Youth-centric discourse and pop-rock music

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ABSTRACT
In this article I will ask some questions and try to suggest some answers about youth, pop-rock music, and rebellion. I will start by tracing a short genealogy of the complex relations between these three concepts. Then, I will argue that in spite of some changes in the pop-rock discourse during recent decades, in many respects our contemporary relations with pop-rock are still inherently “youth-centric”. Finally, I will suggest integrating the concept of “becoming-child”, formulated by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, into the way we think about music, as an alternative to the concept of youth.

KEYWORDS: youth; rebellion; politics; methodology; becoming-child.

YOUTH, MUSIC, REBELLION
“Rock music’s primary audience, youth, is expected to quarrel with institutional forces” (Lull 1987, pp. 13-14). This quote is taken from a book called Popular music and communication, but it really could have been taken from many other studies dealing with popular music. It states two seemingly obvious facts: first, that youth has a significant relationship with rock music as its primary audience. And second, that youth has an antagonistic relationship with “institutional forces”, and is expected to quarrel with them. Whoever or whatever these forces may be, youth is, in a sense, their primary rival.

My aim in this article is to problematise these allegedly evident relations between youth, pop-rock music, and rebellion. I want to begin by considering two texts
published in 1950. The first is David Riesman’s (1990) famous essay, “Listening to popular music”. It is famous because it was the first text that bluntly said: popular music is young people’s business. It affects them, it matters to them, and it is an important part of their lives. Within a few years this would become a matter of common sense, but in the year 1950 it was something that needed elaboration. Riesman had to prove that music constituted a prime concern for young people. He quotes a seventeen-year-old girl who tells him that it is impossible for someone her age to hate music, since “that’s all there is to do for kids [their] age” (ibid., p. 11). It is not a matter of aesthetic preferences but a sociological fact: one’s interest in music corresponds to one’s age, and part of being an adolescent is liking music.

Part of being an adolescent, according to Riesman, is also not being rebellious. While he does identify a “minority group” of teenagers that express some sort of rebelliousness by listening to more esoteric or unfashionable kinds of music, the majority is as conformist as can be, and the music they like only helps to enforce this conformism. The teenagers’ “loss of innocence”, writes Riesman, “has made them cynical, not rebellious; and they are seldom even interested in the techniques of their exploitation or its extent” (ibid., pp. 7-10).

The other text that I want to think about is a manifesto published the same year by French avant-gardists Le Front de la Jeunesse (“the front of youth”). This text puts forward the claim that all revolutions throughout history have failed because they did not take the oppression of the young into account, and that only a front of youth can serve as a truly revolutionary force (Le Front de la Jeunesse 1968). It calls for a revolution conducted by youth, carried out in the name of youth, and aimed at furthering the interests of youth. Unlike Riesman, Le Front do not care about music, but they do care about revolution. And for them, it is revolution, not music, that is young people’s business.

So in 1950 we have these two texts. One proclaims the unity of youth and music, the other of youth and rebellion. In a couple of years, all three will come together under the moniker of rock and roll, but I am not going to repeat the story of what happened there. Instead I would like to fast-forward to the 1980s, where the post-punk, “death of rock” atmosphere prompted some theorists to reconsider the question of youth, music and rebellion. This often included broadening the potential meanings of the concept of “youth” while denying its necessary relations to any young people. Thus, we encounter claims such as “rock and roll celebrates youth, not merely as a chronological measure but as a difference defined by the rejection of the boredom of the ‘straight’ world” (Grossberg 1990, p. 116) or a definition of youth as a “floating symbol denoting ‘modernity’” (Chambers 1985, p. 16). I find these statements interesting because they raise an important question: why is it so necessary to try and retain some sort of a conceptual relation between music and youth, even at the price of proclaiming that the concept of youth has nothing to do with actual, living young people? Riesman and Le Front had to go to some lengths to convince their readers that youth care about music or that they are rebellious, but neither of turned them into an abstract sign. Why must the connection between music, youth and rebellion be held at all costs?
THE GROWING-UP NARRATIVE

What I will try to suggest is that pop-rock’s relationship to youth is indeed abstract enough to exist without an actual audience of young people relating to it as “their music”, but this is because the discourse of pop-rock has adopted some of the narrative structures that make up the story of youth, both as a mythological construct and as a real-life, class-mediated experience. Thinking about pop-rock is always, in a way, thinking about youth.

Youth cultures, by definition, are temporally limited. They apply only to people of a specific age, and when they take on a rebellious or oppositional character it is usually framed as a specific period in a predetermined course of life (Frith 1981, pp. 210, 259). A rebellious spirit, much like an immersion in pop music, is acceptable as long as one is of a certain age, but eventually it must be left behind for the young person to become adult. The image of the rebellious youth who grows up and accepts reality “as it is” haunts music in several ways, and its corresponding dramatic structure is reflected in several patterns of thought about music.

The first site where we encounter this story – let’s call it the “growing-up narrative” – is in the discourse of authenticity and commercialisation. This discourse details a movement from a position of purity, honesty and inward-directed attentiveness to one’s “inner truth” towards a position of cynicism, opportunism and outward-directed submission to society’s pressures. It could apply to a single musician, band or genre, but its abstract structure remains the same. It corresponds both to a romantic conception of youth as a period of life characterised by total purity in opposition to the corrupt adult society, and to the material reality of middle and upper-class youth who are free to “explore themselves” during that period of life, with the family providing financial backing, before having to “settle down”, get a “real job” and make the necessary compromises required to continue living in the style they have been accustomed to since birth. The authenticity discourse shuns the process of “selling-out”, betraying the ideals of youth, but it also implicitly expects it, being familiar with the teleology of youth.

