A RHETORICAL SCHEMA FOR STUDYING POPULAR MUSIC

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

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1998

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ABSTRACT

Popular music typically is not a subject matter of rhetorical studies, even though music creates a symbolic influence that fits under the category of the rhetorical. The need to understand the symbolic work of music—how music influences listeners, how it comes to be a site for sharing meaning and values, and how it works to produce new meanings from existing ones—guides this project. Review of music studies in the field of rhetoric revealed that such studies relied too heavily on the translation of musical data, ignoring the various contexts that play an important role in shaping the listening experience. My research question emerges from this exigence, asking, "What symbolic dimensions of music must be taken into account in a schema for conceptualizing and studying popular music as rhetoric?"

A review of literature in various fields that discuss popular music and its symbolic influence reveals that a schema that adequately conceptualizes popular music for rhetorical study requires a reconceptualization of text and context, allowing for a more complex appreciation of the dynamic nature of these elements. Music's symbolic influence can be explained only through a complex connection of text and context, a connection that goes beyond the simple notion that music works for its listeners by representing feelings or meanings and creates shared context by transmitting these representations. Interpretations,
ascriptions of meaning, and evaluations of taste are explainable by-reference to contexts that inform them but are not reducible to such reference. Studying music as rhetoric requires critics to explore a range of possible contexts and to demonstrate how such contexts become available to the listener and to the potential response to music.

The basic components of a rhetorical schema for studying popular music are illustrated and evaluated through application on a single text--"Rock Music," a song released in 1990 by the Pixies. Through application to this text, the schema was illustrated to be useful in explaining how various musical and non-musical contexts played a role in the critic's response to the text.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The irony in preparing a lengthy bit of research like a dissertation is that so much of the project is a lonely and autonomous act—writing—and yet effective writing and significant research are possible only to the extent they are social. In my best private moments of dissertating, my writing has been enhanced and informed by friends and colleagues who offered me direct feedback on my writing, who engaged me in discussions on the power and value of music, who helped me to work through the peculiarities of academic life and research and the writing process, and whose own work influenced, amazed, and inspired me.

I wish to acknowledge Sonja Foss, my friend and my adviser, for her patience with my seemingly endless re-focusing of my topic, for her thoughtful feedback and encouragement throughout the project, her caring efforts to acclimate me to the rituals and demands of academic research.

I thank Debian Marty, Sharon Varallo, and Raul Reis, my dissertation buddies, my friends, and my companions in the writing process. Thanks for helping me to accept the anxiety, tedium and compositional and noncompositional headaches and successes incurred in the dissertation processes. Thanks also to Alberto Ledesma for his encouragement and perspective on the writing and research process.

Thanks to all my dissertation committee members and readers, including Dale Brashears, Brenda Brueggemann, Graeme Boone, and
especially Mary Garrett, whose thoughtful comments provided me with issues to think about long after this document is bound.

Personal thanks go also to Jim Howley, my close friend for over ten years, and fellow new doctorate without whom I never would have thought it possible, nor desirable, to take this career path; to Ashwini Tambe, who encouraged me to explore the critical implications of my research while not abandoning the joys of listening, and who showed me how to balance the stresses of life with the cultivation of good living; to my mother, for her nonjudgmental acceptance of my alternative career path, and to my family, for their financial support throughout my graduate years. Thanks also to Jenny Prey, Maureen Brown, Kellie Hay, Jeff Sens, Lisa Tomiyama, Victor Van Buchem and the many other good friends who ran my errands, listened to me complain, and provided me with—among other things—distraction, encouragement, and a place to stay.

And finally, thanks to Black Francis, aka Charles Thompson, for inspiring me with his carefully crafted incoherence.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Rhetorical scholarship since the 1960s increasingly has expanded its purview to include symbolic influences and artifacts beyond the traditional category of speech. Such diverse artifacts as monuments (Haines, 1986; Foss, 1986); visual arts (Reid-Nash, 1990; Foss, 1988; McKerrow, 1993); and film (Rushing & Frentz, 1980; Rushing, 1983; Brummett, 1985) have been the subject of rhetorical research in recent years, owing to a recognition that symbolic influence frequently can be attributed to “the non-discursive as well as the discursive, the non-verbal as well as the verbal, the event or transaction which is unintentionally as well as intentionally suasive” (“Report,” 1971, p. 221). Works of art, war memorials, television, and other cultural artifacts have become interesting to rhetorical critics not despite their unusual (to rhetorical theory) modalities and contexts but because of them.

Broadly defined as musical objects through which beliefs and practices are experienced (Mukerji & Schudson, 1991), popular music is a cultural form that bears particular promise for rhetorical study. Rhetoric historically has been concerned with the use and influence of symbols in social interaction, so popular music provides rhetorical
scholars with an opportunity to extend rhetorical theory to include a more diverse range of contemporary symbolic practices.

Music affects people in a variety of ways that fall into the category of the symbolic or the rhetorical. Lewis (1992) provides a few examples of these rhetorical influences. A "golden oldie," he says, easily can " evoke a whole time and place, distant feelings and emotions, and memories of where we were, and with whom, the first time we heard the song" (1992, p. 135). Music can serve as a more provocative influence, as well, when it functions as "a rallying cry" or a call to arms for social movements. It also can be representative, "a badge of identity--a means of showing others (and ourselves) to what cultural group, or groups, we belong or aspire to belong" (Lewis, p. 135).

Further, music is pervasive in modern society, touching people's lives in myriad ways. As Lull (1992) attests:

Music is a unique form of symbolic expression that can exist alone as a cultural event or product (concert, street performance, private singing and playing, records, tapes, compact discs, and so on); serve as the content focus for another medium (radio, music video, some movies) or contribute to overall aesthetics and meaning of another context display (background music for television and film, accompaniment for rituals such as church services . . .). It is the soundtrack for shopping, driving, studying, and partying. (p. 19)

Because musical symbols intersect so many experiences, they play an important role in defining these situations and how people think of and act in them. Just as the musical accompaniment to film images can shape the way audiences interpret the scene, the musical accompaniment to everyday life can shape experiences and attitudes.

Perhaps the most powerful of music's symbolic influences is this capacity to shape one's experiences--forging new meanings or new
symbolic relationships from existing ones. Frith (1981) describes this process, which semiotologist Barthes calls *significance*, in this way:

Barthes argues that what is involved in musical pleasure is not significance but *significance*--the work of signification; our joyous response to music is a response not to meanings but to the makings of meanings, and *jouissance*, like sexual pleasure, involves self-abandonment, as the terms we usually use to construct and hold ourselves together suddenly seem to float free. (pp. 164-165)

Frith uses Elvis Presley to illustrate the concept of significance. Elvis’s music "was thrilling," he writes, "because it dissolved the signs that had previously put adolescence together. He celebrated--more sensually, more voluptuously than any other rock ‘n’ roll singer--the act of symbol creation itself" (1981, pp. 163-164). Elvis’s music dissolved the symbols of "conformity, restraint, and limits" that previously had constituted adolescence, replacing them with a new kind of "freedom" (Marcus, 1993, p. 211). His music became important, symbolically, because it reorganized the received meanings of youth.

Another example can serve to illustrate *significance*, the idea that music creates new symbols as well as reflecting and representing values. Research on the punk-rock phenomenon demonstrates how punk created a "shock effect" that challenged pop and rock conventions of "romance, beauty, and ease" (Frith, 1986, p. 75), as well as social conventions associated with appropriate behavior. Punk music violated norms of performance, composition, and style; the lyrics deconstructed social relations, advancing messages of anarchy and violence. Punk vocals eschewed established Western standards of harmonics and training, offering instead a distinctively working-class voice.
Critical responses to punk illustrate a range of conclusions about the value of punk's symbolic transgressions. Bayles (1994) criticized the punk effect on popular music, arguing that its "anarchistic, nihilistic impulses . . . have been grafted onto popular music, where they have not only undermined the afro-american tradition, but also encouraged today's cult of obscenity, brutality, and sonic abuse" (p. 12). Rock critic Lester Bangs (1987) cited punk's aggression and minimism and the way these qualities served to excise the "boring and bloated" classic rock of the 1970s. Scholars such as Marcus (1992), Laing (1985), and Hebdige (1979) cited punk's revolutionary aesthetic and its avant-garde challenge to class, capitalism, and consciousness.

That a relatively narrow collection of symbols can trigger the resources of competing value structures, producing effects simultaneously understood as profane and profound, illustrates that musical symbols harbor a potential for influence, fraught with complexity and not reducible to a musicological component. More than a representation of culture, musical symbols possess the power to reach people at the deepest levels at which their values are constructed and expressed; music plays a role in constructing culture. Or, as Frith (1995) puts it, music not only represents values but also "in performance . . . produces them" (270) from other components of culture and value.

When musical forms exhibit the power to structure experience, calling into question accepted cultural values and expectations, they can be said to operate within the realm of doxa, placing music more squarely under the purview of rhetoric. Doxa refers to interested
common opinion or the "taken-for-granted rules of society" that provide the building blocks or premises in which all discourse and all nondiscursive communication are grounded (McGee, 1990). Doxa includes the assumptions communicators employ and to which they respond in forming discourse. It is the common opinion that generally is acceptable to all members of a given society but usually is not stated, remaining at the level of presumption.

Hariman adds to this standard interpretation of doxa, suggesting that it also can be thought of as "reputation" or "regard" (Hariman, 1986, p. 48), basic assumptions about the relative value, merit, or status of persons, ideas, or kinds of discourse. Since doxa exists at a level of assumption and typically goes unstated (until called into question), this concept is useful as a way to include popular music and its symbolic influences under the banner of rhetoric. Formed out of doxa, musical communication makes "claims" for its own relative merit by drawing upon the various acceptable means of musical practice and, in some cases, by violating them to create new symbolic relationships.

Frith’s Elvis Presley exemplar demonstrates how popular music functions symbolically to call unstated cultural commonplaces into question. By dissolving existing cultural symbols that define adolescence, Elvis’s music dissolved the very cultural values--doxa--that gave adolescence its meaning. Likewise, punk embodied performance styles that commented on accepted social and musical mores, calling the standard practices of bourgeois style, art, and thought into question; consequently, punk created symbolic influence by challenging the doxa of
1970s' British capitalist society. In these ways, music created new symbols from existing ones by calling existing cultural values into grievance, by challenging doxa.

Popular music, then, is an important artifact for rhetorical study because its symbolic influence strikes deeply at cultural values and meanings. Popular music should be of interest to rhetorical scholars because, as these examples demonstrate, the musical symbols created in the popular culture context are connected to the struggle over meaning and values that characterize a rhetorical culture. Rhetoric's currency as an intellectual tradition depends in part upon its continued capacity to develop explanation, interpretation, and understanding of the broad range of symbolic practice--including popular culture and popular music--in which cultural values are expressed, contested, and integrated.

The problem facing rhetorical scholars who study music is apparent, as well, in these examples. The symbolic work of musical symbols is subtle and unconscious; thus, unlike verbal discourse, musical rhetoric is not easily conceived and studied as rhetoric or even as music. "The music of one's own culture seems completely transparent," explain McClary and Walser (1990). "Music appears to create its effects directly, without any mediation whatsoever" (p. 278). The problem facing rhetorical critics is conceptualizing music in such a way so as to call attention to the "transparent" mediations of music.

The problem of identifying music's mediations can be treated as a question of data. Since music's influence operates at levels beyond the purely musicological, the data explored by critics must also go beyond musicological categories and into categories that reflect what happens
in the listening experience. This study is motivated largely by my own continued attempts to understand my response to a single musical text— "Rock Music" by the post-punk band, the Pixies—in terms that include but go beyond the musicological experience. My response to this song is intriguing because I have read so much into it—it has become pivotal for me as an argument about what rock and roll is and what it is supposed to be. Yet the music can hardly be reduced to a direct representation of this idea.

Since I have been making the case that music is a cultural phenomenon that rhetoricians should be studying, I will proceed by examining how rhetoricians have dealt with popular music and suggesting directions for future work. My first step is to review literature in rhetoric that addresses popular music.

Review of Literature

Critics have begun to explore music's rhetorical dimensions, but existing research has not yet developed a coherent critical orientation toward the study of popular music, mainly because rhetorical studies have not provided ways of conceptualizing popular music in all its complexity. The data of these studies are limited, retaining a traditional bias toward linguistic symbols—song lyrics. In cases when the object of criticism has been shifted to aspects of musical score, rhetoricians have made greater strides, developing tools that adequately translate musical symbols. These studies, however, tend to emphasize translation of musical data at the expense of contextual influences on the symbolic potential of musical form. My evaluation of this literature suggests that the inclusion of contextual factors is a
necessary part of the process of understanding the symbolic dimensions of musical form.

Rhetorical critics who have studied popular music have explored a fairly limited range of music's symbolic dimensions. A good number of rhetorical studies of "music" in communication journals are, in actuality, no more than analyses of song lyrics, using conventional rhetorical starting points such as discovery of the themes present in protest songs. The rhetorical nature of music, as demonstrated in these studies, centers on its ability to transmit "messages" to passive audiences.

For example, Mohrmann and Scott (1976) cluster World War II songs based on content of the lyrics, finding that the song lyrics "projected the values of the culture" but that the "effective range of communication seems inherently limited, confined to the reinforcement of existing predisposition" (p. 155). Knupp's (1981) content analysis of protest songs demonstrates that protest music is "simplistic" and "expressive," relying "pre-eminently [on] in-group messages designed to reinforce feelings of solidarity" (p. 377).

Roth (1981) analyzes song lyrics used by characters in John Ford films; Carter (1980), Gregg (1971), and Kosokoff and Carmichael (1970) study the lyrics of protest songs in the labor movement. In these studies, researchers reach conclusions about the capacity of songs to create "identification," serve as "rallying points," constitute self, and change attitudes, all without attention to any aspect of the songs besides their lyrical content.
The lyrical bias in such studies is to be expected, perhaps, since rhetorical theory long has emphasized the strategic use of words in communication forms such as public address and composition. Confronted with the task of analyzing a complex communicative phenomenon like popular music, someone trained in the use of language is likely to turn first to the lyrical component. And, certainly, song lyrics are significant objects of study. However, the bias toward song lyrics provides a limited understanding of the broad symbolic import of music. A reliance on "codification of lyrics and statistical interpretations of categories can produce only certain kinds of understanding" (Rein & Springer, 1986, p. 252). Missing in these studies is an understanding of musical elements that provide a symbolic influence equal to and perhaps greater than the lyrical ones.

In response to the bias toward song lyrics, a number of rhetorical scholars have begun the task of developing rhetorical approaches to musical form (e.g., Gonzalez & Makay, 1983; Sellnow & Sellnow, 1993; Beebee, 1991; Francesconi, 1986; Rasmussen, 1994; and Holmberg, 1985). But critics who attempt to apply rhetorical concepts to musical form face the imposing task of describing musical phenomena. Sellnow and Sellnow (1993) discuss the difficulties inherent in this process:

This type of analysis poses serious obstacles, particularly for rhetorical critics in communication, due to limitations of journal article form. Specifically, rhetorical critics choosing to study the communicative potential of music must translate nondiscursive symbols into discursive written form. Translation among symbol systems is always difficult . . . . Musical analyses, however, become an even greater challenge for rhetorical critics because of music's nondiscursive nature. (p. 88)
The lack of tools for translating musical phenomena to linguistic concepts is an obstacle to the critical analysis of musical communication because it creates an added burden, obliging researchers to render musical data in non-musical forms. By way of comparison, this step is not necessary in conventional public address research, where critics need only provide transcripts to demonstrate symbolic components of speech texts.

Critics have addressed the translation problem by developing categories that describe musical form and its rhetorical dimensions. Quite common is the use of such methods as notational analysis and chord-progression charts, as well as identification of such elements as harmony, tempo, rhythm, and melody, all of which enable critics to discuss qualities of musical form. Holmberg's analysis of the song "Dixie," for example, concludes that the song "is a convincing rhetorical artifact because its music touches the spirit in numerous, well-crafted ways [such as] [m]elodic structure, chord progression, harmonic fluctuation, and dissonance, rhythm, and instrumentation" (1985, p. 80).

But use of musical categories alone does not provide a means of evaluating the symbolic dimensions of sound. Notational analysis is descriptive; it does not provide a means by which to evaluate the rhetorical effectiveness of the music. As a result, analyses like Holmberg's seem destined to conclude that music "works" when it can be fit easily into notational categories--when it is most conventional. Further, if music is reduced to its notational representation according to standard notational methods, the very qualities that can make it
unconventional—qualities that cannot be transcribed notationally—are systematically eliminated from the analysis.

For notation to be effective in rhetorical studies of music, its use must be supported by concepts that reveal the symbolic and rhetorical dimensions of musical form—the qualities that shape the construction of values and meaning. Examples of research that adopt this strategy include the work of Sellnow and Sellnow (1993), who draw from Langer’s work to argue that “musical score can communicate by symbolizing the patterns of intensity and release which are embodied in the forms of human feeling” (p. 88). Sellnow and Sellnow apply this notion of form to aspects of musical score in John Corigliano’s Symphony No. 1, showing how the musical score inspires emotions that advance the artist’s accompanying verbal argument (Corigliano wrote the symphony as a memorial for friends who had died of AIDS). They conclude that music can “inspire emotions in audiences, but those emotions must be grounded in existing values or attitudes” (p. 100); only in that way can such emotions advance arguments by serving as enthymematic premises.

In another example, Gonzalez and Makay (1983) employ “rhetorical ascription” to explain the process by which both lyrical and musical elements in Bob Dylan’s songs function to create appeal for audiences. Ascription, they say, refers to the process by which “communicators impute meanings to things and experiences and then express the meanings through symbolic processes” (p. 4). In other words, the structures of verse and music trigger meanings in part by referring to familiar structures in other songs, thus inviting appeal by association. Their analysis shows how ascriptive relationships in lyrics and chord
progressions create connections between Dylan’s Christian music and his earlier secular music.

On a whole, the literature concerned with translation provides solutions to various problems of translating musical objects to discourse suitable for criticism. But emphasis on translation leads to two notable weaknesses in exploring symbolic dimensions not accounted for by the translation tool: Translation is symptomatic of a tendency to ignore context in favor of textual analysis, and translation limits critics to what the translation device reveals.

The first problem with translating music as the primary function of rhetorical criticism is that this process eliminates significant aspects of context that play a role in how music influences. Translation methods take the critic more deeply into the text, which potentially eliminates the social and cultural context from consideration. As a result, critics may presume what the cultural mediations are rather than discovering them through critical analysis. Translation is a starting point for analysis, but, too often, it is also an ending point of rhetorical study that leaves to presumption the discovery of new knowledge about rhetorical processes.

The second problem grows out of the first: Often, translation becomes its own goal in rhetorical studies of music, reifying data categories rather than exploring rhetorical processes by which audiences make sense of musical symbols. In other words, when researchers make translation a central part of analysis, they are less inclined to develop explanations for how the peculiar qualities of a piece of music enter its auditors’ consciousness. This is especially problematic when
dealing with popular music because it often gains appeal when it is
described in unique ways into people’s lives.

