was the starting point for Jean Genet’s famous play *The blacks*. He tells us that one evening an actor asked him to write a play for an all-black cast. Genet (1960, preface, unpagedinated) was puzzled: “But what exactly is a black?” he wondered. “First of all, what’s his colour?”.

Borges also comes to mind here. Nowhere is the arbitrariness of classification clearer than in those writings of Borges that deal with what he calls the “ambiguities, redundancies and deficiencies” of human attempts to classify the world. He writes, in a famous example, of “a certain Chinese encyclopaedia” that classifies animals into fourteen categories. The categories are:

(a) those that belong to the emperor; (b) embalmed ones; (c) those that are trained; (d) suckling pigs; (e) mermaids; (f) fabulous ones; (g) stray dogs; (h) those that are included in this classification; (i) those that tremble as if they were mad; (j) innumerable ones; (k) those drawn with a very fine camel’s-hair
Foucault (1970, pp. xv, xvii) laughed “a long time” when he first read this, because the passage “shattered [...] all the familiar landmarks of thought – our thought, the thought that bears the stamp of our age and our geography – breaking up all the ordered surfaces and all the planes with which we are accustomed to tame the wild profusion of existing things, and continuing long afterwards to disturb and threaten with collapse our age-old definitions between the Same and the Other”. Borges’s point is that every classification of the universe is arbitrary. “We do not know what the universe is”, he says, though “we suspect that there is no universe in the organic, unifying sense” (Borges 1999, p. 231); or if there is, its aim escapes us. We don’t know the “words, definitions, etymologies, and synonyms of God’s secret dictionary” (ibid.). So we make up the world as we go along; we make up things and people and “races”, classifying to serve particular goals, interests, and ideologies.

The problem is that it’s the tendency of any system of classification to become a straightjacket, or a disabling device, or worse. Adorno’s metaphor for this process is the term “molluscan”: classifications, he says, eventually become molluscs. For Adorno (2003, pp. 121, 189; cited in Foster 2007, p. 150), the first precondition for any breaking free of the molluscan shell is that thought must give itself over to objects “without reservation”, even “without a lifebelt”; this is the only way that the categories of thought will be able to shape themselves appropriately to human experience.

Beyond that, the struggle to break free of the mollusc may also take a symbolic, or aesthetic, form. During the Paris Commune of 1871, workers took up positions on street corners throughout the city, and unloaded their firearms by shooting at clocks. These clocks were on palaces, on church towers, on city buildings; and shooting at them was a way of signalling the termination of one time continuum – one system of temporal and social classification – so as to allow the birth of another.

Let me give two brief examples of the human consequences of molluscan classification, both from South Africa, the first from the heart of the apartheid era, the second from the present.

The first example concerns the eminent journalist and short-story writer Nat Nakasa. Writing in 1964, Nakasa took issue with the way his identity had been classified. I quote:

Who am I? Where do I belong in the South African scheme of things? Who are my people? [...] I am supposed to be a Pondo, but I don’t even know the language of that tribe. I was brought up in a Zulu-speaking home, my mother being a Zulu. Yet I can no longer think in Zulu because that language cannot cope with the demands of our day. [...] I have never owned an assegai or any of those magnificent Zulu shields. Neither do I propose to be in tribal dress when I go to the United States this year. [...] I am just not a tribesman, whether I like
it or not. I am, inescapably, a part of the city slums, the factory machines and our beloved shebeens.

I'm not even sure that I could claim to be African. For if I were, then I should surely share my identity with west Africans and other Africans in Kenya or Tanganyika. Yet it happens to be true that I am more at home with [a white South African] Afrikaner than with a west African. Some of my friends who have been abroad say they got on best with [the white] Afrikaners they met in Europe, instead of Englishmen or west Africans. We saw some evidence of this when a number of Nigerian students passed through Johannesburg once. We took them to a party in Soweto where they were welcomed like long-lost broth-

ers. After marveling at their flowing robes and talking some politics, we didn't know what to do with them.

