The Seduction of Sound and the Disenchantment of the Word
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Since the late 1980s until approximately the first decade of this century, a plethora of works dedicated to decipher the relationships between music, identity and identification has enriched the congresses and publications focusing on popular music. Encouraged by the sociological and culturalist profile of Cultural Studies, in particular by the, then, new and influential reflections of Stuart Hall about the concept of identity (1996), popular music studies have made of this concept a fetish which has guided the developments and conclusions of a big number of research papers.

Before Hall deconstructed the concept of identity and postulated that it could only continue functioning “under erasure”, an idea which turned out to be especially attractive for those who were interested in the identification processes with music appeared from what Simon Frith called “the four most significant uses of pop” (1987). Within the framework of an extended interest in understanding how, why and who consumed the so-called pop music, Frith (1987) coined the expression “identification pleasure” –first “use”– to account for the emotional experience which a fan has when he or she identifies him or herself simultaneously with the music he or she loves, with the interpreter of that music and with those who share that identification with him or her.

More than three decades after being formulated, Frith’s disquisition about how pleasure and identifications are intertwined in the musical experience is still useful in order to consider that, on occasion, those identifications turn out to be unsuccessful.

In October 2018, Roger Waters gave a concert in the Allianz Park of the City of Sao Paulo, Brazil, as part of his Us+Them tour. During the concert, Waters included the name of Jair Bolsonaro, at that moment presidential candidate in Brazil, in a poster where several neo-fascist (sic) leaders appeared and openly expressed his opposition to Bolsonaro. To the surprise of many of those present, Waters himself included, the reaction to his expressions by a sector of the public was one of rejection, whereas another sector celebrated his declaration by shouting ele nao (not him), the slogan of Bolsonaro’s opponents. The episode was reported by major international news media –specialized and non-specialized- and had wide circulation on the Internet. The divergent reactions of the public to Roger Waters’s position occurred within the framework of a ferocious campaign orchestrated by neo-liberals, right-wing and extreme right groups, religious leaders and military people who, with fake news, invented judicial processes and diverse kinds of tricks to discredit the Partido dos Trabalhadores, convinced an important part of the Brazilian population that a xenophobic, racist, homophobic, militarist and sexist turn was the solution to all their evils.
What happened with the fans’ expectations at that concert? How did the “pleasure of identification” take place? How were pleasure and unpleasantness brought together with the interplay of identifications and non-identifications? It was to be expected that, as in almost all big rock events, at that one, the fans, delighted with their music, would be linked to it and to their idol through a sort of “affection saturation” (Grossberg 1992), would revive a state of affinity which Victor Turner (1991) very well described with the term “spontaneous communitas”. That is to say, it was to be expected that in front of their idol, their music and the complicity of their peers, the spectators would ritually evocate and revalidate an alliance of mutual correspondences and would immerse themselves in an intense experience of emotional union weakly linked to the outside world. However, that did not happen that night. At least in its initial formulation, the triple identification postulated by Simon Frith did not take place for any of those present.

Those who celebrated Roger Waters’ declarations saw their identification frustrated with a group of their peers who, by incarnating the discourse of the extreme right candidate, acquired for the first ones a pure otherness status. The “other”, invested and armed with the discourse of intolerance, a firm hand with criminals and disciplining, had transcended the streets space, television, Whatsapp messages and of other social networks, and now unexpectedly and illegitimately invaded and altered the familiarity of their own space. In turn, the fans who had booed the British musician saw their identification expectations doubly frustrated: it could not materialize either with their idol or with a sector of those who, the same as them, had gone to celebrate their music and perhaps also their condition as rockers and/or some other of the multiple and unstable existing identities. Probably, also for them, the safety and placidity of their own space had been threatened by the presence of an “other” who personified the political position contrary to Bolsonaro’s promises.

This brief interpretation of the case, based on theories held by popular music scholars between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, which, to my understanding, still have certain validity, raise some questions which deserve being answered through research work and which invite rethinking about the scope of those same theories. Perhaps the most significant of those questions is raised around the voices which disagreed with Roger Water’s expressions. To what extent did the lack of identification of the fans with their idol and their peers affect their emotional experience with “their” music? Could “the pleasure of identification” have taken place for those fans only with the sound aspect of the event? Could their bodies have enjoyed as they had until that moment with the music created and interpreted by a musician who in front of their faces flew the flags of their political opponents? Could the emotional experience have been split from political passions? Did the fans not know of Roger Waters’ previous manifestations about neo-fascist leaders? If the incident affected the emotional response of the fans, was this a momentary discomfort or a disenchantment which persisted after the concert? To what extent, in the field of music experiences, can pleasure remain associated to an object of desire which seduces with sound but disenchants with the word? Perhaps popular music scholars can help us answer these questions.
References