In the two examples of research provided above, categories such as
musical score, ascription, enthneme, and symbolic form reflect
assumptions about the way the audience interacts with the musical text.
None of these categories, nor their application, is inherently
problematic. But their use results in critical studies that serve
primarily to confirm categories of analysis rather than to develop a
fresh approach to how musical symbols work. Overreliance on translation
does not allow for exploration of the range of possibilities for music’s
symbolic influence. Middleton (1990) addresses this problem when he
writes: “It takes a considerable act of sociological sympathy to grasp
that other listeners may actually hear different things, or hear them in
different relationships” (pp. 104-105).

Since rhetoric historically emphasizes claims capable of being
argued concerning things that appear to be the case, rather than
“truths” to be demonstrated in discourse, rhetorical studies of music
would be better suited to approaches that treat translation as a problem
to be solved through the work of analysis rather than as application of
data categories to phenomena. Rhetorical scholars of music need to
question the methods of translation themselves, considering how the
researcher came to know the music through the translation of data.

For the rhetorical study of music to be effective in discovering
how music goes about producing influence, meanings, and values, it must
recognize that music gains some of its symbolic effect by its relation
to other songs, genres, and styles and to the situations in which it is
consumed. Gonzalez and Makay provide an example of how this context can be conceptualized as they presuppose this relationship in their comparison of Dylan’s later music to his earlier music. Rhetorical ascription, in their schema, includes the idea that music gains meaning in part due to its invocation of associations of similar music.

Two other studies move in the direction of a deeper evaluation of context, adopting what can be described as a structural view of musical influence and meaning. Gonzalez (1992) goes beyond musical data to focus on his perception of the ideal audience for Dylan’s album, Blood on the Tracks. Dylan’s music, he writes, “enscribes (sic!) a ‘culture class’ attracted to Dylan’s musical/lyrical treatment of the conventional rock myths about disaffection and mystery, sexual fulfillment, and victimage” (p. 309). The term culture class is derived from the work of Lewis (1992) and Bordieu (1985) and refers to the notion that “cultural/ideological perspectives are sustained and reflected in musical forms . . . As rhetor, Dylan transforms the common experience of the culture class by creating moments that seek identification” (Gonzalez, p. 309).

The textual analysis in Gonzalez’ study is based, in part, upon the most likely audience for the work; thus, he is able to link his close reading of musical score and lyrical content with the immediate cultural context in which the messages are received. Gonzalez’ work on the culture class constructed through Dylan’s album enables him to demonstrate that the “songs [are] influenced by, and a symbolic resource for a culture class identifiable by . . . a particular set of values and expectations in Blood on the Tracks.” In other words, the meaning of
Dylan's music is given weight by the context in which it makes most sense--the "culture class" that shares Dylan's ideological and aesthetic presumptions.

Another study that considers the contextual implications of musical form is Francesconi's (1986) work on the role of jazz in the black nationalism movement. In this study, Francesconi focuses on the cultural-aesthetic influence of jazz, adopting "a dialectical perspective on form" that enables him to study elements of the cultural context that informs its production. The relevant contexts are African and European musical influences that are "dialectical in nature when applied to qualities of style seen in opposition to one another. This dialectical confrontation of stylistic qualities provides the contextual background setting the stage for rhetorical uses of style" (pp. 38-39).

Francesconi uses the African-European dialectic as a way to gain insights into musical dimensions of jazz he determines to be "rhetorical": "melody, harmony, nature of the instrumental source, and rhythm" (p. 38). As opposed to approaches in which rhetorical study amounts to explanation of what makes various musical dimensions conventional--and thereby rhetorical--here, music achieves its rhetorical status through the violation of convention. Francesconi demonstrates how certain musical dimensions gain their significance through transgression of conventions associated with the European and African tradition. Thus, the rhetoric of free jazz depends on the interaction of these two cultural contexts: "Without the European-African dialectical tension as a visible part of jazz history, it would be impossible to discuss the rhetoric of free jazz. . . . The recurrent
domination of one or the other terms of that dialectic provides the point of stylistic comparison for jazz audiences* (p. 46).

Application of structural and contextual factors in these studies moves rhetorical research on music outside the text itself as the privileged site of analysis, away from what Hart (1975) refers to as translation fallacy. The introduction of concepts such as context, dialectic, and culture class enables rhetorical scholars to expand their studies to include non-text-based categories of analysis that can shed light on the rhetorical function of musical symbols. In other words, rhetorical scholars, in their attempts to understand better the symbolic uses of music, have tended to focus more exclusively on musical texts in order to learn what those uses are. In response, studies such as those by Francesconi and Gonzalez suggest a need to move outside the text in order to understand the context in which such symbols become meaningful.

Problem Statement

Existing rhetorical research on popular music provides a number of ways to translate musical forms into rhetorical data, demonstrating how music represents meaning, emotion, or culture. When studies proceed from preconceived assumptions about the rhetorical process, however, they tend not to be successful in developing new understanding about how the symbolic work of music actually takes place. If the rhetorical dimensions of music are to be understood in all their complexity, a rhetorical approach must not be limited to translation; it must explore the conditions that make translations of all sorts possible in different situations. It must take into account data categories that not only represent musical sounds but their uses as well.
Since rhetoric historically has been concerned with the contingent, with things that can be otherwise, the unproblematized application of categories to phenomena is almost anti-rhetorical. A rhetorical orientation to the study of music needs to go beyond the typical goal of applying data categories to musical phenomena; it must divine the spirit of rhetoric by seeking out explanations for how translation may occur in various situations, given the peculiar qualities of a musical symbol-system and its likely (ideal?) audience.

Instead of translating music with prescribed forms of representation, rhetoricians should be investigating translation itself, asking how rhetorical methods and other methods of studying music and culture can be used to develop understanding of music grounded in the actual consumption process.

My purpose in this study is to synthesize and extend existing research on popular music as a symbolic phenomenon in order to develop a rhetorical orientation to the study of music that is specific enough to be useful to other rhetorical scholars yet general enough to account for a wide range of music’s symbolic dimensions. The question governing my study is, “What symbolic dimensions of music must be taken into account in a schema for conceptualizing and studying popular music as rhetoric?”

My response to this question will bring together rhetorical studies of music along with work in musicology, sociology, aesthetics, and cultural studies that helps answer the research question. My aim is to evaluate and synthesize this research in order to build a coherent theoretical understanding of the rhetorical dimensions of musical symbols.
By reviewing the ways in which musical symbols have been conceived and studied, I intend to develop a schema that integrates and extends existing research both within and outside of rhetorical studies. Such a schema is needed because rhetorical studies tend to take rhetorical theory and apply it to music, for better or worse, without incorporating much work from outside of rhetoric (which is not surprising because this work is fragmented among many fields, including sociology, cultural studies, aesthetics, literary theory, semiotics, political economy, and musicology). Rhetorical studies also tend to be idiosyncratic, starting almost from scratch rather than building on previous works. A need exists to synthesize rhetorical work on music as well as to integrate other approaches that offer insight into the rhetorical dimensions of music.

Before describing the method and data I used for completing this study, I will define the two key areas connected by this study—popular music and rhetoric—and my orientation toward them. Settling on a definition of popular music is a task complicated by opposing political implications of what makes culture "popular." Shuker (1994) describes two competing notions of this term:

For some it means simply appealing to the people, whereas for others it means something much more grounded in or "of" the people. The former usage generally refers to commercially produced forms of popular culture, while the latter is reserved for forms of "folk" popular culture, associated with local community-based production and individual craftspeople. (p. 3)

This distinction, says Shuker, is artificial and does not adequately account for the current state of popular music. In capitalist societies, commercial interests significantly affect popular music,
whether music is primarily a product of those interests or a force that stands in opposition to them. Thus, definitions that do not include both senses of “the popular” risk becoming either too cynical or too romantic, depending on their particular slant.

In order to encompass competing notions about what constitutes the popular, I prefer to work with a pragmatic notion of popular music. To suggest that all music is popular music because all music is used by people may be so obvious a statement as to appear trite. Another way to approach the definitional question would be to understand popular music as musical forms and practices that are given significance through their popular expression and use in particular discursive formations. Frith (1995) employs such a pragmatic approach, identifying competing discursive formations—collections of musical and social rules, norms, codes, and expectations—within which music is created, performed, experienced, and given meaning. The following chapter explores the nature of these formations with more detail and demonstrates how they apply to a rhetorical understanding of music.

This definition meshes well with the rhetorical focus of this study because of its assumption that music represents a site of struggle over cultural meaning. Music’s symbolic force operates within social structures of meaning and power and to understand music as symbolic action—as discourse—requires an understanding of the social formations that structure it. Discursive formations are not incompatible with either of the general views of the popular expressed above and are potentially revealing as to the nature of the popular in a given case and how the nature of the popular is formed.
Rhetoric can be defined in many ways, and for the purposes of this study, I have selected a definition that helps to shed light on the difficulties of defining the nature of the popular. I will operate with a definition adapted from Brummett (1994) and Foss (1989), who define rhetoric, respectively, as, “The ways in which signs influence people” (Brummett, p. 4) and “the use of symbols to influence thought and action” (Foss, p. 4). “The term signs,” says Brummett, “refers to the countless meaningful items, images, and so on that surround us” (p. 4). Although signs induce meaning in various ways (i.e., iconically, indexically), I am most concerned with the symbolic dimension of signs. Symbols are suggestive—they can lead people to a number of different kinds of meanings, and they attain whatever meanings they possess through convention or agreement. Because symbolic meanings are contested and changeable—“sites of struggle”—the term symbol represents a dynamic focus for rhetorical study of popular music and its discursive formations. Rhetoric, in this study, will refer to the way that symbols influence people.

The term influence is broad, but I qualify its use by connecting it to the term symbol. In the case of music, influence may refer to a variety of ways in which people are affected by sound; physiologically, sound waves produce effects upon the eardrum or produce vibrations elsewhere in the body. The effects of music on the body also may include increasing adrenaline (such as when dancing at a nightclub), producing headaches (particularly when the music is too loud and not appreciated by the listener), or inducing sleep (at opportune and inopportune times). Music, of course, also may induce emotional or
psychological effects. All of these potential influences of music are significant to musical experience, but the ones that interest me are the ones that take on a symbolic dimension. Thus, the influences of music on which I will focus are those that produce, influence, change, or inspire meaning. In other words, music's symbolic influence refers to the role played by musical phenomena in affecting human perception, thought, and action through the management of meaning.

In a broad sense, the meaning of music could include actual semantic meanings that are derived from it but also could refer to music's personal or cultural significance or to any way in which it can be valued by listeners. For example, at an aesthetic level, music provides a source of pleasure and a medium for creative, artistic expression. At this level, music may be enjoyed without directly contributing to any sense of meaning. The aesthetic contributes to the rhetorical dimension, however, when meaning is attributed to or induced by aesthetic elements--when someone attributes meaning to the artist's expression, for example. So I do not limit the meaning of music to a semantic dimension; instead, I view meaning as an open concept--as any result of symbolic exchange.

The potential for rhetoric as an approach to popular music lies in its tradition of theorizing how audiences make sense of and interpret texts. Brumnett (1995) describes this interpretive function of rhetorical theory and criticism:

A rhetorical theory is a form, pattern, or recipe, a statement in the abstract, of how a person might experience a rhetorical transaction. . . . A rhetorical criticism in support of theory is an illustration of how such a theory might in fact have guided rhetorical experience in one particular instance. (p. 658)
Brummett’s description suggests a role for rhetoric in theorizing audiences’ interpretive practices. The rhetorical study of musical symbols involves explication of processes by which music comes to be symbolic—how symbols come to make sense for people, how they provide ground over which to contest meaning, how they develop their shared social meanings, and how these meanings work influence.

The rhetorical approach suggested by Brummett is useful in the study of music because it helps rhetorical scholars move beyond some of the problems encountered in certain examples of rhetorical criticism of music. The assumption that musical symbols create meaning primarily through representation and transmission of messages closes rhetorical study off from the theorizing of audiences’ interpretations of musical symbols. In order to reconceptualize rhetorical theory to be inclusive of musical symbols, critics should not begin with the presumption that symbols produce meaning in consistent and unremarkable ways. Instead, critics should follow the kind of model Brummett describes, attending to music with the idea of building abstract statements about how music works in rhetorical transactions. Criticism, then, can work toward the goal of developing theory that describes the diverse processes by which musical symbols create influence.

Method

My method was inductive rhetorical analysis, governed by the research question, “What symbolic dimensions of music must be taken into account in a schema for conceptualizing and studying popular music as rhetoric?” The study proceeded in two stages—examination of literature and analysis of musical texts.
Data and Procedures

Two kinds of data were examined in order to answer the research question that guided the study. The first set of data consisted of theoretical and critical writing about rhetoric and music, including rhetorical studies of music as well as studies from the areas of musicology, popular culture, and aesthetics. In selecting data from these areas, I emphasized studies of music that contributed to an understanding of music's symbolic influence in the listening context. For example, the field of musicology contributes extensive theoretical research that serves the primary purpose of describing music's formal features and their aesthetic or historic significance. In reviewing the literature of musicology, I emphasized work that offers ways of conceptualizing the audience's response to musical form rather than work that makes judgments about the quality of the form.

My initial step involved dividing research into several categories, reflecting different kinds of perspectives on music. This was helpful in developing a broad conceptual understanding of what approaches to music are possible, as well as an understanding of their relative merits. This organization ultimately was not satisfactory, however, because it did not allow me to integrate concepts and data categories, which is one of the needs driving my study.

In order to integrate better the different concepts and approaches that I had discovered, I re-framed my treatment of the literature, organizing it into two groups of studies representing two broad orientations to music's symbolic influence. The first orientation consists of those studies that locate symbolic influence primarily in
musical form; the second orientation includes studies that locate symbolic influence in social conditions and collectives.

After developing this orientation, I looked into each set of studies for ideas that would help me develop a rhetorical approach. In the section on form, my criterion was how well these concepts and methods conceptualized form in terms of the listener’s experience with music. After reviewing the literature in the form section, I concluded that most of the concepts I reviewed were acceptable in one way or another and could be useful to rhetoric. After discussing these concepts, then, my task was not so much to choose from among them but to point out some commonalities and how those common points would contribute to my general conceptualization of a musical rhetoric.

In the second section on social factors, I used my experience with the literature on form to develop slightly different criteria for how to judge the usefulness of the literature. In this section, I sought to discover the extent of the influence in each of the cases. This section reads as more of an analysis of competing positions than as a collection of various tools and devices.

I synthesized my findings in these two sections to develop a general sense of how music works as rhetoric. The literature review helped me to see in what ways existing work on music’s symbolic dimension could be extended to integrate the efficacy of form and context. Next, I used rhetorical resources to help me articulate a position on how the rhetorical dimension of music could be conceptualized and studied by critics. This position is a coherent rhetorical schema for studying popular music, an approach that allows
for integration of various concepts and processes discussed in the literature review.

After developing the schema, I tested it by using it in rhetorical criticism of a musical text—"Rock Music" by the Pixies. For the sake of continuity, the justification for this particular application is discussed in Chapter Four, after presentation of the schema.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter One of this dissertation includes an introduction and problem statement, along with a description of the data and method used in the study. Chapter Two is a synthesis and evaluation of literature on popular music, divided into two sections—musical form and social contexts in which music is situated. Chapter Three is the articulation of a rhetorical schema for studying music. Chapter Four is an illustration of how the schema can be used in rhetorical criticism, organized around examination of my response to a single musical text, "Rock Music" by the Pixies. Chapter Five concludes the study with examination of its limitations, an assessment of how the schema worked and how it can work in future research, its implications for the study of popular music, and its implications for rhetorical theory and criticism.
CHAPTER 2

MUSICAL FORM AND CONTEXT

The purpose of this chapter is to review studies that offer potential contributions to a rhetorical approach for studying popular music. I narrow the literature on popular music by emphasizing ways of conceptualizing and studying music that contribute to my general orientation to rhetoric, as described in Chapter One. Specifically, I emphasize the problems and issues associated with conceptualizing, experiencing, and criticizing musical form as a symbolic process. My emphasis on rhetoric as process—how discourse works in the world—leads me to focus on the consumption—rather than production—end of the musical communicative exchange. Rhetoric, from this perspective, is concerned with how the nature of musical form creates symbolic influence and with the complex of social and cultural factors that contribute to this influence.

A rhetorical approach to music addresses a set of questions that do not necessarily circumvent, replace, or ignore other approaches to music to which I refer in this chapter. Rather, I seek to extend other approaches that treat musical form as symbolic, thus contributing to the development of popular music as a field of study. To accomplish these tasks, I situate a rhetorical approach within existing knowledge of
music's symbolic nature. Thus, a rhetorical approach becomes something of a figure against the field of the study of popular music—not a last word on music's nature or an ideal approach to studying music. Instead, a rhetorical approach contributes ways of studying the relationships among musical text, audience, and society.

I am interested in the listening experience as a symbolic, rhetorical process, and I am trying to understand how to translate musical form in all the complexity implied by its placement in the listening experience. In other words, my concern is with what is available in musical form for perception of meaning by the listener. Thus, in the first part of this chapter—"Translation and Representation of Musical Form"—I explore various ways that popular music scholars have conceptualized musical form. I evaluate the usefulness of these concepts and approaches by asking how their translations of form reflect the listening process and what they contribute to a rhetorical schema that captures the complexity of the listening situation.

In the second part of the chapter—"Musical Form and Social Relations"—I explore the complex social and cultural relations in which the listening process is embedded and from which meanings emerge. My criterion for evaluating the concepts and approaches in this section is the extent and type of influence provided by social explanations of musical form in the listening experience. Thus, in this section, I will review literature that suggests ways to ground musical rhetoric in the listening experience. The result of my review is the organization of constructs—new and borrowed—that address rhetorical issues arising in this literature.
Translation and Representation of Musical Form

Before any treatment of popular music’s influence, symbolic or otherwise, can be developed, the critic must deal with a significant obstacle--translating music into specific verbal constructs. Much has been made about the difficulties inherent in rendering musical forms in spoken or written language. The complexities of the phenomenon lead to music’s seeming ineffability, even as these same qualities produce an aural dimension that is comprehensible and in many ways meaningful for listeners. McClary and Walser (1990) describe some of these complexities in pointing out that music

relies on events and inflections occurring on many interdependent levels (melody, rhythm, harmony, timbre, texture, etc.) simultaneously. Each of these has something of a syntactical dimension--a grammar of expectations, normal continuity, etc.--and also a wide-open semiotic dimension that can make us think we hear sincere remorse or bad-ass sassiness, that can produce the image of “the authentic working-class hero” or “the virginal slut.” (McClary & Walser, p. 278)

Writing about music challenges the critic not only to make conceptual sense of the aesthetic ‘events and inflections’ that comprise musical expression but also to develop ways of exploring the semiotic and rhetorical dimension where meanings and values are put into play by the aesthetic elements. Thus, the choice of proper data itself (melody or attitude? timbre or sexuality?) is implicated in the representation/translation question.