Being Muslims – and millions of Nigerians are Muslims – they did not drink. We could not offer them meat because that also would have gone against their faith. [...] They were perfect strangers, more so than the many South African whites who spend some of their time in the townships. To speak of those Nige-

rians as 'my people' would not make much sense, even though we all had flat noses. (Nakasa 1964, pp. 356-358)

The second example concerns a recent student of mine, whom I'll mention very briefly because I have previously spoken and written about her. Lerato is a twenty-five-year-old Venda-speaking graduate student in music. She comes from a rural part of South Africa. And her greatest musical passion, which she keeps strictly se-

cret, is the British pop singer Cliff Richard. But “nobody knows”, she says. “I listen to [him], but only when I’m alone, on campus, in residence. If anybody’s coming, I just switch it off. I don’t want them to ask me about it”.

The reason for her secrecy is that she fears others will judge her – or worse. I quote:

People would think it was weird that I’m black and I’m listening to Cliff Rich-

ard. Most of my friends are black, and they listen to other stuff, R&B, whatever, South African music. So I just think people would not understand: here is a black girl and I’m so into this white guy’s music. [...] I’m a big fan of Cliff Richard, who happens to be white. They wouldn’t understand why I’m not into more R&B and other stuff that black people listen to, black people my age listen to. And [instead] I listen to things that probably they think some old white man should be listening to, or maybe just white youngsters. (Ballantine 2007)

In music, the classificatory system that looms largest is what we refer to as genre. Genres establish horizons of expectation – but, as Lerato painfully discovered, horizons can confine and foreclose, just as easily as they can open vistas and possibilities. Genre boundaries tend to be policed for correctness by gatekeepers of various sorts. Works, or authors of works, that break loose of genre-defining pre-

cepts, or that straddle genres, typically run into trouble – as for example happened
to Miles Davis when he started to fuse jazz with rock in 1970, or to Bob Dylan when he went electric at the Newport Folk Festival in 1965, or to Beethoven after the first performances of his Razumovsky Quartets of 1806, or to *marabi* in the urban ghettos of South Africa ninety-to-one-hundred years ago. Like other forms of classification, genres are “ideological in the strictest sense of the term”, as Fabbri and Shepherd (2003, p. 403) have argued, “[t]heir intention is that of confirming or criticizing established hierarchies of value”.

One thing is clear, then: for the same reason that the struggle for freedom and power is likely also to be a struggle against categories and classifications, so too is genre rebellion, within a particular socio-historical formation, very likely to be linked to rebellion elsewhere within the formation. That, to be sure, was the case with South African music in the climactic, final years of the anti-apartheid struggle. At a time when the inhumanity and contradictions of the apartheid system were reaching breaking point, the land overflowed with musical performers and idioms that embodied a range of potent cultural transgressions. New performing venues sprang up in the major cities: through these passed musical groups of breathtaking originality, offering syncretic styles of a range, depth and variety absent from the South African stage for decades, or in some cases never previously imagined. Bands such as Sakhile, Bayete, Sabenza, and Johnny Clegg’s Savuka played music in which the blend might be *mbaqanga* with traditional Nguni song; Cape-Coloured *klopse* idioms with bebop; *marabi* with electronic rock; Zulu *maskanda* with the Celtic ballad; and so on. These were genre *transgressions*: ways of breaking free of the mollusc. But they were also genre *integrations*: potent cultural and political discoveries that prefigured a new reality. Precisely in this way, and precisely for this reason, they offered hope: an often euphoric promise that the final struggle against apartheid could be won. Their music was an alchemy, helping, in its way, to corrode the old social order and to liberate the new.

That was then. It is now seventeen years since the end of apartheid – and this *taxonomic emancipation*, this rebellion against banal classification, this *jouissance*, has largely disappeared. Take the case of South African jazz, for example. Under the rubric of jazz, South African music had a long history of defiance; it stayed relevant and oppositional by responding unpredictably to changing socio-political circumstances. So it avoided prescription, and eluded molluscan classification. Ironically, 1994 changed all that. Democracy brought new freedoms, and, at least for some, a sudden explosion of opportunities to make money.