The second place where we can find the growing-up narrative is in the discourse of “maturity”, or “ripening”. Here, growing-up is understood as a positive change, as a movement towards higher levels of skill and sophistication. The tale is told like a bildungsroman – “the story of how young X, through trials and tribulations, grew up and became a real artist”. This, for example, is how the story of the “invention” of rock music is usually described, with the rowdy, vulgar rock and roll of the 1950s becoming the serious, artistic rock of the 1960s. It also reappears later with “progressive” rock – this is basically the meaning of the word “progressive” in the pop-rock discourse – or the attempted move from 1980s acid house music, allegedly made for drugged-up lower-class folks, to 1990s IDM, “intelligent dance music”.

So we have got two versions of the growing-up narrative – one wants to stick to youth and the other tries to shed it. However, both of them actually tell the same story, they just interpret it differently. And these two interpretations converge in a very interesting way, creating a third version of the story. This version is personified by the mythological figure of the musician who died young, and thus remains...
young forever. From Buddy Holly to Jimi Hendrix to Janis Joplin to Kurt Cobain to Biggie Smalls to Amy Winehouse, the dead youth is a focal figure of pop music. The level of obsession with the death of the young throughout pop-rock history is remarkable, and it would be easy to understand this obsession as part of the authenticity discourse – it is better to burn out than to fade away, isn’t it? – but the story is not that simple.

As Roy Shuker (2001, pp. 117-118) notes, many pop-rock musicians who died young were to be regarded after their death as “auteurs”, as “producers of rock art, extending the cultural form and, in the process, challenging their listeners”. This is an important claim, because it manages to retain the aesthetic and ethical values of both versions of the growing-up narrative – these musicians managed to grow up, become artists, create serious music, but also to stay forever young, never having to sell-out or commercialise. This is possible because pop-rock’s youth-centrism operates on two separate levels. Content-wise, the music or musician is expected to stay young – as in spontaneous, vital and creative – while on the formal level, there is a constant requirement to “grow up”, to make “mature” music, as serious as high art. These two levels can operate simultaneously only on the premise that a good musician is a dead musician.

The question of pop-rock’s politics cannot be easily disentangled from its bind with youth. The music’s “rebelliousness” is mediated by the particular concept of youth that emerged in the 1950s, and this equation always runs the risk of reducing any political potential that the music might have to the a-political concept of adolescent rebellion, while always expecting its “co-optation” or “incorporation”, since the young rebel, inevitably, has to either die or grow up. As a way to avoid this dead-end, I suggest that we should try replacing the figure of the youth with that of the child, by paying more attention to the music’s immanent becomings.

**Pop-rock and becoming-child**

The concept of “becoming” has been formulated by French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987). It describes the production of a set of connections between heterogeneous components. Becoming-child is not a regression to an infantile state, a nostalgic recollection of days gone by or a spiritual discovery of one’s “inner child”, but an entering into a certain sort of childlike relations, experimenting with a certain measure of childlike intensities (ibid., p. 294). Deleuze and Guattari identify becoming-child as one of the becomings associated with music (ibid., p. 248), and though they are more interested in dealing with “classical” music, I believe that becoming-child is also one of the defining traits of pop-rock music.

The rallying cry of early rock and roll, “awopbopaloobop alopbamboom”, from Little Richard’s 1955 single “Tutti Frutti”, later released on his *Here’s Little Richard* album (Specialty 1957), is plain and simple baby-talk. It is not the voice of disaffected youth but the becoming-child of Little Richard; who is, by the way, 178 cm. He’s “little” only in the sense of becoming-child. Ravers suck on pacifiers. It is not
because they are on drugs – they could chew bubblegum for the same effect. They suck on pacifiers because they are becoming-child through the mouth. Punks proclaim asexuality, they find sex disgusting. It is not another shock tactic – there is nothing really shocking about not having sex, is there? – it is a matter of becoming-child through the genitals.

Becoming-child, like the other becomings described by Deleuze and Guattari, means essentially becoming-minoritarian, both in relation to the majority of the regime and to the liberal concept of a personal, autonomous, stable identity (ibid., pp. 277, 291). It is a simultaneous critique of state fascism and micro-fascism. From this perspective, the discourse of youth culture and youth rebellion is a paranoid, majoritarian discourse: it portrays a ready-made struggle between two binary opposing forces, it erases differences of gender, race and class in the name of “youth”, it purports to offer some kind of rebellion or resistance, but only according to its set of predetermined regulations. Becoming-minoritarian, on the other hand, means producing lines of flight that have no teleology or linearity, that only act according to their own singularity. Pointing out pop-rock’s becomings might be more difficult than talking about “resistance” according to the well-known rules of adolescent rebellion, but as I see it, it also offers greater promise.

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ENDNOTES

1. My use of the term “pop-rock” is based on Motti Regev’s (2002, pp. 253-254) suggestion of it as an umbrella term for different styles and genres of popular music that share a certain set of creative practices, particularly “extensive use of electric and electronic instruments, sophisticated studio techniques of sound manipulation, and certain techniques of vocal delivery, mostly those signifying immediacy of expression and spontaneity”.

2. See also Simon Reynolds’ (1999, pp. 342-343) interesting discussion of the generational aspects of labels such as “progressive” or “intelligent” in electronic music.

REFERENCES


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Phonogram.