Translating music means to represent musical “data” using verbal constructs, but such representations implicitly represent the physical and cultural experience with music as well. Music is an abstract form “which we absorb into our bodies and into our consciousness” (Frith,
1987, p. 135); thus, any translation of musical form will come to represent a way of experiencing music and not just the musical notes and performances themselves. Musical representations are very much indicative of a way of listening to music, telling us as much about the ideological predilections of the translation method as about the music being translated. In this section, I examine relative advantages and problems inherent in different approaches to musical form while working toward synthesis of concepts and approaches. The schema developed in this study should recognize the way form is realized and conceived as a function of the listening experience, which includes the physical and the cultural experience. In other words, I am trying to create a schema that allows the critic to understand musical form in the listening context, in the moment of reception, as a text.

My arrangement of data categories in this section is based loosely on Middleton's (1990) distinction between methods that address denotative and those that address connotative meanings. Denotative methods emphasize the "primary level" of significance in music—the basic surface level of musical form, which represents nothing other than music itself and which constitutes the primary object of musicological analysis. In contrast, connotative meaning refers to meanings that are implied by the text and that depend upon some shared knowledge base for proper understanding. The shared knowledge base is key for music to act rhetorically: it brings music to the symbolic level.

Connotative meanings for music are indexical only, given that musical units possess no direct meaning and only serve as cues to possible meanings. Any number of connotations may be connected to a
single piece of music, so whatever meanings are to be found in music are shaped by the audience’s experience with the music and by what it takes into the musical experience. Musical connotative, then, may be considered those meanings that are added to the denotative dimension.

The two—connotative and denotative—are never really entirely separable, and I view methods as falling on a continuum between the two extremes. Thus, the arrangement of units of analysis in this section will range from those approaches that are situated closer to the music—denotative methods—to those that move away from musical elements—connotative methods.

**Primary Meanings**

**Notational Analysis**

Musical notation appears to be the most obvious starting point for translating musical form; theoretically, a trained musicologist should be able to use notation to reproduce precisely the basic elements of a musical performance. Likewise, a musician should be able to reproduce a performance given a notational representation of it. Notation is relatively accurate in translating and reproducing intervals and pitches, at least when applied to Western classical music. Notation is useful to scholars of popular music because it allows them to transcribe a musical event in a manner that simulates how the music actually unfolds over time. Notation grasps music in its duration, marking significant events so as to call them to the attention of readers and listeners. In addition, in cases when readers also are skilled in reading notation, this method can be quite useful in demonstrating
musical principles when the technical limitations of written media--i.e., journal articles--prevent recordings from being played.

Musical notation is a useful device for representing formal qualities of music (and rhetorical critics who study music often use it this way), but it suffers from limitations associated with its presumed objectivity. How music is conceived depends upon the ideologies, assumptions, and norms of the field or discipline in which they are formed. Thus, "accurate" ways of writing about music should not be conflated with objective or neutral ways of conceptualizing music. Musical form is attended to and conceptualized in learned ways--by theories no less than by music fans--even if these conceptualizations are presumed to maintain an objective status. Musicological methods are tied closely to classical music, so when notation is used to transcribe popular music, its ideological biases erase elements of popular music that are central to popular music's functioning as symbolic form.

One of the ways in which musicological methods erase elements of popular music is through lack of conceptual fit for terms that it uses to describe and evaluate music. The terminology used in musicology reflects a certain amount of bias; within the classical music discourse, words are readily available for those elements of music that are granted significance and value, but de-valued elements of music are not so carefully differentiated. Thus, musicology employs "value-laden terms like harmony and tonality to the neglect of ideas like rhythm and timbre" (Longhurst, 1996, p. 158).

Such bias obscures elements of certain non-Western and popular musical forms, as Middleton (1990) notes: "In many kinds of popular
music, for example, harmony may not be the most important parameter; rhythm, pitch gradation, timbre and the whole ensemble of performance articulation techniques are often more important" (p. 104). The application of notation to many popular music forms is problematic, then, because it attends only to those parts of song for which notational methods exist--those parts that can be written down. According to Longhurst, "The analyst who simply focused on the text of a pop song as written down with notes on a score would miss a number of the different ways in which such music creates meaning, including, for example, the nature of the performance given of the song" (159). The nuances of such elements, therefore, cannot be represented quite so easily via standard musicological methods.

Musicological methods and approaches that emulate them lead to further problems translating and studying popular music. McClary and Walser (1990) suggest that these approaches tend to "atomize" music, translating its constituent parts into free-standing concepts that do not reflect the listening experience. Analysis itself, in McClary and Walser's view, is subject to critique for removing music from its listening context. Analysis involves the abstracting of certain elements from a whole, pulling them out of their context. When methods like notation are used to analyze music, the danger always exists that what is being abstracted is not what listeners are hearing. In addition, as Gracyk points out, popular music is geared toward recording (1996). He argues that its aesthetic essence is the recording and not the score (which is considered the essence of classical music). Performance variables such as sound effects, echoes, multi-tracking,
fades, and vocal effects make up a significant part of what is heard, and notation is not suited for transcribing such elements.

Thus, although notational analysis seems like an objective method for translating popular music, its ideological biases create significant limitations in accurately representing how popular music is experienced. Musical notation and other musicological devices are grounded in the discourse of Western classical music; they were meant to be used for training and music appreciation within this particular aesthetic structure. As a method of translation, then, notational analysis is not neutral when applied to popular music; it "listens" to music in such a way that it changes it by comparing it to the aesthetic standards of classical music. Consequently, even those musicologists who study popular music are faced with the challenge of developing more appropriate—although not necessarily more objective—methods of representing popular music. So, although tools of notation are capable of providing accurate measurements for certain dimensions of music, they cannot grasp fully the organization of sounds that make up all music. Notation is especially inadequate in providing rich representations of popular music unless used in conjunction with methods that specifically address special issues of popular music.

Musical Grammar and Rhetoric

Bonds’ (1991) historical work on 18th-century music theory demonstrates how basic elements of music can be conceived as part of a rhetorical framework. His work emphasizes how the formal arrangement of musical elements—melodies, tones, rhythms, and the like—can be understood as rhetorically effective for a given audience. Bonds
recognizes that the connection between rhetoric and music is long standing and significant to the way music is conceptualized. That such rhetorical terms as composition, phrase, and passage were borrowed by musicologists to describe (and teach) elements of classical music is no coincidence, he asserts. Some music theorists went so far as to provide comparisons of rhetorical tropes and figures and their musical equivalents, and later projects catalogued musical devices that were appropriate to produce specific emotional effects.

Bonds’ work is useful to this project in that it articulates a rhetorical understanding of musical arrangement, describing how musical form can be understood as a construction of individual units put together for rhetorical effect. Identifying interaction between simple and complex units of music, Bonds describes the smaller units of music as “grammatical”—associated with the “correctness” of various aspects of musical sound such as tonal qualities, harmonics, and meter. Proficiency in musical performance and composition depends upon mastery of such elements of musical grammar. The distinction between musical grammar and musical rhetoric can be traced to the notion of periodicity, the way basic grammatical units are combined together or “concatenated into increasingly larger ones.” Musical rhetoric goes beyond matching patterns of correctness, just as constructing a sentence of poetry requires more than fulfilling basic rules of grammar. For 18th-century music theorists, the processes of invention and arrangement of grammatical units marked a distinction between two levels of musical achievement: the merely proficient and the exceptional, described by
Bonds in such pairings as mechanical/aesthetic, teachable/unteachable, grammatical/rhetorical.

Musical rhetoricality involves a move beyond proficient renderings of musical responses that sound “correct” to the listener. The rhetorical power of the musician or composer derives from the authorial production of music in the form of choices, choices among competing correct possibilities. Audience response to music derives as much, then, from recognition of correctness and choice as musical composition does. Bonds presents these concepts as intensively audience centered, and on that claim the limitations of his work can be identified.

Classical music’s effects, as spelled out by Bonds, depend on a sense of shared social understanding about musical correctness. For music to operate effectively as rhetoric, a homologous relationship must exist among members of culture. This approach is only audience centered, then, to the extent that audiences can be trained to respond properly to the music with which they are presented. In the context Bonds discusses—the classical discourse—conformity between musical invention and audience response is more likely than in the heterogeneous and informal situation that characterize popular music, particularly in contemporary times.

Bonds’ work suggests musical rhetoric is audience centered. Audience members are the arbiters of music’s effect, judging whether the arrangement of grammatical units works effectively as rhetorical units, and intended audience response governs the combination of grammatical units. In the kind of homogenous culture theorized by 18th-century musical aestheticians, the assumption of homogeneity carries more weight
with analysis of classical music than it does with contemporary popular music, born of a heterogeneous society and the fusion of diverse musical elements. Bonds' treatment of musical form itself as rhetorical is useful to the extent it can be couched within the complexity of contemporary culture.

Auto-Reflection

Jakobson's work on auto-reflection in music provides one more example of a denotative system for studying music. Auto-reflection, according to Jakobson, means that music does not refer to any outside reality: it constitutes "a language which signifies itself" (quoted in Middleton, 1990, p. 221). Thus, instead of thinking of the musical language as a system representing precise linguistic meanings, "one could consider the process as indexical: the signifier 'points to' the larger class (style, genre, activity) of which it is a member" (Middleton, 1990, p. 222).

Such references include units inside the musical text and outside; thus, parts of a song refer to and repeat one another. But they also work by reference to outside forces through "quotation, stylistic allusion and parody" (Middleton, p. 221). For example, jazz musicians "have long indulged in quotations from well-known songs or solos, slipped into an improvisation." Likewise, in popular music, allusion "is particularly important. How many male rock singers have paid homage to Elvis Presley" (Middleton, pp. 221-222)?

Auto-reflection addresses a key issue associated with translating popular music--the inevitability of music's referential quality. A problem in translating music is that even when the analyst is focusing
on the primary level of signification, the actual aural phenomenon being analyzed exists within a complex of available possibilities inherent in such devices as the musical instruments, recording equipment, expectations associated with established genres and styles, and performance rituals and motifs. As a communicative experience, listening to music cannot be reduced to a purely abstract level of primary significance because significance always depends upon the relation of the individual unit to the larger class. The problem of translation, then, becomes one of choosing concepts that accommodate not only the individual instance but also its relation to the musical context in which it is situated.

Auto-reflection provides critics with a way to describe music in structural terms rather than as isolated--atomized--events. By calling attention to the way elements of a song relate to similar musical genres, styles, and performances, auto-reflection allows critics to discuss music in relation to other music and to describe musical meaning in the context of other music. This is key to recognizing how listeners make sense of music as music. Auto-reflection enables the critic to identify how distinct musical elements work to create a complex aesthetic experience. A result of the holistic implications of auto-reflection is that it provides a systematic means to link the primary and secondary levels of significance.

Understanding the primary level of significance as a holistic, structured event helps to connect the primary level of significance to the secondary level because the move from the atomistic to the whole mirrors the move from primary to secondary. Using auto-reflection to
identify how parts of a song relate to one another or how they relate to other songs, critics can draw conclusions about secondary meanings that arise from the use of raw musical data (for example, examining how the performance of vocals and hooks in a cover version reflect on the performances in the original). A thorough understanding of all that is happening at the primary level of significance is necessary and advantageous in understanding what symbolic effects are being created at the connotative level. Thus, auto-reflection points to the need to gain a thorough understanding of the rhetoric of popular music by linking the two levels.

Primary signification refers to music as music, of course, making it a necessary but not sufficient way to conceive of music as rhetorical. For that, one must turn to methods of addressing secondary significance. The following concepts

Secondary Meanings

Although a rhetorical approach to music is concerned primarily with connotative meanings, the primary level is important because it gives rise to the secondary meanings. Middleton (1991) provides several examples of how "secondary meanings . . . can arise on the basis of primary significance" (p. 232). Borrowing from Stefani, he lists some of these:

Intentional Values: "recognized, intended connotations" such as "rest" or "conclusion"

Positional Implications: "connotations arising from structural position" of a musical unit in the overall piece; e.g., a "loop" effect in a song's fade implies "unendingness"
**Ideological Choices:** "particular preferred meanings, selected from a range of possible interpretations"

**Emotive Connotations:** "agreed affective implications of musical events"; e.g., punk equals "aggression"

**Style Connotations:** "associations summoned up by coding at the general level of style"—e.g., disco means nightclubbing, silk shirts, retro-70s clothing. (p. 232)

Each of these labels describes how a particular musical effect produces secondary meanings by suggestion. Meanings can become attached to the music because the music works to invoke a conventional expectation. Several methods are useful in connecting music to such connotative meanings.

**Musemes**

At the level of secondary significance of music, the concept museme is a unit of analysis that bridges acoustic material and the listener's response to it. Invented by Tagg, the museme refers to the smallest unit of sound—a note, a chord, a riff—that can be distinguished by the listener or that makes sense as music. Musemes can be distinguished from musicological concepts in that musemes are suggestive to listeners, calling up connotative meanings that relate to the different contexts of which musemes could be said to represent a fragment. Musicological elements, by contrast, are typically descriptive and relatively value neutral, at least at the level of suggestive meaning.

Tagg describes musical form as being composed of repetitions of musemes and discursives (longer units, which are made up of combinations
of musemes). Musematic repetitions are simple, short, and easily distinguished by listeners—guitar riffs, bass lines, and choruses, for example. Discursive repetitions are statements or phrases that combine musemes into coherent wholes—into songs or constituent parts such as melodies, choruses, intros, and outros. The possible combinations of musemes and discursives are infinite, just as the possible constructions of sentences are infinite, given all the available combinations of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs.

Musemes and discursives provide critics with more than descriptive categories for musical elements; they also undergird a system of musical interpretation. Tagg uses these basic units to support a hermeneutic analysis of music, moving from musematic elements to chains of representational meanings. Thus, musemes and discursives are units that help to articulate the basis of interpretations based on music.

The museme is a useful bridge between musical phenomena and the structure of listening, then, especially given the problems previously noted about notational analysis concerning the difficulty in “defining minimal units consistently and precisely.” The “nature and size of the museme [can be] regarded flexibly” (Middleton, 1990, p. 189) so that its identification is potentially free of predetermined expectations regarding its status. Musemes, then, provide for a more holistic description of music than that provided by notational analysis. The holistic description facilitated by use of musemes and discursives allows critics to explain the ways basic musical units give rise to connotative meanings.
The concepts discussed thus far provide ways of conceptualizing musical form—either describing its primary level of significance or more complex associative meanings that derive from the primary level. The concepts remaining to be discussed move the location of form farther away from the acoustic event itself and into the processes by which listeners make sense of the event.

**Rhetorical Ascription**

Rhetorical ascription specifically addresses the associative power of music and its importance to the “rhetorical potentiality of musical form” (Gonzalez & Makay, 1983, p. 2). By rhetorical ascription, Gonzalez and Makay mean the way meanings become ascribed to music through associative or referential qualities. In their research, Gonzalez and Makay employ ascription to discover how Bob Dylan’s Christian music (circa 1979) appealed to fans more familiar with his earlier secular music:

> The melody, rhythm, chord progressions, and instrumentation in Dylan’s music become rhetorical as they are employed as elements of high ascription which attempt to resolve or mediate the tension experienced by the listener when confronted by the unfamiliar born-again message of the lyric. (1983, p. 13)

These elements of Dylan’s music achieved ascriptive power by drawing on musical structures and performance styles that bear similarity to his earlier work.

**Ascription** is a label used to describe the process of association employed by listeners in apprehending music. It does not account, however, for the possibility of music that does not provide much of an index for the audience. Even in the cases of high ascriptive value, suggest Gonzalez and Makay, meanings outside the realm of musical sound
become attached to the sound; thus, analysis of the relations of sound
does not provide understanding of the full value of the meaning of
music. But rhetorical ascription can be applied in a more general
manner, used to describe the sound plus the meaning attached to it. In
cases when listeners create new meanings from new sounds, ascription can
be understood not as a ready-made association between the two but as a
process of making associations. The critical question being asked by
the critic in this case would be why such associations were formed in a
particular instance and how ascription is possible.

The process of ascription is an important one for a rhetorical
orientation to music because of the assumption that symbols work by
convention. In order for symbols to be recognized as such, ascription
must occur in some form.

Music as Presentational Symbol

Langer’s approach is a prime example of a theory of music that
emphasizes connotative or secondary meanings, and rhetorical critics
have built on it in various ways. Langer describes musical form as
consisting of presentational symbols as opposed to representational
ones. By presentational, she means that musical symbols are understood
“only through the meaning of the whole, through their relations within
the total structure” (1948, p. 49). Musical meaning relies on both the
presentational content of feeling and “the listener’s participation to
complete the meaning” (Francesconi, 1986, p. 37).

As a presentational symbol, music does not so much refer to shared
meanings as provide emotional content from which new meanings can be
created:
It is not usually derived from affects nor intended for them; but we may say, with certain reservations, that it is about them. Music is not the cause or the cure of feelings, but their logical expression; though even in this capacity it has its special ways of functioning, that make in incommensurable with language. (Langer, 1948, p. 218)

The emotional content of music, while perhaps very representative of meaning to the composer or performer, then, is not representative to the listener. It is a prompt that happens to be culled from emotions.

Langer’s conceptualization of music as a logical expression of emotions has been used by rhetorical critics to examine how pop music symbolizes patterns of feeling. Sellnow and Sellnow (1993) have used Langer’s theory of the musical symbol to argue that “musical score can communicate by symbolizing the patterns of intensity and release which are embodied in the forms of human feeling” (p. 88). This conceptualization of music creates a more substantial role for the audience, which completes “the argument” made by the embodiment of feeling in the music. For Sellnow and Sellnow, music operates as enthymeme in that it requires the audience to fill in the missing premise.

Using the notion of argument to understand music is helpful because it provides a means by which to include audience response in the process of making meaning from music. In Sellnow and Sellnow’s application, however, the full possibilities of audience participation are not addressed; the audience is largely assumed to share the emotional response developed by the critic or researcher. The structure of meaning produced does not take into account the various kinds of experiences audience members take into the listening process and into
their determination of intensity and release. As a result, the assumption that music works as enthymeme is a bit contrived and is contrary to Langer’s own conceptualization of music as presentational: “If music has any significance, it is semantic, not symptomatic. Its ‘meaning’ is evidently not that of a stimulus to evoke emotions, nor that of a signal to announce them” (Langer, 1948, p. 218). Thus, Langer’s theory of music as presentational symbol requires the critic to re-examine the idea of music as representation, revealing the critic’s translations of music to be further expressions of emotions inspired by music.