And as jazz musicians exploited the new commercial opportunities in a fun-seeking and supposedly “post-struggle” environment, the music itself changed: it became adaptive and conformist. As Nishlyn Ramanna notes (2006, pp. 180, 185), this is a point that critical commentators and musicians have made repeatedly. They have called post-apartheid jazz “impoverished”, saying that “the whole shape of South African music [has] become watered down”, lamenting that “the records coming out are just smooth, smooth”. They tell of trips abroad, where they’re asked why, “in the last few years”, so much of the South African music that finds its way onto record has lost its characteristic “rawness”, “soul” and “passion”, and has in-
stead come to sound “like American smooth jazz”. Noting the same turn, local critics have heaped scorn on the rise of what they call “café jazz”, or “soft serve jazz”. What has been lost, according to one prominent local musician, is the “whole experimental bit; [...] right now there’s nothing really interesting going on musically with jazz musicians” (ibid.).

And not only with jazz musicians. On some accounts, this malaise now affects South African popular music in general. In an article in the London Financial times, for example, David Honigmann (2006) puts the case as follows:

Recent releases paint an unhappy picture. Many old names are playing old standards. [...] Pretenders to [Ladysmith] Black Mambazo’s pre-eminence are the Soweto Gospel Choir, whose [recent album is a] desperately safe collection. [...] As for the Mahotella Queens, [they are now] polite rather than muscular. [...] What went wrong with South African music? Apartheid gave South Africans something to sing about. [...] Today, too many sing from a western songbook, whether aping gangstas or serenading tourists.

I want to suggest that these problems are at least in part a consequence of our post-democratic choices – central to which is a neo-liberal policy orientation that has spawned a complacent, nouveau riche commercialism, and, crucially, a corresponding epistemology. Our new social order is vested in fixed, or molluscan, identities (ironically, exactly the same “race”-based identities that underpinned apartheid), and unreflective, taken-for-granted, often primordial ways of naming, categorising and classifying the world. To the extent that the new South Africa, like the old, has tied personal and cultural identities to essentialist notions of personhood, it is profoundly at odds with what we fought for, what we expected in 1994, and what we anticipated in the new world we were about to build. I conclude with four linked thoughts.

1. At issue in such classifications are the powerful, legitimating ideologies of our social and political world. To paraphrase Göran Therborn (1999, p. 18): it is precisely through such classificatory ideologies that we become subjects, and inherit a world; this is how we recognize “what exists, [...] what does not exist, [...] who we are, what the world is, what nature, society, men and women are like [...] what is good, right, just, beautiful, attractive, enjoyable and its opposites [...] [and also] what is possible and impossible”;

2. Music plays an especially powerful role here. On Bourdieu’s argument, the “most successful ideological” work is done by those “institutional mechanisms” that “have no need of words, and [that] ask no more than complicitous silence”. In principle, of course, music is wordless. Bourdieu (1977, p. 188) stresses that each time we fail to interrogate these wordless processes, we make “a contribution to the efficacy” of the ideologies so insidiously embedded within them;

3. The music of South Africa’s young democracy shows relatively little evidence of a musical creativity that moves outside familiar or sanctioned comfort zones, or
that connotes transgression, challenge or resistance: which means that, so far, this music is of little benefit to a public sphere tasked with building the kind of society we so urgently need;

4. Walter Benjamin (1970, p. 257) once wrote that “[i]n every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it”. In related vein, Adorno (1966, p. 43; cited in Foster 2007, p. 150) spoke of the need to move beyond the cages of “[t]raditional thinking and the habits of common sense”. Do that successfully, he said, and you provoke “the shock of the open” and the “dizziness” that accompanies it. The urgent task now facing South African musicians and music researchers, it seems to me, is to resist the conformism to which our post-1994 history has mobilised us. We must question such conformism and, where necessary, disrupt its classifications, practices and significations. In South Africa today, our aim should be to analyse our too-settled, too-formulaic social and musical worlds, and to destabilise and confuse their classifications, practices and identities. “Dizziness” is to be welcomed.

In keeping with that, I want to give the last word to Dr Das, of the Asian Dub Foundation. He makes exactly the same philosophical argument – but does so in just eight words. “My favourite Indian instrument”, he says, “is the bass guitar” (Sharma 1996, p. 32).

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