Langer’s conceptualization of musical form supports Francesconi’s (1986) research on free jazz and Black nationalism. In Francesconi’s research, however, musical form is treated as a product of cultural, rather than emotive, forces. Francesconi suggests a broad dialectical reading of music, in which form is a kind of nonverbal communication that is informed by cultural forces—in this case, European and African cultural and musical imperatives. “Music,” Francesconi writes, “does not exist in a social vacuum. The internal relationships of a musical composition acquire social meaning from the comparison . . . to other compositions of a similar style or juxtaposed . . . to compositions of a contrasting style” (p. 37). In addition, social meaning derives from “the correlation the listeners make between the compositions and events in their social environment” (p. 37).

Francesconi’s approach takes the study of music farther into the connocative realm and beyond. Here, the meaning of music exists in the cultural forces that situate it; thus, identifying musical form means to
identify the influence of broader musical forces rather than building systematically from the primary level of significance. Francesconi's method involves some historical analysis of the Black nationalism movement and other aspects of the social context in which free jazz developed. Such an approach reverses the question being explored in this part of the literature review, treating musical form as an aspect of social and cultural context rather than as a producer of social and cultural meaning. Synthesis of these orientations is a goal of my study; thus, later in this review, I will examine research on the social and cultural contexts of music. But first, I will continue the exploration of musical form by focusing on the use of lyrical and vocal elements in popular music as systems of representation for musical form.

Words and Voices

Words are significant symbolic material in songs and not only because they provide a source of semantic meaning. Much of the tone and structure of the song are presented through lyrics, so much so that Frith (1988) argues voices are the central symbolic element of popular music. Words carry tunes as well as narratives, and the voice functions as a source of empathy for listeners. Further, and most significant to my efforts in this section, lyrics are taken to represent music, both by fans and researchers, although, as I explained earlier, to stop with analysis of the lyrics is detrimental to the understanding of the music's symbolic influence. Using lyrics to stand in for the form and meaning of the song often results from the researcher not possessing the training to identify musicological elements properly.
In this section, I will look at ways that words and voices can be used to represent music and provide rhetorical response. My discussion will incorporate standard means of representation—such as content analysis—as well as suggestions for ways to use words and voices. Frith (1995) discerns among overlapping ways by which words and voices produce effects in the listening context and thus provides a sufficiently comprehensive framework for this section of my review. Listeners, argues Frith, hear lyrics of popular music in three significant ways—as

words, which appear to give songs an independent source of semantic meaning; **rhetoric**, words being used in a special, musical way, a way which draws attention to features and problems of speech; and **voices**, words being spoken or sung in human tones which are themselves "meaningful," signs of persons and personality. (p. 159)

I will begin my discussion of words and voices by looking at the study of lyrics as words, as an independent source of semantic meaning.

**Lyrical Content.** In content analysis, the "lyrics, the English-semantic-knowable part of the music communication act, are counted, evaluated, and analyzed to a fine degree" for the purpose of drawing conclusions about those who use the messages—at both the production and consumption end of the process (Rein & Springer, 1986, p. 252). Content analysis focuses on the characteristics of the communication messages . . . but the typical way in which lyrics are studied—through content analysis of their meanings—obscures the vitality of the event. The purpose is to learn something about the content and those who produced the messages. (Rubin, Rubin & Piele, 1990, p. 182)
Content analysis operates from the assumption that the ideas transmitted in song lyrics—the semantic meanings of their content—determine the significance of the song as message.

Discussion of song lyrics cannot be separated easily from the assumptions and tendencies of content analysis. In fact, the argument can be made that assumptions about what exactly constitute song lyrics and why they should receive emphasis in popular music research is a direct result of the prevalence of content analysis as a method. According to Frith (1988), the significance given to song lyrics relates directly to the use of content analysis, which, in turn, was the preferred method of music researchers simply because this was the method their training led them to use. He makes this case with reference to early studies of popular music in sociology:

In the 1950s and 1960s, for example, the tiny field of the sociology of popular music was dominated by analyses of song words. Sociologists concentrated on songs (rather than singers or audiences) because they could be studied with a familiar cultural research method, content analysis, and as they mostly lacked the ability to distinguish songs in musical terms, content analysts, by default, had to measure trends by reference to lyrics. It was through their words that hit records were taken to make their social mark. (1988, p. 105)

One result of the predilection to studying lyrical content is that researchers tended to abandon the music or treat it as an inconsequential expressive dimension.

A heavy emphasis on song lyrics is criticized mainly because popular music creates its effects through various structures of sound; the undue focus on lyrics relegates the music to secondary status in that is “scarcely mentioned or simply ignored” (Rein & Springer, 1986, p. 252). But Frith’s (1988) comprehensive review of the assumptions
underlying content analysis reveals a deeper problem associated not so much with the data but with the method itself and the kind of knowledge it produces. In assuming that songs "make their social mark" through words, analysts not only miss out on the musical dimensions of song, but they also make sweeping generalizations about the people studied through song. Since content analysis is a means for getting at people’s beliefs through their message, conclusions reached about people depend upon assumption of homology—a fit between cultural artifacts, material conditions, and beliefs. Homology will be considered further in the second part of this chapter, in which I explore how meanings are grounded in social organization.

Lyrics often are accepted as representing the meaning of a song, but they also are commonly used to conceptualize the form of the song. Common descriptions of song structure includes reference to verses, choruses, and hooks—organizations of words in songs. In popular music, songs usually consist of a few repetitions of verse and chorus; also included are solos, intros, outros, interludes and fades. Each of these concepts assumes music to be the part of song that fills gaps between lyrical structures. Using lyrics to represent musical form is helpful in grasping what is occurring at different points in the song, but the tendency to focus on lyrics creates limitations in that it prevents critics from directly addressing aspects of musical form. It also obscures the various ways listeners become aware of and use the words of songs.

The focus on lyrical content requires close attention to the meanings of song words. This approach is detrimental in cases when
researchers study lyrics with a pre-established position to look for serious meaning or poetic qualities. Lyrics that are abstract, nonsensical, or surreal cannot be explained strictly by interpretation of their meanings. Likewise, many kinds of popular music can be judged banal or clichéd if one makes judgments through the meaning of the content. Such judgments—while accurate strictly in terms of lyrical meaning—may miss the point when leveled against a genre whose lyrics are built more on the beat or the sound of the words than on semantic meanings.

Lyrical Speech Acts. My review of lyrics has focused thus far on content analysis as a means of discovering the meanings of song words, but other units of analysis besides lyrics are available for grasping the meanings that derive from song words. In addition to being transmitters of semantic meanings, song words are important in that they provide cues for listeners' interpretations. Words in song titles shape the meanings listeners may form about the music or about other lyrical content, constraining or enhancing possible interpretations. Words in songs also can have a cumulative effect upon listeners, who gradually become aware of the lyrics and create personalized interpretations over repeated listenings. The meanings of songs words cannot be reduced to how content is encoded and decoded; listeners' responses are a kind of interaction with the words, a negotiation that provides listeners with a way to make sense of and give shape to their world. But understanding the full symbolic weight of words in songs requires addressing how lyrics work at subsequent levels—as speech act and as voice—and these areas have received sporadic treatment in analyses of popular music.
As rhetoric—or, to avoid confusion—as speech acts, words in popular music are a rich resource for rhetorical analysis. By rhetoric, Frith (1995) means that song words "are not about ideas ('content'), but about their expression" (p. 164). The significance of lyrics is not in the meanings they transmit to audiences but in the meanings created through the peculiarities of articulation. To take speech acts as units of analysis means to look at song lyrics as a form of persuasion, says Frith. Lyrics are a species of speech that takes "ordinary language" and puts it to "extraordinary use" (Frith, p. 168). For example, words may be "'framed,' held up and examined, everyday clichés liberated by being taken literally or turned inside out" (p. 168). Or, since all lyrics harbor "implied narratives," speech acts enable audiences to conceptualize songs as stories, as a form of address involving a "central character, the singer ... in a situation, talking to someone (if only to herself)" (p. 169). Treating lyrics as speech acts means, ultimately, to explore expression as a dynamic function of songs.

Voice. Awareness of songs as speech leads to Frith's third category of symbolic activity associated with lyrics—the voice. Frith divides the voice into four potential analytical categories: voice as "musical instrument; as a body; as a person; and as a character" (p. 187). Most interesting of these for rhetoric is the treatment of voice as character—one of the ways a voice is meaningful is its suggestion of the singer's (or the protagonist's) personality. For a rhetorical critic studying this aspect of voice, attention should be directed to the social workings of the voice—how it suggests the personality of the singer and how the audience is expected to respond to the person
suggested. In general terms, the way content and speech are understood by listeners depends upon the workings of an embodied voice. The message--the symbolic event--perceived in song, then, may not be much of a factor of content at all; rather, it could relate more to the implications of voice as character, as source of emotional expression, or as interlocutor.

The voice is also a source of pleasure and emotion for the singer and the listener. It operates in this way to the extent that it encourages listeners to sing along or to empathize its expressive qualities. Empathy has been described by aestheticians as projecting one's self into the work of art. In terms of listening to singing, the projection involves a physical process. Even when listeners do not sing along with a vocal, their bodies respond to the act of singing, parroting the release of air from the lungs and straining of the vocal chords. Singing along to music increases the degree of empathic response, of course; as Frith (1988) suggests, singing along allows listeners to adopt the personality of the singer and character of the protagonist. In this way, the bodily implications of the grain of voice can become visceral for the listener/singer. In an extreme case, Elvis impersonators incorporate the characteristic sneer and strut of "the King." The vocal element of singing certainly is much less geared to semantic analysis than the actual lyrical element. But the effects of the singing voice are perhaps more vital and significant to the listening audience than are the dimensions of content.

Song lyrics merit study in a rhetorical approach, but, as a category of symbol, they amount to a narrow conceptualization of the
part of song that includes words, voices, vocal performances, singing
and speech; yet, song lyrics are the most commonly studied symbolic
element of popular music. By focusing on content of lyrics as the
primary impetus to meaning, critics potentially miss the greater
possibilities in this significant element of popular music.

Conclusion

When I began this review of literature, I expected I would
discover a set of concepts that could be used to explain musical form
and its symbolic influences on audience. What I discovered is that any
one of a number of concepts and methods are useful in describing some
aspect of form or the experience with it but that these different
approaches vary in the kind of abstractions they make from the musical
event. In fact, some of these approaches—such as Langer’s treatment of
music’s affective basis—do not emphasize the musicality of music;
rather, they attempt to trace influence in the connotations implied by
music.

A picture of the listener’s experience with musical form can be
imagined, based on the concepts covered in this section. Formal
elements of music are recognizable as atomized bits of the listening
experience. Music can be represented in strictly musicological terms
such as notes, rhythms, and melodies, or it can be rendered in more
suggestive terms such as musemes or musical grammar. Music can be
analyzed in atomistic fashion according to various schemas described in
this literature, but in terms of the listening experience, connection
must be made from the atomistic to the unified. Popular music is not
experienced by listeners as notes; rather, it is experienced as sounds or noises. It is comprehended holistically, not atomistically.

Scholars of popular music have recognized that musical elements are neither unique nor autonomous. Elements in a given musical event can be traced to broader collections of elements to which they refer or from which they are invented. Jakobson’s description of music’s auto-reflective quality helps to conceptualize this referential and dependent tendency of music. Similarly, ideas like rhetorical ascription demonstrate how musical elements influence listeners in meaningful, extra-musical, ways. As a repeatable pattern, elements of song are not purely musical; they create symbolic connections for listeners by suggesting social meanings that become attached to the musical event. Creating the “whole” from the unified bits, then, is, in some ways, a non-musical process.

In the end, a tension can be articulated between two primary understandings of how musical form works to produce a meaningful experience for audiences—as presentational and as representative. As a presentational symbol system, music provides a source for emotional involvement. As a unique and dynamic experience, music possesses the power to take listeners outside of themselves, as Barthes (1990) would say. Music creates its audience, calls it into being through an aesthetic experience that touches individuals at an emotional level. In this view, listeners are made social by the music, which invites their empathic response and calls them into union with the emotions expressed.

At the same time, however, musical form gains its significance intertextually, through its relation to other musical forms. Music is
meaningful and comprehensible to the extent that it is linked to other music and other experiences of the listener. In this view, music has less force--less power--to frame a new context for the listener. Instead, the listener's own cognitive, affective, and physical processes are called into play by music, but the meaning inspired by the music is subject to the social influences brought into the experience by the listener.

While various approaches to studying popular music have leaned in the direction of one or the other explanations, my own view is that studying music gains more from living with this tension than resolving it. Attali (1977) writes that music is a "herald" that anticipates social change before it happens in society. Music is created within social conditions, yet its special power comes from its ability to create experience that is not bound by those conditions. Whether or not an individual work, genre, or artist is successful in breaking the bounds of convention must be determined in the individual case, with reference to the more general work of music in culture and society. A rhetorical position on the influence of symbolic form gains its power from the ability to consider both music's social boundaries and its ability to surpass them.

A rhetorical conceptualization of music rests centrally on the idea of connectedness--musical events gain their power through a dynamic and dialogic connection to other musical and non-musical events. One way for rhetoric to deal with this assumption is to treat music as an intertextual event that is not fully completed until the listener has contributed her or his part to it. In other words, the musical "text"
can be understood in much the way that Fish (1980) describes a literary text—as something established through the conventions of an interpretive community. In the case of popular music, however, the boundaries of such communities are rather uncertain because popular music is commodified and is used in rather personal ways by music fans. Understanding of music, then, neither can begin nor end with a treatment of its formal qualities. The social processes that go into producing, distributing, and consuming music must be considered in any analysis of its rhetorical function. In the following section, I will review research that explains these factors and the extent of their influence.

Musical Form and Social Relations

Earlier, I noted that the difficulty in writing about music occurs largely as a result of its ineffable qualities—its complex structure of sounds and accompanying meanings. But another potential barrier to conceptualizing popular music is its location within commercial industry and social relations. Popular music emerges from commercial origins, as "the final product . . . of an elaborate process" (Frith, 1992) and derives much of its meaning and influence from the social contexts in which it comes to possess cultural capital. Embedded as it is in this complex network of social and cultural relations, popular music cannot be bracketed off easily for study of symbolic influence. For the critic studying popular music, questions of symbolic form and influence must be considered with reference to how music operates within material, social, and commercial constraints.

Although popular music often is celebrated as music made "by the people," it is, first and foremost, a commercial industry. Evidence of
the corporate influence on popular music can be felt everywhere, from cd and tape sales to t-shirts and concert promotions to MTV and radio airplay. The commercial aspect of popular music must be considered in a rhetorical study because most popular music is made for the specific purpose of making money. Its production is geared to that process as much as to whatever expressive, artistic purposes are otherwise suggested.

For example, one of the dominant means of distributing and promoting music, the 45 rpm vinyl record—the single—illustrates the inextricable connection between music's commercial and expressive aims. Singles originated as a cheap way for record companies to record and distribute the work of a performer. But with the onset of long-playing records (lp's), they became more of a promotional device for artists and record companies. Singles containing two songs from an as-yet-unreleased lp would garner radio airplay, increasing the potential for sales of the lp.

In order to get sufficient radio airplay—to become a hit—a single needed to conform to popular standards; thus, a single was often a very short song—under three minutes in length—and centered around frequently repeated hooks and choruses. Singles were supposed to be "catchy," easily grasped, and interesting enough to retain interest and radio airplay for several weeks (until being replaced on the radio by the next round of releases). The formal organization of the song, then, was integrated with the technology, the means of production, the means of distribution, and its intended popular effect. Rhetorical analysis focused solely on the appeal of the catchy hooks and choruses would
provide an incomplete picture of the greater structure within which the hit single operates as symbolic force—the commercial context.

In this section, I will examine how scholars of popular music have charted the interplay between music and its social contexts, beginning with the commercial. That is, I will focus on the degree to which music's symbolic influence is enhanced, mitigated, contradicted, and enabled by its social placement and on how musical form contributes to the structuring of the social. The key assumption of this section is that musical form is not independent of the contexts that inform it, nor can its reception be understood purely as a product of such contexts.

I will begin this section by describing the kinds of social influences critics have identified. Social contexts I discuss in this section range from broad society-based factors (capitalism and the popular music industry) to more specific social groups (subcultures, social movements, and taste cultures) to more theoretical constructs (discursive formations and affective apparatuses).

Musical Form in the Commercial Context

Few critics of popular music would deny that the commercial context is the most significant factor governing the production and distribution of musical texts. In fact, popular music often is defined by its commercial nature. But critics disagree widely on how significant the industry is in determining the nature of music's symbolic influence. Many of the social factors discussed in this section, in fact, are presented as responses, in one way or another, to the determinacy of the commercial context. By identifying alternative social collectives that use music in particular ways, critics are able
to challenge assumptions about the uncontested hegemony of capitalist forces in shaping response to popular music. Still, most of these approaches accept the commercial influence as an unavoidable factor. Thus, I will begin with perspectives that explicitly address the commercial aspects of the music industry.

Hennion (1990) explores the ways that the eventual commercial goals of popular music constrain its production in the music studio. Musicians, producers, sound mixers, and other production staff work explicitly with an audience in mind, and their goal, he says, is production of music that will become commercially successful. While believing that musical artists would operate from the base goal of commercial success is not difficult. Hennion's work--based on years as a studio "insider"--is unique in that it provides a detailed account of how thoroughly constrained aesthetic choice actually is. Hennion points out how melody, lyrics, voice, instrumentation, rhythm, song structure, and special techniques (sound effects) work together to produce a recognizable, easily remembered song that is easily promoted and marketed to audiences.

On the other hand, the audience can be understood less as the ultimate arbiter of musical decision making and more as a construction of the musical industry. Frith (1992), for example, points out how industry marketing slices the audience into various demographic sectors, representing race, sex, age, and economic class. The production process is characterized by a series of musical choices, leading up to preparation for one of these specific markets. Thus, audience taste does not so much govern the work that happens in the studio; rather,
decisions in the studio shape audience taste long before the moment of
listening for the audience. At its most extreme, this is a pessimistic
view of audiences, but it is a useful critique in that it demonstrates
the connection and interdependence of the various forces that comprise
popular music as a communicative endeavor. Frith’s exploration is a
helpful application of the ideas of Adorno to the contemporary music
arena.

Adorno (1990) articulates the most pessimistic view of the
relationship between industry, musical form, and audience, implicating
the audience as a passive, pliable member in the transaction. Adorno
argues that the commercial influences on popular music lead the audience
to adopt self-deceptive listening strategies. Listeners, he says, look
for a measure of individuality and uniqueness in popular music, focusing
on qualities that seem to separate one performer or song from the rest.
But the listeners are also standardized by the music industry, and, by
focusing on the deep structure of musical form, Adorno demonstrates that
the perception of individuality and uniqueness is a facade. For Adorno,
the nature of musical form is determined at the industry level and not
necessarily by the performers and producers, either. All popular forms
are standardized versions of a common overarching structure, and any
perceived innovation in musical form can be dismissed by moving the
account of the structure to a more fundamental level.

Adorno’s immanent method of criticism is designed to explicate the
provides a lucid interpretation of this method: Musical meaning is
“immanent”; the “truth” of the work—although obscured by pseudo-
individualized adornments—"is within the work itself" (Middleton, p. 61). The critic's task in Adorno's immanent method is "critical confrontation" of the song's ideal with its reality for the purpose of unmasking the hidden truths or deep structure. Through notational analysis of the structures of popular song, Adorno (1990) demonstrates that many of these qualities are, in fact, only "pseudo-individualized," dependent upon a contrived alteration of vocal timbre or melody, for example. Musical innovation is really just another aspect of its industrialization, a way of sustaining audience interest in the musical product. The reception of music occurs within the purview of the ruling social interests, and musical form amounts to nothing more than "a reified reflection of manipulative social structures" (Middleton, 1990, p. 34). Familiar and predictable, form is a product of "pre-existing formulae, norms, and rules" (Middleton, p. 34), and audiences are to be blamed for accepting as unique musical forms that actually are quite standardized. By implication, audiences are standardized by the industry.

That Adorno was able to identify standardization across a large body of works suggests something of the extent of the industry's control over musical form. In the end, popular music affirms the status quo, and even changes in the circumstances of its production—such as innovations in technology and distribution—serve only to alter the musical form but not the commercial basis of musical form. Given this uncompromising view of the standard of form and audience, Adorno's critique remains a model of skeptical reflection about popular music. Middleton, therefore, is apropos to point out that "anyone wanting to
argue for the significance of popular music had better absorb Adorno in order to move beyond him" (1990, p. 31). Absorbing Adorno's immanent method means to take seriously the political economy of the music industry and the rigid control it exercises over the production of musical forms. It means to approach music, at least in part, as a commercial product. Responses to Adorno include emphasizing the actions of audiences rather than the work of musical form, exploring the effects of form, and challenging the presumed dominance of the residing political economy.

One criticism to Adorno's approach focuses on his assumption that notational analysis adequately represents the listening experience of popular music audiences. Earlier, I discussed Middleton's (1990) critique of notational methods of analysis, a critique based largely on what he saw as their inappropriate use by Adorno. Since musical notation was developed for studying classical music, Adorno's conclusion—that popular music forms are banal and standardized—is not surprising, says Middleton. Notational analysis of musical form "reads" the form in such a way that is not immediately translatable to audience reading. Moreover, the closed structure of notational methods constrains what actually can be identified by using them, raising the question of whether the extent of standardization in popular music is evident of the effects of the industry or the conceptual power of the analytic device.

This particular critique of Adorno's method resonates with certain aspects of the cultural studies approach to popular culture--mainly that audiences listen actively to music (rather than passively, as Adorno
presumes) and routinely practice strategic readings of mainstream texts. Reader-oriented criticism, ethnography, and encoding-decoding models provide methods and theoretical grounding to explain the audience’s tendency to fit the meanings of works into their own value hierarchies and structures of meaning. A celebrated example of strategic reading is Hall’s (1980) description of encoding and decoding processes, which includes three general reading strategies used by audiences to make sense of texts. Dominant readings generally prefer status quo responses, alternative readings subvert certain aspects of the text and create a space for co-existing meanings, and oppositional readings turn the text upside down to yield meaning that goes against the status quo.

The presumption that the effects of music can be read off of notational analysis is challenged by approaches that search for alternate ways of imagining musical influence. Adorno’s colleague in the Frankfurt School, Benjamin, articulates a perspective that offers more positive possibilities for innovative artistic production within the context of capitalist society than does Adorno’s method. Benjamin’s theory provides a means by which to counter the assumption that efficacy necessarily resides in industrial forces, although Benjamin’s contributions to critical music theory come from more general discussions of art and its effects. In contrast to Adorno, Benjamin (1994) celebrates the democratic possibilities of technology and media. Although industrial and state forces exert a certain amount of control over production and distribution of music, individuals manage to work within the gaps of capitalist control, subverting mainstream organization of media and meaning.
Benjamin's ideal for artistic production is based on Brechtian drama, in which "traditional apparatus is transformed through the technique of modern media" (Middleton, 1990, p. 66). Such work is experimental because in it, the audience members are detached from the narrative and are "forced to think, participate" (Middleton, 1990, p. 66). The subversive effects of artistic works on audiences are key to Benjamin, in contrast to Adorno's assumptions about audience passivity. Political art, built on transformed media, is that which shocks audience out of their normal practices of reception. This shock effect is intended to alienate the audience, releasing it from an empathic response to the narrative and characters, and, theoretically, leading to reconsideration of their own place in capitalist society.

The advent of punk rock in Britain in the 1970s provides an example of the way shock effect worked in the realm of popular music. Scholars such as Hebdige (1979), Laing (1984), Lull (1987), and Grossberg (1986) have written about punk's violation of accepted norms and how it challenged pop and rock conventions of "romance, beauty, and ease" (Frith, 1986, p. 75). Punk music violated norms of performance, composition, and style; the lyrics deconstructed social relations, advancing messages of anarchy and violence. Punk vocals eschewed established Western standards of harmonics and training, offering instead a distinctively working-class voice.

Punk provides an example of another type of challenge to the music industry's control—one that, perhaps, more directly challenges Adorno's views about the political economy of the music industry. Punk initiated a challenge to the dominance of the "big seven" record companies who
controlled production and distribution of popular music throughout Britain. Punk rhetoric included a "do-it-yourself" attitude, suggesting the ease with which virtually anyone can form a band and record and distribute a single. One often-reproduced graphic in a punk zine showed its readers where to place their fingers on a guitar to form chords—"here's a chord," said the ad. "Here's another. Now go form a band." Punk bands provided testimony that music could be produced and marketed outside the corporate economic structure. In the wake of the punk era, independent record companies and various other kinds of alternative forums have provided a place for innovative acts to develop outside the usual control of industry forces.

The influences of capitalism and the commercial forces of the music industry are very real, then, and play a central role in determining the structure of popular music. The effects of popular music cannot be bracketed off from the constraints of the industry. However, as the perspectives above demonstrate, performers and audiences have options available to them. Musical form and its reception need not be determined by the operations of the industry, and critics can find alternative structures of relation among the industry, the audience, and the form. But these forces are in constant tension with one another, complicating assumptions about their presumed influence on one another. Thus, in a more general way, various kinds of popular music research have explored social effects of music without emphasizing the capitalist and industrial influence. These studies comprise the next section of this review.
Musical Form in Social Contexts

The commercial context of popular music provides a general explanation of how musical form is received by audiences, but a number of other social contexts have been identified as significant factors. The ascription of meaning, development of taste, and other aspects of the response to music are socially constructed, and the purpose of the following section is to explore various ways that scholars have explained the link of form to social context. Much of this research emphasizes how the meaning and significance of popular music are based on the beliefs and practices of social movements, subcultures, or ethnic groups. According to these perspectives, the meaning of music can be found in the homological relationship among group members, their cultural artifacts, and the material conditions in which they operate. But other research by such scholars as Frith (1995) and Grossberg (1992a) suggest that assumptions of homology themselves must be questioned.

Social Realism Studies

The first general group of studies I consider are those that make essentialist or realist assumptions that connect music to its presumed audience. These studies, which originate in folklore and sociology, are built on the assumption that popular music is the music of the people or from the people. Music is the real voice of the people; it derives its influence from its authenticity, and it represents a fairly well-defined group of people. This perspective can be described as social realist, reflecting its key assumption: reality is a social product that can be located in the texts produced by authentic cultures.
Scholars such as Middleton (1990) find that work deriving from the assumptions of social realism can "oversimplify the relationship between words and 'reality'" (p. 228). Lyrical realism, as Frith (1988) calls this assumption, is the theory that there exists "a direct relationship between a lyric and the social or emotional condition it describes and represents" (p. 112). The same principle can be applied to the music, as well.

Lyrical realism means researchers make assumptions about how the content of songs represents social groups who use them. Says Frith, "Folk song studies, for example, work with a historical version of reflection theory: they assume that folk songs are a historical record of popular consciousness" (1988, p. 112). Meanwhile, "blues analysts assumed, like folk theorists generally, that the blues could be read as the direct account of the singers' and listeners' lives." Blues was looked at as a "social history" (Frith, p. 113) of African-Americans, an authentic voice of this social group. Other kinds of studies describe music as a form of popular memory—recording the important ideals and thoughts of a people and a time; as a source and expression of group consciousness; or as the voice of a generation, speaking on behalf of a particular demographic. In such studies, assumptions are made about social groups based on analysis of the songs produced by them. In folklore studies, the song lyrics are analyzed and the meanings derived from their content are accepted as beliefs— as the reality—of the group.

Realist assumptions about the music of these groups are introduced in another way— as a question of authenticity, the problem of whether a
given piece of music represents "authentic" expression of the social group. The distinction between authentic and inauthentic expression, Frith (1988) reports, often is political, depending on the ideological nature of the definition employed:

The problem of this "sentimental socialist-realist" argument is its circularity: folk "authenticity" is rooted in folk songs' "real" origins, but we recognize these origins by the songs' authenticity and, in practice, the assessment of a song's realism is an assessment of its use of assumed conventions of realism... To be chosen as authentic, songs have to meet literary or political criteria---authenticity lies in a particular use of language, a particular treatment of narrative and imagery, a particular ideological position. The problem, then, is not whether folk songs did reflect real social conditions, but why some such reflections are taken by collectors to be authentic, some not. Whose ideology is reflected in such definitions of folk "realism"? (p. 113)

Frith suggests that judgments about authenticity do more to confirm the assumptions of the researcher about social relations than to investigate how authentic expression is accomplished by performers or evaluated by listeners.

Social realism provides some enticing explanations for the social context of musical taste and meaning. In many cases, clear connections can be drawn between social organization and musical form. Furthermore, questions of authenticity are important, even if the way they are answered often is loaded ideologically. For understanding contemporary popular music, though, social realism has clear limitations. Contemporary audiences are fragmented and diverse in taste and social class. New musical forms tend to cross market boundaries despite the music industry's attempts to manage markets, performers, and audiences carefully. Thus, audiences are never represented as directly as social realism would imply.
Social realism suggests that music's symbolic influence can be expressed in terms of the social group from which audience member and music emerges, but the unquestioned assumptions about homology, lyrical realism, and authenticity mitigate the explanatory power of these concepts for understanding the listening experience. To trace the meaning of music back to a fairly limited social context in this manner suggests an assumption about perceived influence rather than an exploration of actual influence. In cases where the audience member clearly does not belong to the group at question, the notion of realism takes on entirely new terms to fit the different set of experiences brought into the listening. For example, rap is a musical form that originated primarily with African-American performers and became established among African-American audiences. Over time, however, it resonated with white audiences as well. Social realist explanations about rap authentically reproducing life "on the streets" fail to explain the appeal to audiences made of white suburban youths. The explanatory power of social realism runs out at exactly the place where interesting questions about the diffuse nature of the listening experience are being formed.

**Social Movements**

Like the sociological and folklore studies discussed above, studies of music associated with social movements (and, in particular, those by rhetorical scholars) assume that the meanings of songs can be located in an ideological connection to the audiences. Song lyrics take their meanings from the shared beliefs of the movement; they are functional, therefore, to the group's cause, which tends to be a
political or cultural struggle of some kind. Music is purposive and persuasive for group members: It represents the group’s ideology and disseminates it, creating narratives that explain the struggle to the group members.

Rhetorical work on the music of social movements provides a good example of this type of study. Rhetorical studies focus exclusively on the lyrical content of songs, working from the assumption that these songs possess purposive effects, serving either their producers or the social groups that disseminate them. The lyrics are understood as alternative rhetorical products of social groups and rarely receive analysis as a separate, unique kind of experience.

One key assumption of this work is that music serves as a means of popular expression among members of social groups. Bloodworth (1975) makes this case about protest songs in the 1960s and early 1970s, which appealed to youths, he argues, who constituted a “generation . . . [that] communicated its values through music.” Bloodworth explores what he labels the expressive and instrumental purposes of song. Expressive purposes refer to those for which no immediate or long-range effect upon an audience is intended. Expressive purposes are always present, but a song “may gain an instrumental function as soon as it is heard by an audience” (p. 306). The instrumental function is key to rhetorical analysis. Bloodworth suggests, because this is the level at which music serves a communicative purpose beyond mere self-expression or artistic expression. In its instrumental function “music became a constant and reliable source for searching out certain themes” that are relevant to
members of this generation, such as protesting the Vietnam War and exploring social and cultural alienation (p. 306).

Bloodworth’s study is typical of rhetorical studies of song lyrics and studies of social movements in that it relies on realist assumptions. In this case, Bloodworth presumes that messages in songs by artists like Paul Simon and the Beatles speak for a generation. In addition, he warns students of rhetoric that when evaluating protest music, they must focus on differentiating between “inauthentic” commercial protest songs and “authentic” expression: “In the final analysis, the student of music as rhetoric must decide whether the artist being studied was attempting to express a genuine social concern in his songwriting, or whether he was strictly out to gain commercial success” (p. 306). Discerning between the two would appear to be a difficult critical task. After all, commercial constraints are part of the social influence on songwriters, whether or not they acknowledge or purport to ignore the constraints. Also, such distinctions rest on notions of intentionality, which are not easily observed or inferred by critics. According to Frith, such distinctions would more accurately suggest the political motivations of the researchers (how they define “authentic” expression) than those of the musical artist.

Other rhetorical studies draw conclusions about how songs are used by members of social movements, based on content analysis of the lyrics. In general, this research explores the way music serves such rhetorical functions as providing a way to encode and disseminate values and ideologies of the groups. For example, Carter emphasizes how narratives
in IWW work songs served to "regularly expose" workers to the ideology of the group:

One perennial way of dealing with hard times, oppression, bosses, or bitterly unbearable conditions is through song. A song tells the story simply. Heroes and villains are identified, struggles and crises are amplified, and the hopes for salvation and nirvana are shouted. Songs become means of uniting against and coping with a common enemy. (p. 365)

Mohrmann and Scott's (1976) study of song lyrics from the World War II era reveal how "general cultural values" were expressed and shared through such music. Similarly, S. Smith (1980) suggests that country music lyrics both "reflect and shape popular thought" through narratives. These studies all focus on song lyrics only and on the semantic content of the lyrics specifically.

In general, then, the rhetorical work on song lyrics shares the assumptions of folklore and sociological work about the "fit" between music and society--lyrics are interesting symbolically in that they serve as a medium for communication among members of a defined social group. Lyrics take their meanings from the social groups that produce or use them, and a homological relationship among lyrics and group members is presumed. While homological assumptions are not altogether inappropriate to the study of popular music, they are problematic in their assumed realist stance, especially given that most popular music audiences cannot be viewed as pre-standing social groups. Rhetorical analyses of lyrics and the accompanying realist stance seem to lead critics to make judgments about the authenticity of the work--judgments that do not question the political assumptions underlying the concept of an authentic culture.
Subcultures

Studies of subcultures and youth cultures are similar to the studies operating from social realist positions in that they focus on music's role in creating and maintaining social position. Subculture studies deal more directly with the question of homology, however, tying it to basic questions about identity. At the heart of the subculture concept are concepts of youth and collective identity. In subculture studies, identity is presumed to be something granted through participation in the subculture.

Youth subcultures, a frequent focus of research in British cultural studies, provide an example of this kind of social influence. As a social factor influencing the way music is received, subcultures provide a common grounding for constraining musical meaning. As Shuker (1994) explains:

[?]he relationship between pop music and youth subcultures was comprehensively explored in a number of studies during the 1970s and early 1980s. Collectively, these confirmed what became a frequently asserted thesis: that youth subcultures appropriate and innovate musical forms and styles as a basis for their identity, and, in so doing, assert a countercultural politics. (p. 237)

In subculture studies, a sense of belonging is developed in conjunction with "style," and part of that sense of belonging often involves musical choice. Music's symbolic influence is tied to the meanings the group attached to it, and so musical taste becomes a marker of belonging in the subculture, a stylistic trapping tied closely to identity. In addition, the "countercultural politics" enacted by a subculture mean that the meanings of the music are mostly organized around a politics of resistance. Thus, in subculture studies, the meaning of music is
considered mostly to be determined at the group level rather than in individual response to music.

Subcultures are credited for providing their members with coherent responses to mainstream influences; thus, they are often celebrated for their oppositional politics and appropriation of dominant media. For many scholars, then, subcultures have come to represent an idyllic response to the hegemonic forces of the mainstream. Subcultures introduce their own influence on their members, as well, and are usually written about as providing a structured lifestyle—a homology—which helps to make style a means to identity.

Homological explanations for the meaning of music in subcultures create as many questions about symbolic influence as they answer, however. If homology can be described as the nature of the fit between the group’s music, its ideology, and its material conditions, then homological relationships among these factors may be easy to characterize but difficult to explain. One can diagram a structural relationship among hippy music, culture, and drug use, for example, but an explanation of how these factors relate will not necessarily tell much about how a given member of the subculture comes to accept the structural relationship. Middleton (1990) worries that such analysis, then, is “flawed above all by the uncompromising drive to homology” (p. 161). Shuker (1994) agrees, suggesting, “in these studies the connection between music and subculture is drawn much too tightly” (p. 241). Further, subculture studies tend to “freeze” the group in time and space, failing to acknowledge the possibilities for change and development.
Shuker criticizes subculture studies further, pointing out, first, that the concept’s value is limited as an explanation for symbolic influence of popular music. Not all youths fall into subcultures, he explains; in particular, girls are much less likely to participate in such groups than are boys. Thus, the majority of subculture studies focus on boys in subcultures, reflecting a masculine bias in the choice of the concept. Shuker’s second criticism—one he shares with Middleton and Frith—is that subculture studies tend to understate analyses of the music used in these groups. In their tendency to focus study at the group level, scholars tend to treat the music as a given.

**Taste Cultures**

Beyond the relatively closed category of subculture, taste cultures are social formations that provide structure for symbolic influence yet are not considered to function with the same kind of homological tautness that characterizes subcultures. The concept of taste culture derives from the work of Bourdieu (1984) on consumption, class, and the formation of taste. Bourdieu’s studies of leisure practice found social class to be a fair indicator of taste preferences. Subsequent research, however, has turned to social implications of taste preferences that accentuate cultural links more than material ones. A taste culture consists of groups of people who share similar cultural practices, even though the members may possess varied socioeconomic backgrounds. Researchers have found the taste culture useful as a concept for studying popular music because it takes into account how music audiences arrange themselves according to market, genre, and fandom.
Although homology is not usually a factor in studies of taste cultures, the critical questions concerning identity and participation in a common culture are still vital. The taste culture is a useful rhetorical concept because it provides a means by which to understand how individuals come to invest themselves in cultural artifacts and how they receive a sense of identity and affective reinforcement in return.

Taste cultures describe symbolic influence in audiences by connecting music to perceived identity. Lewis (1992) writes that there is “plenty of evidence . . . that people choose their music not only for its message, sound and/or danceability but also for the ways in which it can bolster their self-image and . . . send strong reflective messages about them to the rest of their social world” (p. 37). For example, Gonzalez (1991) studies Bob Dylan’s album, Blood on the Tracks, to learn how Dylan’s music creates lyrical and musical messages with which a specific group of fans is likely to identify.

Music situates its audience, according to a taste-culture perspective, linking members together according to shared values and perception of self rather than through shared material conditions or participation in a cause. “This is not rhetoric as a way to knowledge,” says Gonzalez (1991), “but rhetoric as a way of being in the world and coming to respond to that world through our symbolic encompassment of it” (p. 319).

Taste cultures respond to the problems with subcultures by putting aside the issue of homology or, rather, by inverting it, asking how a particular genre or performer provides a means by which to create shared values. Since the concept of taste culture is a relatively more open
concept than that of a subculture, it also provides a means for explaining the wider range of experience people have with music. One cannot assume that anyone who listens to a given type of music shares a perceived social bond with all others who listen to it. But the size and characteristics of taste cultures are not determined by anything but the music, so taste cultures provide a useful means to show how a particular musical genre tends to "situate" or "enscribe" its audience, as Gonzalez puts it.

Taste culture is a useful concept because it explains a central aspect of what fans do with music in a listening experience--they value it according to a sense of taste. Taste culture is also useful in describing how audiences are constructed and manipulated by the market or, less cynically, how fans deal with marketed music. Taste culture explains fandom as a social act connecting value judgments and enjoyment.

Two recently articulated models of popular music provide alternative takes on the concept of taste culture, responding in distinct ways to limitations of the notions of taste culture, subcultures, and social realism. Frith's (1995, 1981) discursive formations and Grosberg's (1992, 1992a) effective apparatus provide socially rooted explanations for the formation of taste and the production of audiences, as well as intriguing explanations of identity, musical value, and the role of authenticity. These approaches respond to questions of musical value and meaning in sharply different ways; thus, they complement each other well.
Discursive Formations

The "essence of popular culture is making judgments and assessing differences," says Frith (1995, p. 16). But cultural studies neglects the "importance of value judgments for popular culture" (p. 8). Frith's model for discursive formations of popular music provides a socio-cultural grounding for aesthetic judgments about popular music by integrating two sociological models—Becker's art worlds and Bourdieu's cultural capital. According to Frith:

Becker suggests that to understand art objects and people's response to them we have to understand the institutional and discursive processes (the art world) in which they are constructed as art objects, as works to which a particular sort of aesthetic response is socially appropriate. Bourdieu uses the concept of cultural capital to relate cultural values to social structural variables (social class variables in his case) to questions of power and hierarchy that Becker puts to one side. For Bourdieu, in other words, the aesthetic response can only be understood in reference to the social organization of taste which patterns people's lifestyle, morality, and habitus. (p. 36)

Frith's integrated model describes three discursive formations or music worlds into which music can be placed. "Music," he writes, "is valued according to three types of discursive practice": "the bourgeois world," "the folk music world," and the "commercial music world" (p. 36). The musical norms, expectations, and values of these worlds provide common ground for justifications of musical taste, and a given response to music may derive from participation in any of these three discourses.

Frith distinguishes among the three discursive formations by describing how musical skill, production, and reception are organized in each. The bourgeois world, or the "art music" discourse is organized around a particular notion of musical scholarship, a particular concept of musical talent, and a particular sort of music event, in which music's essential value is its provision of a transcendent experience that is, on the one hand, ineffable and
uplifting but, on the other, only available to those with the right sort of knowledge, the right sorts of interpretive skills. (p. 39)

The folk music world rests on the assumption that 'ideally, there is no separation of art and life' (p. 39). Social realist and authentic culture issues define this discursive formation, which puts emphasis on "purity" and "tradition" (p. 40). In this discursive formation, the idea that popular music is music of the people is a central assumption that gets enacted in various ways. The folk music world is organized around a set of rituals—the festival, the club—that "attempt to minimize the distance between performer and audience" (p. 41).

The third discursive formation is the commercial one, whose "values are created and organized around the music industry, around the means and possibilities of turning sounds into commodities" (p. 41). The musical practices that organize the commercial world are based on the idea of transcendence and fun. Commercial music is used as a part of everyday life and as an escape from everyday life, and distinctions between performer and audience, between production and consumption, are more clear than in the folk world.

Frith's perspective on music discourses extends the study of taste cultures, offering a more detailed explanation of how taste is structured at a social level, outside of the individual. In these formations, various aspects of musical performing and listening can be explained with reference to the same core structure. The discourses Frith describes are larger and more broad than taste cultures; in fact, they may be taken to inform taste cultures, providing a common organizational structure into which competing aesthetic judgments may be
placed. In this sense, this concept represents Frith’s response to the problem of how taste cultures are formed by individuals. There are no guarantees that individuals experience the same music in the same way--taste cultures may be loose aggregates of different types of people getting different uses from the same music. In the discourses presented by Frith, however, contradictory responses--always a part of popular music--can be accounted for.

The discursive formation is a useful concept to a rhetorical perspective because it provides an explanation for the role of social structure in the music listening experience. Most significantly, the concept provides an overarching explanation that connects important concepts--taste, identity, and authenticity.

Value judgments about taste are the currency of popular culture, says Frith, and he finds them important not just because they reveal musical tastes but also for the way they construct taste. Identity, then, is related not just to the connection of music and perceived taste culture but also to a way of valuing music. Music fans are connected to one another by the kinds of arguments they make as well as by the kinds of taste reflected in their judgments.

Music fans’ arguments about taste reflect competing judgments about rock as well, and Frith says that such arguments are important because they reveal the character of authenticity. Authenticity, in Frith’s view, is not an essential quality of a given piece of music but a kind of argument fans make about music--a socially constructed idea that derives from the perspective of the discourse. Authenticity--although a mark of ideology more than anything else--is important in the
way it connects to other concepts, creating multi-dimensional understanding of musical style. For example, Frith says that an investigation of “authenticity and facade” would yield a multi-dimensional understanding of punk, while, in contrast, at country’s heart is the interplay between “authenticity and sentimentality” (p. 90).

Discursive formations are more broad than taste cultures and allow for more leeway in articulating connections between music and listeners. They allow for competing responses to the same music by listeners participating in the same formation; thus, they are significantly dynamic. The concept of the discursive formation is especially useful to rhetoric because of Frith’s special attention to the structure of values and how they are expressed, musically and verbally, in arguments about taste.

**Affective Apparatuses**

Grossberg offers a model of something very like a taste culture but that moves in a different direction from Frith’s discursive approach. Grossberg identifies structures of listening that work from the bottom up rather than from a top-down organization; thus, musical taste and meaning are not articulated to an audience of subjects but audiences actively create the social through their engagement with culture. Focusing on affect—the idea that rock and roll is supposed to be fun—rather than on meaning and the rationalization of aesthetic value, Grossberg (1992a) reconceptualizes taste cultures in post-structural terms. Popular music, he writes, is “related to meanings, but not reducible to them, for an event, even with a specifiable
meaning, will have radically different effects depending upon its relations to our affective lives" (Grossberg, p. 164). Grossberg’s general concept for dealing with affect is the “affective apparatus,” which he uses to describe “interactive contexts” that are larger than more individual investments of affect. An affective apparatus, like a taste culture or discursive formation, is a concept that describes a structure of social relations that can be used to describe individual responses to music. But in Grossberg’s conceptualization, the individual is much more of an individual; investment of affect depends more on the structure of desires in the person than on the representations of affect in the artifact or culture.

To illustrate these ideas, Grossberg examines the huge success of rock artist Bruce Springsteen, arguing that—at its height—Springsteen’s popularity came not because the meaning of his music suddenly became more significant to more people. Rather, Springsteen picked up fans incrementally throughout his career, adding new sets of fans whose affective investment came to be centered on "The Boss."

Grossberg reconceives critical questions raised in the subculture and taste culture literature, framing them in affective terms. For example, affective difference, he says, “refers to rock and roll's relation to the dominant culture, to the kind of boundary with which it surrounds itself” (1992a, p. 171). Affective difference may lead rock to construct itself in opposition to, dismissive of, or competitive with the mainstream. Affective difference is a concept that extends Hall’s strategic readings as a way of appropriating the dominant culture. Affective alliance refers to “the ways in which groups of fans invest
their energy into rock and roll itself*--in other words, the value structure in which fans participate. Affective structure is the actual shapes that fun can take in the rock and roll world--the musical forms, concerts, videos, dances, or whatever material context frames the investment of affect.

For Grossberg, identity, authenticity, and taste judgments all derive from affective investment. Authenticity is not ideological: what is real is what the listener feels. Fans know what is authentic because they feel it, not because there is a rule or meaning that suggests authenticity. As a result, taste judgments are simply after-the-fact representations of the experience and not significant to the experience with music. Identity with a group arises from similar ways of experiencing events, similar kinds of affective investment; the social structure, then, is an affective one and not a signifying one.

Grossberg's affect-based approach provides rhetoric with a way to deal with taste questions without reducing them to questions of signification. Affective investment is at the heart of taste, and critics can give attention to taste by focusing on the level and kinds of affect that are invested into a musical text. The "meaning" of music for fans can be described in terms of the *jouissance*--the pleasurable response to the musical text.

Of course, the affective apparatus is not helpful to rhetoric in the sense that its assumptions preclude a rhetorical approach. Grossberg would seem to deny a discursive structure to listening and to enjoying music in that he conceives of music as all about affect, enjoyment, and the immediate physical response to sound. Yet, as Frith
points out, one must learn to listen to music just as one must learn to
read. Even affective responses are, at least in part, socially
constructed and subject to signifying frameworks. Listening to music is
always located in a situation, and that situation is always located
within a social structure; for example, dancing is appropriate at a rock
concert but not a classical music concert. Certain kinds of dancing--
e.g., "slamming"--are appropriate to certain kinds of rock music
concerts. Affective responses are shaped by social norms and
expectations and vice versa.

Conclusion

This section of the literature review begins and ends with the
assumption that the ascription of musical meaning, judgments about
taste, and other responses to music's symbolic nature are located in the
sociality of the listener. In the approaches discussed, the presence of
social systems--the music industry, capitalism--or social groups--
subcultures, social movements--are the best possible indicators of how
individuals respond to popular music. At issue, though, is the nature
of the fit between social organization and listening.

According to Adorno, listening is a product of capitalist social
production: the music industry and the capitalist system determine the
nature of listening and the response to form in clear-cut ways. A
number of approaches have challenged Adorno's assumptions, yet a good
many replace the commercial with a drive to homology. In studies of
subcultures, social movements, and other social groups, the response to
music is located unproblematically in the homological connection of
cultural practice and society. The response to music for a member of a
subculture, for example, is not explored so much as it is interpellated, based on the presumed authentic reading practice of the group.

The ideas of Frith and Grossberg are useful, then, in reconceptualizing how homological relationships are understood by popular music scholars. Discursive formations and affective apparatuses demonstrate how the diffuse nature of popular culture can be approached in ways that need not depend on social realist assumptions. In Frith’s approach, what is real, what is authentic, is located in discursive structure, replete with the contradictions, ideological posturings, and nuances that characterize discourse. In Grossberg’s approach, authenticity is defined by the affective investment of the consumers. Grossberg emphasizes popular music’s most basic function—enjoyment—and builds from there. He questions the tendency to make fun part of signifying social structure.

To conclude, one can identify social structures in which responses to music can be located and explained, but in the popular music context, listeners’ responses are too diverse to be generalized or presumed. While this seems like an obvious point, it needs repeating given the social realist assumptions that govern many of the studies of music and the social context for music. In short, the tendency to read culture off of texts needs to be questioned, or it needs to be warranted in another way.

In order to study popular music’s rhetorical dimensions adequately, critics must leave musical texts and their influence open to various kinds of readings, traceable to various levels of social involvement. In saying that music must not be understood as autonomous
but as intertextual, critics also must see that its connections--its meanings, its value--are also part of larger structures. In this chapter, I have explored a number of possibilities for identifying what form those structures may take. Still at issue, however, is the diffuse nature of popular music. Listeners’ experiences with music are fragmented; they cannot be located in a clear situation or social context and they cannot even be considered to represent the interpretation of a message. Conceptualizing and studying popular music as an intertextual phenomenon is necessary but not sufficient, then, for understanding music’s rhetorical nature.

The critic’s task in studying popular music is to define the perimeters of the musical text: to study music as intertextual but also to examine the range of contexts in which responses can be located. In the process of defining the text, the critic should ask how the text gains its efficacy through interaction with other relevant contexts. The following chapter articulates a theoretical description of what this implies for a rhetorical conceptualization of music and, consequently, what the study of popular music might look like based on this conceptualization.
CHAPTER 3

ARTICULATION OF A PROPOSED RHETORICAL SCHEMA
FOR STUDYING POPULAR MUSIC

Conceptualizing and studying popular music as rhetoric requires critical strategies that expose the formal and social levels of the listening experience. In the preceding chapter, my review of literature demonstrated that neither formal nor social explanations are sufficient to explain music’s symbolic influence. Understanding popular music’s rhetorical dimension requires a re-conceptualizing of rhetoric, an understanding of the rhetoric of musical form as more than an encoded message in need of translation. Understanding popular music requires the critic to explore the intertextuality of music as well as the contextual bases for responses to music. Rather than going more deeply into the musical text for answers about its rhetoricality, critics must go outside the text to find the contexts in which a given response or potential reading of music makes sense.

My purpose in this chapter is to articulate a critical schema or model that is general enough to incorporate various formal and contextual concepts suggested by the literature review but still specific enough to provide adequate explanation of music’s symbolic influence in particular cases.
As a critical tool, my proposed schema is not intended as a means to evaluate the quality of music--what makes it effective as persuasion or significant as an aesthetic form--but to explicate symbolic influence as a dimension of the listening process in the popular music context. My interest centers, then, on developing a general explanation for how popular music works as rhetoric--how it works as a potential source of symbolic influence. My goal in this schema is to theorize the audience's response to music's symbolic nature, exploring what is available for a listener to make sense of a piece of music, what the music contributes to the meaning-making process, and what the listener brings to that process. Thus, my aim is to describe the structure and constraints that govern the symbolic aspects of the listening process.

Based on my critical evaluation of prior studies of popular music, I conceptualize the symbolic process of listening as follows: Listeners' rhetorical responses to music--which may include aesthetic judgments, attributions of meaning, or pleasure in particular musical forms--are located in contexts that exist beyond the individual musical text. Whether enacted by the critic or lay listener, rhetorical responses to music involve the production of context-based connotations that become attached to the primary signification or the musical data. The connotations (secondary meanings) produced can be understood as fragments of larger discursive contexts that inform both the production and apprehension of popular music. Studying music as rhetoric requires critics to adopt the notion, most recently advanced by McGee (1990), that criticism is a performance and constitutes a response to music that is, in fact, a form of listening. Performing criticism means to trace
textual fragments from the artifact to the contexts outside the musical data, demonstrating how the text participates in and receives its symbolic dimension from these contexts. I now will explicate in detail the various components of the schema.

Components of the Rhetorical Schema

**Perspective on Criticism**

The first component included in the schema is the critical process and its performative nature. By *performative*, I mean that criticism constitutes an elaborate rhetorical response to music that can be useful in developing an understanding of how rhetorical processes occur. Understanding criticism as performance means to stress the role of the critic in creating a rhetorical artifact “suitable for criticism” within the constraints of a fragmented culture. As performance, criticism goes beyond analysis of music’s “message” to exploration of the factors that contribute to the critic’s own response to the music.

Critical performance assumes that there is no such thing as critical distance. An act of rhetorical criticism is understood as a tentative explanation for how a rhetorical transaction has occurred in a given situation—a situation in which the critic him or herself has participated. The purpose of criticism is not strictly to apply theory to discourse but to use the critical process to create rhetorical theory. Brummett describes how critical performance leads to production of rhetorical theory:

> [R]hetorical criticism is the way in which the critic himself or herself, perhaps acting as a representative participant, actually did assemble message sets in a rhetorical transaction. A rhetorical theory might thus be the logic or pattern behind that experience... how anybody in a given time and space might have experienced a rhetorical transaction. (p. 658)
Criticism, then, provides a way to explain and demonstrate how discourse works in actual experience. The role of the critic is to make the processes of rhetoric explicit, to call attention to forces at work in everyday rhetorical transactions, and to explicate rhetorical processes (Foss, 1989, p. 3). The critic, supported by a knowledge of rhetorical theory and critical practice, explains the symbolic work of the text—how it presents meanings to its audiences.

In this perspective, criticism exemplifies "a commitment to process, rather than product. Human reality is viewed not as facts and variables that can be measured and manipulated but as a process constantly under construction—one that is unfolding and resistant to closure" (Foss, Foss, and Trapp, 1991, p. 330). As performance, then, criticism exemplifies a commitment to "embodiment—to understanding through lived experience, participatory ways of knowing, and intimate encounter rather than detached observation" (Foss, Foss, and Trapp, p. 330). Criticism as performance requires critics to get involved, to experience culture and respond to it, and to record their experience.

Such a critical stance derives from a real need to make sense of discourse in a changing society. McGee’s work on text and context presents a discussion of how the fragmented nature of postmodern society requires a performative critical stance. McGee suggests that rhetorical critics would benefit from adopting a perspective that the roles of audiences and rhetors have been reversed in postmodern contemporary society. In his formulation, the most crucial task of readers, critics, and audiences is text construction, while the most crucial task of
rhetors is interpretation. In effect, the only way to communicate in this “fractured culture is to provide readers/audiences with dense, truncated fragments which cue them to produce a finished discourse in their minds” (p. 274).

Working basically from a pragmatic perspective on rhetoric, I find this argument a bit overstated—McGee’s insistence that communication is possible only in rough, suggestive ways obscures the essentially rhetorical notion that members of a given society share many cultural commonplaces: they create and interpret discourse with relation to the same doxa. A more pragmatic model would suggest the exchange of fragments as a typical part of any communicative activity—that communication can be analyzed according to what works. Call them fragments, symbols, or appeals, communication occurs only when commonplace assumptions can be built on and shared. I find McGee’s concept useful, then, despite this epistemological disagreement, because his framing of concepts like text, context, and fragment provide language to describe the performative nature of the listening experience. Using fragments as a conceptual link between text and context provides critics with a conceptual tool to describe the listener’s role in the construction of a text, thereby including the response to music in critical analysis.

Thus, while the primary task of speakers and other producers of discourse is to interpret culture by providing perspectives on it, critics’ “first job as professional consumers of discourse is inventing a text suitable for criticism” (p. 274). In inventing texts, critics emphasize the performative nature of their practice, producing texts for
publics rather than interpreting given texts.

Thinking of the critical act as a performance in which the critic produces the text is a useful response to the key issues explored in the literature review--choosing the most appropriate means of translating musical form and identifying the social contexts that contain responses to music. The most appropriate way to conceive of form, I argued, is to consider the ways in which form is realized in listening situations. Criticism as performance emphasizes the critic's listening experience, incorporating response and theoretical understanding of that response. Working with a flexible notion of social contexts is key, I argued, because musical response occurs with reference to social context but is not reducible to the context. Criticism as performance involves the critic in a process of negotiating response to the text with the context that warrants it.

An example can demonstrate how criticism works as a parallel to audience response yet moves beyond it. As Lanham (1993) describes it, rhetorical analysis involves "toggling between looking at" discourse and looking "through it" (p. 170). **Looking at discourse** is what audiences typically do, and it is not in itself a critical act. In **looking through discourse**, critics are able to offer explanation and understanding of the everyday function of discourse in the world, providing strategies by which to navigate through it and make sense of it.

In the case of the critic studying popular music, the same general principles articulated above apply, with the exception that instead of dealing with discourse, the critic is dealing with musical data.
Looking at data means a focus on the primary level of significance—the immediately identifiable signs that comprise the musical event. Looking through data requires an understanding of the layers of interpretation and cultural mediation that play a role in how listeners construct a musical text. Constructing the musical text is more difficult than constructing a text based on verbal data because so much of the musical data are abstract and nonsignifying. But because music is abstract and seemingly reaches listeners unmediated, constructing the musical text is perhaps even more vital. Understanding these mediations and how abstractions produce significance requires attention to the structures and constraints that affect responses to the musical data.

**Musical Data**

The second component of the schema is the musical data—the sound of the music and everything encompassed by the musical sound—its pitch, volume, duration, source—and all that the description *sound* implies. Middleton discusses this aspect in terms of denotation, or the level of primary signification. Here I am talking about music as "the organization of noise" (Attali, 1977) or the end product of the collection of performances that has gone into producing a given piece of music. In other words, sound-data include all that can be described as comprising the primary level of significance or the "surface" form of music (Barthes, 1990)—the notes, chords, rhythms, and various other identifiable musicological elements.

In the discussion of translation in the previous chapter, I argued that the level of primary signification is difficult to separate from the secondary level of signification because of the cultural mediation
attached to it. Because listeners' experiences with music are never neutral, music is always attached to secondary levels of significance, corrupting the purity of the physical data. The problem concerns level of abstraction, then; how do critics choose which level of abstraction is appropriate for describing and understanding musical data? Since description itself is an abstraction, as Becker argues (1971, p. 23), descriptions of sound data themselves must be explored for contextual warrants that govern the choice of descriptive category. Such warrants will become central fragments in the text constructed by the critic.

Text

Since musical sound data are abstract, the response to them by the listener is a key factor in determining what exactly the text is. The notion of text is at issue because audiences typically do not deal with all texts in equal fashion. They are exposed to some only once; others, they hear repeated or, perhaps, parts of them repeated. The message culled from the mosaic of rhetoric is a result of a partially unconscious selection of certain texts and obliviousness to others. The text may be understood as a product of the rhetorical response to the mosaic of available rhetorical messages.

In addition, the notion of musical text is compromised by all that listeners put into the experience with music. When listeners experience songs, they hear music, performers, styles of singing and instrumentation, genres (sets of similar texts), popular culture, and culture. They hear something that usually can be identified as a specific text, but they also hear a host of connotations and mediations attached to the text. The eventual apprehension of a musical "text,"
then, is really the combination of a number of fragments, and these fragments are parts of contexts that extend beyond the musical experience itself or in which the musical experience is embedded.

The musical text, in this schema, is a functional term, a handy way to describe the work that audience members put into responding to music. Fish’s (1980) notion of text as the product of an interpretive community is a useful way to approach text. Text, he says, is a “structure of meaning that is obvious and inescapable from the perspective of whatever interpretive assumptions happen to be in force” (p. vii). I would add a major caveat to that definition—the idea that in the popular music listening experience, the interpretive assumptions themselves are under question. For example, the interpretive assumptions of a given taste culture (a kind of interpretive community) play an important role in structuring a listener’s response. But in the contemporary world of popular music, the identification of a taste culture as a distinct interpretive community is mitigated by the multiple contextual possibilities that constrain the listening experience.

**Context**

The fourth component of the schema is context, or patterns of experience that govern the ascription of meaning at the secondary level of significance. Communication scholars long have considered context an important concept because contexts frames all communication experiences, affecting the processes that occur within it. Communication contexts can take many forms—physical, social, psychological, cultural—and because of their varied nature, they overlap; thus, any musical
communication event occurs within a number of contexts simultaneously.

Although context is frequently described as a container within which communication occurs, I prefer to define it as something less situational and more functional, as patterns of experience. My definition is based on the work of I. A. Richards, who defines context as a "cluster of events that recur together" or a "set of entities (things or events) related in a certain way" (Richards, 1991, p. 113). Such a definition ties context more closely to the process of generating meaning because when "any part of a context appears, the possibility exists that the entire context will be called up and remembered" (Foss, Foss, & Trapp, 1991, p. 33). Richards describes this process:

In these contexts one item--typically a word--takes over the duties of parts which can then be omitted from the recurrence. There is thus an abridgement of the context . . . . When this abridgement happens, what the sign or word--the item with these delegated powers--means is the missing part of the context. (p. 113)

Richards explains that "some residual effect" remains imprinted in individuals' consciousness from prior experiences, and these residual effects are recalled when signs, representing and referring to the original context, are experienced.

The production of musical signs is inextricably linked to context because the two co-determine each other: Signs are meaningful because they trigger the residual effects of the contexts in which they were first experienced. With context and sign connected in this way, the notion of context becomes particularly important to music's symbolic operation because, from this perspective, musical signs receive their meanings from the contexts of which they are a part. Music is
meaningful because its system of signs and codes participate in identifiable contexts.

The notion of context as pattern of experience has use for studying popular music because it allows the critic to describe the functioning of music’s abstract qualities. “Because of its qualities of abstractness,” says Frith (1987), “music is an individuating form. We absorb songs into our own lives and rhythms into our own bodies: they have a looseness of reference that makes them immediately accessible” (p. 139). Thus, music’s referents cannot be pinned down easily; music does not refer to some set meaning that is “out there.” Instead, music is abstract not because it is a nonsignifying form but because it represents an abstraction of a context; in Richards’ terms, it suggests the parts of the context that are missing in the sign immediately before the listener.

Music does not lead listeners to specific meanings, but its contextual fragments lead listeners to contexts in which rhetorical response is contingent and varied, yet somewhat constrained by the pattern of experiences in force. Meaning emerges through engagement with the contexts alluded to by the text. In other words, abstract qualities become meaningful not because they represent meanings but because they are signs of the text’s participation in given contexts. Ascription of meaning to context, then, involves a certain amount of choice (or habit) as the listener is cued to different contexts by fragments encoded in the text.

Richards uses the term **comparison-fields** to describe how individuals construct a message based on experience with previous
contexts. The data at hand are experienced as part of a particular context, depending upon the individual's experience with that context. The salience of the context may come from conscious or unconscious responses to the symbol; thus, the response may be a product of habit, extensive experience, or a combination of previous patterns of experience.

A textual fragment that refers to a bigger context does not have a certain meaning as a result of the reference, but its potential meanings are constrained by its operation in that context. The meanings that emerge for the listener are dependent on the structure of interpretation--personal factors constraining choice among contexts and as well as the existence of shared contexts themselves.

The kinds of contexts called up by cues in the sound data can vary: A context may comprise a small cluster of personal events, recognized or pieced together by an individual listener, or it may include events that have a clear social basis outside the listener. For example, genres, or group of songs following the same kinds of rules of arrangement, may constitute a context.

Context may be placed into any number of general categories, but three dimensions of context seem especially salient—the social, aesthetic, and cultural. I present these categories as heuristic devices rather than as clearly distinct realms of experience; these dimensions are likely to overlap in any given piece of music.

The first and most obvious dimension is the aesthetic, which, in this case, is primarily but not exclusively musical. The aesthetic dimension of contexts concerns how music functions as an artistic
endeavor, how its creation and reception revolve around musicological issues and issues associated with the relative value of art. Frith’s discussion of discursive formations in useful here because it provides a way to link two common understandings of aesthetics, both of which are vital to this project—-aesthetics as beauty or appealing qualities of works and aesthetics as philosophical inquiry into the nature of art. A broad definition understands aesthetics as the way that artworks are arranged and performed, within the constraints of a socially formed discourse, in order to evoke a measure of appeal from auditors. Frith’s discursive formation explains aesthetic value in such a way that it includes reasoned communication about musical taste as well as experiential understandings of aesthetics.

Aesthetic contexts, then, may refer to any cluster of events associated with how music is performed, arranged, or valued. Such a cluster may include established styles (rock, pop, soul), genres (ballads, rockers), or methods of distribution (singles, cds). Aesthetic contexts also may include modes of artistic production—-e.g., surrealist, parody, modernist—or micro-issues related to the peculiarities of performance—-e.g., a style of singing, a kind of guitar solo, a mood evoked through a combination of instruments. The critic has some measure of choice in deciding on aesthetic contexts, particularly because listeners often are not fully aware of how music is working aesthetically. Connections among songs or artists may exist, but listeners may not have the musicological skills for recognizing the similar elements or the language for describing the connection.
The second dimension of context included in the schema is the social—cues in the music that relate to clusters of interpersonal and group events and that involve a sense of identification. The discussion of subcultures and taste cultures in the previous chapter provides numerous ways of understanding how social contexts come to be apprehendable in music. Social factors may derive from interpersonal associations—for example, music may remind listeners of another person or group with whom they often listen to music—or derive from a sense of group belonging—for example, black music, labor music, women’s music. Listening to music that is perceived as music representing a certain kind of social group would not necessarily create a social link with the group represented, however. The link is primarily a matter of perception, based upon what may or may not be very real homological ties between music and a given group. A preference for country music, for example, may be tied to a listener’s desire (conscious or unconscious) to identify with a perceived group of country-music listeners.

The final dimension of context included in the schema is one that I label cultural for lack of a more precise term. What I mean by cultural is something like what rhetoricians mean by the term doxa—the shared assumptions and commonplaces of a culture. In this category, I include anything that is part of the knowledge base of the listener and that the listener brings to the music (or what the music brings to the listener).

The cultural context is the location where music relates and fits with other cultural practices—with everyday experience. The cultural context works through the musical text at a variety of levels and always
constitutes part of the response even if audience members may not be specifically aware of it; thus, the cultural framing of the listening experience refers not only to what is conscious and knowable but also to the unconscious. The cultural context, as a pattern of experience, may be unique to the listener but already may be in place socially. One of the roles of music is to situate the listener within culture.

Before concluding, one more important issue related to the use of the schema in criticism needs exploring: how is the critical work produced through the schema evaluated? When does the critic know that the performance of criticism is complete and adequate? In rhetorical analysis, the concept *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, occupies a central place in determining the adequacy of critical arguments. If rhetoric is built on a tension between appearances and reality, as various scholars from McGee and Lanham back to Plato and Aristotle have suggested, then there is no external criterion for truth or reality to which rhetoricians can appeal to determine the adequacy of their arguments. Instead, adequacy in rhetorical criticism is connected to the social aspects of arguments—whether or not the critic made claims that, to his or her peers, are reasonable and compelling.

Standards for adequacy in rhetorical criticism generally revolve around the notion of criticism functioning as practical reasoning—argumentation built not upon appeals to universal truths but upon appeals to socially constructed truths and standards for articulating perspectives. For example, Foss (1983) describes four basic standards for adequacy in rhetorical criticism: justification of claims according to "community" standards and norms of argument, recognition of human

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choice in the process of rhetorical engagement, coherent presentation of a theoretical framework, and capacity to incorporate opposing perspectives into the critical judgment.

Applying these standards to the critical work suggested by the schema, I would hold critics to two general criteria—internal and external effectiveness of arguments. Internal effectiveness is the coherence of the argument and consistency of its logical inferences; external effectiveness refers to the potential acceptance of claims by critical audiences.

In practical terms, criticism articulated via the proposed schema differs from other critical arguments primarily in that it places emphasis on the notion of context in establishing effective arguments. Context serves as a potential commonplace for producers and consumers of musical texts, but the critic must go beyond cataloguing relevant contexts to an explanation for how various relevant contexts lend credibility to the interpretation. Critics must demonstrate that the rhetorical response to music occurs within the framework created by the intersection of knowable contexts. Thus, critics must include all relevant contexts in the critical argument as well as offering explanations that do not ignore the tensions that exist within contexts. For all contexts included in the description, the critic should demonstrate potential effects.

Contexts should be held to an external standard of coherence as well. Ideally, critical readers should be able to identify similar contexts and similar tensions operating on the same texts and should be able to follow the logical inferences made by the critic—-inferences
that range from identification of context to explanation of the response to the text. In short, adequate criticism using the proposed schema should provide a coherent and sound picture of text as intersection of contexts, and it should be as inclusive as possible—neither leaving important contexts out of the picture or stressing the significance of certain contexts without warranting the claims to significance.

Conclusion

Studying music requires critics to develop strategies for dealing with the abstract nature of music and its potentially endless connotations. In order to address adequately the music listening experience, rhetorical critics must conceive of music as embedded; they must understand the text as the product of a listening experience, a union of socialized listening performance with a suggestive musical data source rather than as an autonomous message to be translated.

In this proposed schema, the musical text is re-conceptualized as a collection of fragments that derive from various social, cultural, and aesthetic contexts. Text, according to the schema, is defined by a given auditor's response to musical data. This textual response may vary for auditors because each auditor brings a different set of experiences to the listening experience. Understanding how a given text was formed is possible, then, through a process of tracing textual fragments outward to their contextual basis. By employing a notion of criticism as performance, critics of popular music could use this schema to "construct" a text by tracing out the contexts that inform it.

According to this schema, studying music as rhetoric does not mean interpreting music or finding its true meaning—true to the translation
method or true to the audience it represents. Studying music means
invoking the spirit of rhetoric as the realm of the contingent and the
possible, finding the potentiality for musical meaning within the
intersection of contexts suggested by music. To perform rhetorical
criticism of music, my proposed schema suggests, is to construct a text
by exploring the critic’s own response to it: to construct a text by
elaborating on the contexts that form it.
CHAPTER 4

ILLUSTRATION OF THE PROPOSED SCHEMA: FRAGMENTS OF CONTEXT
IN THE TEXT OF “ROCK MUSIC”

To this point, my discussion of popular music and the rhetorical response to it has been somewhat abstract, focusing on theoretical components for a rhetorical schema for studying music rather than on musical texts themselves. Such abstraction has been necessary because the nature of popular music and its reception are diverse: a more concrete theoretical apparatus would compromise the broad explanatory power required to explicate diverse listening experiences accurately.

The purpose of the schema, however, is to serve as an aid to performing rhetorical criticism of popular music, and criticism requires work with cultural artifacts. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to make the relative abstractions of the schema more concrete by employing it in a study of a listening experience associated with the song “Rock Music” by the Pixies. Through study of this text, I hope to demonstrate how understanding of popular music as a social, culturally grounded, intertextual phenomenon can be accomplished through rhetorical criticism. I also hope to demonstrate the utility of the schema in rhetorical criticism.
Songs are convenient starting points for the critical analysis of listeners' response to music--songs are, after all, typically what fans mean by a musical text. But I have been arguing that music's symbolic work can be understood best in the response to songs rather than in the formal qualities of the song (whether those qualities are identified by musicological or symbolic concepts). By moving from the song to the response, critics can investigate a new realm of data--significant experiential contexts that provide a framework for the responses to popular music. Although I begin my critical response with a focus on a single song, the key difference between my approach and a more musicological approach is that I assume the song is a starting point that leads critics outside the musical text and toward the contexts that comprise a rhetorical response to music. The schema provides a means for mapping this response to music--a way to explicate the listening experience and to discover the text formed by the response.

Critical Artifact

As a starting point for my illustration, I have chosen the song, "Rock Music," by the Pixies, from *Bossanova*, their fifth studio album. The Boston-bred Pixies recorded six albums between 1987 and 1992 before disbanding. In that time, they received critical acclaim and a measure of success, in terms of record sales (over 300,000 copies of *Bossanova* sold) and concert appearances, that surpassed expectations for most alternative or college-radio bands in the 1980s. More recently, alternative and punk bands have sold in the millions, using MTV exposure as a marketing tool.
“Rock Music” serves my illustration by providing rich symbolic data, both musical and nonmusical, that invites especially intriguing responses from listeners. In many ways, its musical qualities—such as vocals and instrumentation—are typically punk: instrumentation is guitar based and characterized by distortion and harmonic dissonance; the lyrics are difficult to discern because the vocal style consists of screams rather than singing; the melody, likewise, is obscured by the “singing” and instrumental effects.

Punk is an ideal musical genre for illustrating the possibilities of the schema because it is highly referential, appropriating and culling from other musical forms, as well as social and aesthetic sources. Thus, punk is symbolically rich as a genre. “Rock Music” is especially interesting because it was released in the post-punk era of the late 1980s, an era during which punk had become increasingly avant-garde. Aesthetically, then, “Rock Music” invokes standard musical tropes of the punk genre and also challenges even the punk standards by attaching avant-garde elements.

When I write that “Rock Music” is useful for this analysis because of its nonmusical data, I refer primarily to the response it invites. For example, “Rock Music” possesses a vocal track, but the vocals are almost entirely incomprehensible as words. This lack of lyrical content would suggest a lack of rhetorical content if rhetoric were defined in terms of semantic meaning. But since I am interested in rhetoric as a response to nonverbal symbolic data, “Rock Music” provides an opportunity to explore this response. The lack of clear lyrical content provides a better chance of exploring the wider rhetorical possibilities.
of vocals—the implications of grain of voice and the uses of incomprehensibility and incoherence, for example.

In addition to these qualities, my particular response to “Rock Music” is worth exploring because, since getting to know the song shortly after its release, it has come to represent a significant statement for me about the nature of punk music, the nature of rock music, and the relationship between them. Unravelling my interpretation of and response to this song will provide, I believe, an excellent extended example for testing the usefulness of the proposed schema, which traces the symbolic influence of music outside songs and into the contexts that give them significance.

Procedure

Simply stated, this illustration proceeds according to the primary goal of constructing a rhetorical text. To review, key to my perspective on musical rhetoric is a distinction between musical data and the listener’s response to it. The text, the listener’s response, is a construction that includes much more than the musical data. The text consists of fragments of experiential contexts that inform listening. By constructing a rhetorical text, I mean that I will trace musical data and my response to it to the contexts that inform my response. The text, then, is actually a complex structure, understandable only by reference to the contexts that comprise it. Besides constructing a text, I also will illustrate how my experience with this text shaped my understanding of broader discourses of rock.

The eventual illustration of my response to “Rock Music” can be likened to a constellation, a picture of a rhetorical text formed by the
intersection of a number of contexts. In other words, my schema suggests that critics can hold up context, text, song, and response artificially only as individual units of analysis. There are always relationships among such critical objects, and criticism always involves choosing among some relationships and silencing others. My hope is not to silence the important ones. Thus, my approach is not so much to analyze (read: atomize or dissect) the text as to recombine the text and my response to it, allowing myself to articulate the text-response-context relationship as it emerges. Thus, I begin by discussing the musical data and then building the text by following the chain of contexts that extend from articulation of the basic units of sound and meaning.

My procedure is inductive, then, as selection of contexts depends upon a gradual understanding of my response. My study of "Rock Music" and my response to it began with developing a description of the musical data in symbolic terms. I identified its most significant musical characteristics and articulated a description of them as punk, the genre into which they fit most obviously. I also recorded my own response to the song, relying on notes that I had drawn up during this process and notes and previous research I had performed on the data. In this way, I recorded a basic response--my reflections on "Rock Music"--that was largely free of the language of criticism suggested by the schema.

After articulating this basic description of the musical data and my response, I identified several key contexts suggested by the data that were apparent in the response. From these, I selected the ones that seemed most significant to me--the ones that helped me to
understand my response as well as provided explanations for how the data influenced my response. The key contexts that formed my response to "Rock Music" include: punk rock and punk taste culture, surrealism, argumentation, anthem rock, and alternative rock. Within these contexts are other less significant contexts, as well, which I include here to the extent that they support my description of the data and my response.

Application of the Schema to "Rock Music"

"Rock Music" In Punk Context

Punk serves as the first context that structures my response to "Rock Music." "Rock Music" is informed by a number of contexts that relate closely to or form part of the punk context, including punk musical elements and aesthetics; punk taste culture; aesthetic movements such as surrealism and avant-garde art; and, closely related to the aesthetic movements, psychological/primal contexts. I begin my discussion of these contexts with a more detailed description of the musical data for "Rock Music" in terms of the punk genre, its most obvious aesthetic context.

"Rock Music" has no lyrics or, at least, none that the Pixies apparently intend to make accessible. Instead, lead singer Black Francis' vocals consist of vaguely para-verbal screams that roughly mark out a melody. Repeated listenings (and attempts at inter-subjective comparison) reveal no discernible words but a few discernible phonemes. Despite the general incomprehensibility of the lyric track, the impression is created that somewhere lyrics exist for this song. For example, at one point, Francis may be singing, "Ain't got no one, ain't got no thing," but this perception could not be verified by other
listeners. Francis seems to be using English phonemes in his singing, and his utterances possess a punctuated quality, as if his articulations are supported by words or phonemes. This suggests to me that Francis is not improvising nonsensical phrases but obscuring pronunciation of a previously written text. Lyrics are provided in the cd’s packaging for all the other songs on the album but not for “Rock Music.” Lyrics may not exist for this song, but if they do, clearly, the Pixies do not wish to make them easily accessible.

The instrumentation on “Rock Music” is guitar and drum based, typical of rock and punk. Like other punk bands, the Pixies stretch the discourse of three-chord rock beyond its logical ends, emphasizing dissonance and distortion, both of which obscure whatever traces of melody or lyrical content may be available. “Rock Music” begins with a fade-in—a distorted single note that becomes increasingly louder. This note is joined by a fast-paced staccato drum riff and finally by a simple, repeated guitar riff. After repeated listenings to the song, I was able to discern a simple verse-bridge-hookline song structure, which is not uncommon for punk or for pop music, although pop songs frequently climax with a lengthier chorus rather than a hookline.

“Rock Music” invokes the punk context by emphasizing the same musematic qualities associated with punk. It ignores the extraneous qualities punks despise in rock—long guitar solos and excessive, sentimental, or clichéd lyrical content (providing, instead, no lyrical content). Instead, in “Rock Music,” the Pixies distill the conventions of rock into their most basic incarnation—play it fast, play it loud, keep it simple.
When I first heard this album on its release in 1990, I had the feeling that this song was important, significant. Although musically I did not especially gravitate to any particular hook or quality of instrumentation, I began to form the opinion that this was the epitome of rock and roll for me. I told people that, in my opinion, this was the best rock song ever made. My reasoning was not that it was the most creative, interesting, or pleasing song I’d ever heard, but, rather, that in some way, it defined rock and roll for me. It served to provide an abstraction of sorts of what rock and roll was about, representing a punk rock response to what rock and roll was and should be. That I would have such a judgment for this song, as opposed to other similar punk songs, indicates that a significant part of my response derived from factors outside the musical aspects. The social context of punk--punk as taste culture--plays a significant role in affecting how my response was constructed.

"Rock Music" in Punk Taste Culture

The response to music involves more than listening; it also involves the frameworks through which listening occurs, including, most obviously, taste--value judgments about what is good and bad musically. In the punk context, such value judgments can be linked to an attitude I will refer to as aestheticism, the bracketing and privileging of artistic principles over social ones as a strategy for supporting value claims about punk. Punk aestheticism asserts that musical qualities are more vital than social, ideological, or commercial ones, although the attitude itself, of course, is ideological.
In practice, aestheticism in punk taste culture results in an exclusionary practice, which is not unusual for a taste culture that functions more to keep people out than in. Aesthetic values in punk—such as minimalism, distortion, and aggressiveness—often are inaccessible to the uninitiated. Pop fans, whom punkers see as bending to commercial control of music, typically do not gravitate to the rough edges of punk aesthetics. Thus, punk’s musical tendencies create boundaries around its aesthetics and audience, and to buy into punk aestheticism means to adopt a kind of elitism of musical taste. For punk fans, either you “get it” (understand the artistic ideals) or you don’t, and if you don’t, then you are probably being manipulated by social relations—especially commercial ones—that are manifest in easily accessible, indulgent, and overly romantic musical styles. Of course, punk aestheticism is no less a socially structured attitude, a point that may be denied or confirmed by any individual punk fan.

Whether aestheticism is presumed social or bracketed from the social, it still governs taste judgments of punk to some degree. In the case of my response to “Rock Music,” the workings of aestheticism exert an almost certain influence on my judgment that this song is somehow the epitome of what punk—and what rock—is supposed to be about. As my discussion of the musical data already confirms, “Rock Music” is not easily accessible. Not only does it possess typical punk characteristics—like speed and distortion—but it is also especially minimalist and obscure, with very few lyrics or pleasing vocals, and its harmonic range is severely limited.
In addition, Francis' vocal style would seem to negate the expectation that grain of voice transmits pleasure to the listener by providing a source of empathy. Few listeners would enjoy projecting themselves into the body of this singing voice, which does not so much carry a tune as ravage it. In the end, the musical qualities of "Rock Music" serve to exclude listeners for whom the artistic ideals of music are supposed to provide a whole different kind of listening experience. My judgment of "Rock Music" is structured by this expectation that few others will "get it" in the same way that I do. My judgment is supported by a review of this album in which a respected music reviewer, Greg Kot of The Chicago Tribune, writes that this song is the best cut on the album, simultaneously saying "nothing and everything about the subject of 'Rock music'" (1990, p. 3). Such confirmation helps to assert the sociality of my response, linking me to an elitist taste culture (with critical apologists of punk).

"Rock Music" in the Surrealist Context

My judgment of "Rock Music" and its appeal—as well as the appeal of punk in general—can be explained partially by the values formulated within the punk taste culture, but this appeal relates also to broader cultural and aesthetic values. Punk's historic development as an artistic form includes a significant reference to avant-garde movements in the arts, particularly surrealism, dada, and situationalism (e.g., Frith & Horne, 1987; Marcus, 1990; Hebdige, 1979). Surrealism, in particular, is a dominant force in the Pixies' artistic vision, so I will focus here on "Rock Music" as a surrealist artifact and how that context influences my response.
Evidence of surrealist influence on the Pixies may be located in a variety of places. For example, cover art on their albums reflects surreal painting and collage (featuring randomly juxtaposed objects that mimic the work of surrealists like Salvador Dali). Direct references in interviews (Sullivan, 1990) and songs (In “Debaser,” Francis refers to a scene in Dali’s film *Un Chien Andalou* with the lyric, “Got me a movie... slicing up eyeballs... I am un chien andalusia”) reflect an intentionality to surrealist reference. Even the name of the band, Pixies, with its connotations of fantasy and magic, carries an ethereal, mythical quality that resonates archetypal imagery and the supernatural—both common surreal art content. Many other such references can be inferred from the Pixies’ music, but my concern in this section will be with how “Rock Music” is placed in the surrealist context (or how surrealism becomes a fragment in “Rock Music”) and with how my response to “Rock Music” can be understood in terms of surrealist artistic practice.

My description of “Rock Music” as surrealist is based on two generic qualities of surrealist art—symbolist as opposed to objective imagery and the emphasis on unconscious thought processes in articulation and invention. Quoting Ozenfant, Smith (1974) differentiates symbolist from objective imagery:

“Two very distinct attitudes,” wrote Ozenfant in the early heyday of surrealism, “have so far shared the universe of art between them: the trend toward objectivity and the trend toward symbolism,” the former imposing “its imperious edicts upon us” and “moulding us into shape,” while the latter is “ready to take on ours.” (p. 68)
**Objectivist imagery**, in this case, refers to images that are representational or realist, reflecting objects as they might appear in the material world. **Symbolist imagery**, by contrast, refers to the use of nonrepresentational or fantastic images that bear little relation to how objects would be found in the material world. The distinction is troublesome, as any artwork may reflect a way of seeing the world or teach its viewers to see the world in a new way. But in the surrealist context, the distinction between **objectivist** and **symbolist** seems to deal primarily with the amount of information provided the viewer; symbolist imagery provides enough information to influence the viewer's perception but not so much as to strongly limit the possibilities for meaning. Objectivist imagery provides excessive information, narrowing the possibilities of meaning for the viewer.

A symbolist attitude provides the auditor with more leeway for interpretation in that it creates images that are so dissimilar to "normal" images that it forces the auditor to construct artificially relations among the images to understand them. This approach is usually described in terms of pictorial representation, but it works well for musical and lyrical representation as well. In a number of Pixies songs, lyrical content is filled with incoherent and nonsensical messages, which create the symbolist effect described above. For example, in "Gouge Away," Francis sings, "chained to the pillars/a three-day party/I break the walls/and kill us all/with holy fingers." Such words provide little narrative meaning or coherence and thus are ready to take on a wider possibility of interpretations for the audience. The vocal performance in "Rock Music" takes the symbolist
attitude a step farther; here, Francis’ very articulations are incomprehensible as linguistic content and as harmonious singing (since they are off-key, unmelodious, and screamed rather than sung). Such incoherence provides a greater opportunity for the audience to read into the music because it provides less restriction as to what can go into the meanings.

Such vocal incoherence is also a manifestation of unconscious thought processes (or at least a representation of them). Surreal artistic invention proceeds through the suspension of consciousness, allowing the unconscious mind to assume agency over invention. According to Breton, the author of *The Surrealist Manifesto*, surrealist invention relies on “pure psychic automatism, by which one intends to express verbally, in writing or by any other method, the real functioning of the mind” (quoted in Smith, 1980, p. 65). Surrealism allows artists to tap into these functions, producing a kind of expressionism that is supposedly unfettered by conscious thought. A complete lack of conscious constraint upon art production is unlikely, whatever the medium; still, surrealist practice approaches this goal, elevating unconscious thought processes to a level that enables them to assume agency over the invention process, producing Breton’s ideal of “thought without reason.”

In “Rock Music,” the suspension of conscious thought is manifest in Francis’ vocals and in the musical accompaniment. Francis’ vocals contain acoustic essences of language without actual words. His vocals possess a paraverbal quality that suggest words; taken as unconscious thought processes, these vocals reach the listener as something like
dream imagery. Francis' paralanguage does not use words, yet it reflects the rhythmic patterns of speech and of lyrics. His vocals suggest a dream state in which one suddenly has awakened to find someone talking or in which one has only dim recall of the conversation in a dream but a feeling that the conversation was somehow meaningful. In this way, Francis' vocals suggest the unconscious process of dreaming without directly referring to dreaming.

Taken at another level, Francis' vocals may be understood as a kind of automatic writing, an invention of strategy along the lines of Breton's suggestion to expose the real workings of the mind. Francis' screams are reminiscent of the "primal scream," a Jungian concept employed in clinical psychological practice. The primal scream is a method for tapping and expressing pre-conscious emotional impulses while suppressing the rational, conscious processes that normally would constrain the expression of such emotion. The primal scream is an attempt at pure expression, a direct link of emotion with articulation. Francis' screams in "Rock Music" may be characterized as pre-verbal yet distinctly human, perhaps fettered by the technical impulses of utterance that give the impression of language but produced by the unsuppressed, unconscious processes of the mind. Such an interpretation provides a different way of looking at the production of incoherence and the strangeness of "Rock Music." Perhaps the body in the singing voice is subject to empathy after all, since it is so basically human in its emotive features.

The surrealist context for "Rock Music," taken as an offshoot of punk, suggests a symbolic function that operates at a level unlike
conventional rhetoric. "Rock Music" is more than a performance of music; it is a performance of body and emotion. The message which the listener draws is especially dependent upon the listening performance since the song provides so few "common-sense" cues--standard musicological or verbal phrases. Instead, the meanings are left open, left to the listening process and, eventually, the interpretation. Part of the message from "Rock Music" may be that messages only can be performed; the primary value expressed by "Rock Music" is one of shunning rational communication.

As a result of these features, my response to "Rock Music" as a surrealist artifact could lead me to believe that the qualities performed here are representative of the qualities that all music should adopt. The message of surrealist music is that content cannot be communicated rationally or, at least, that such communication is not music's purpose. Further, for music to work for the listener--for it to play into the open performance of the listener--it must be created in an unrestrained fashion. Still, even an argument based on nonsense and unconscious thought processes is formulated by the listener as an argument, and in the case of "Rock Music," the title of the song directed me to articulate my interpretation into an argumentative context.

"Rock Music" in the Argumentative Context

The title of "Rock Music" influences my approach to the music as an argument, but it also has significance for me because my background includes the study of literature, poetry, and modern art. Working in these fields, I learned to take a structuralist approach to meaning in
art, an approach that requires interpreting the title as a significant symbolic factor in the work's meaning. My training in literary criticism and art criticism, then, led me to focus on the title as an important part of a work. And in this case, the title was all the more interesting because it was so generic and descriptive; yet, at the same time, the sound was so minimalist and surreal.

At a fundamental level, a song's title is always referential to the sound of the song itself; this is the primary way people recognize and identify popular music. Using the title to interpret the song (and doing the reverse) is not an unusual approach to interpretation of a song. In the case of "Rock Music," because the title reflects the category of music into which the song fits, the referential nature of the title may be extended. The question that arises for me, then, is: What are the Pixies saying or what do they seem to be saying with such a title? Is this a statement about what rock music is? Is this a statement of what rock music is supposed to be?

A way to make inferences about what this song "says" is through use of Adorno's immanent method—the comparison of a song to its ideal. In this case, the title suggests that what has to be compared is the artistic quality of these sounds to rock music as a general category. "Rock Music" is an abstract version of rock or a performance about other performances (other songs within the category of rock music). Pixies' songs generally seem to be constantly rejecting and subverting rock and pop genres, including punk; this song is yet another example.

Shaped by my ongoing efforts to analyze the abstract title, my response to "Rock Music" began to focus on ways in which the sound of
the song is an abstraction of bigger forces—how "Rock Music" is an
abstracted version of rock music. The silences in this song
(downplaying of lyrics, clear hook and chorus, and instrumentational
polish) all suggest to me the possibilities for subtlety in the rock
genre, and subtlety is largely absent in rock, constituting a silence.
Popular rock styles typically have drawn on didactic, simplistic, heavy-
handed, forceful modes of instrumentation and writing. In this case,
the Pixies are presenting listeners with a rock aesthetic built on a
wall of sound—wailing guitars and vocals—that share the values of
volume and speed but shun the direct, anthemic, familiarity,
accessibility that defines rock. My favorable response had more to do
with my inferences about what this song is trying to say rather than
what kind of direct affective response it triggers in the listening
experience. Still, this reasoned response to and interpretation of the
song only can work in conjunction with my response to its musicality or
its sound. Earlier, I discussed the sound as being especially
minimalist. Perhaps this is to accentuate the comparison to other
performances, a way to call attention to these other performances’ lack
of minimalism and assert that as an ideal.

If the title of the song suggests that "Rock Music" is an argument
about rock music, then the style and genre in which "Rock Music" is
placed become significant in answering the question of what the argument
is about. My focus in this final context is on the intertextuality of
"Rock Music"—how this song works rhetorically in relation to other
similar songs and styles. A look at "Rock Music" as inter-textual
includes a focus on rock anthems and alternative rock.
“Rock Music” as Subversion of Anthem Rock

In order to discuss the context, I first must clarify two technical terms that often are used interchangeably—genre and style. In this case, the distinction is significant to my illustration, so I will define genre as a classification that refers to a specific formation of texts (much like a literary genre); style is a set of performance values that reflect aesthetic preference or tendencies (e.g., punk, metal, rap). Song genres may exist across different styles, so there may be punk ballads, metal ballads, and pop ballads. A comparison of songs of the same genre but different styles yields a comparison, then, of styles. To extend the current example, a comparison of the ballads listed above would tell me about the difference between punk, metal, and pop music. In this section, I will focus on “Rock Music” as an example of a specific genre—the rock anthem. By articulating the general qualities of the rock anthem and comparing the qualities of “Rock Music” to this formation of texts, I will paint a picture of “Rock Music” in the post-punk alternative style, which is how I distinguish it from other anthems.

Identifying “Rock Music” within the rock-anthem genre is helpful to my purpose because it allows for a comparison of the Pixies’ style to other styles of music, a comparison more difficult to make without some common core to govern the comparison. Comparing one punk song to other punk songs may not yield many significant differences, and comparing a punk song to another type of song requires a common starting point. “Rock Music” can be viewed in the genre of the rock anthem, and
comparison to other rock anthems and their basic components helps me see what the categorical title represents.

The term *anthem* is used to refer broadly to any song to which the proper response is singing along. This applies to any number of rock songs, but within rock discourse, *anthemic* is an appellation usually reserved for songs whose melody is very accessible and whose hookline or chorus is very clear. The term *anthem*, in this case, derives from the way the chorus is sung—or shouted—often in unison by more than one vocalist. Rock anthems share the social expectations that accompany national anthems; they are ideal concert songs that involve audiences by encouraging them to sing along. Audiences get to sing the hookline several times; typically, performers add extended session to the repetition part at the end of a song (instead of fading the song as on a record).

Even more specifically, the kinds of rock anthems that attract my attention are those that focus on rock and roll as subject matter of the song and that emphasize rock-and-roll attitudes. This kind of rock anthem includes songs like “Rock and Roll Never Forgets” by Bob Seger, “R.O.C.K. in the U.S.A.” by John Cougar Mellencamp, “Rock and Roll Music” by The Beatles, and “I Wanna Rock and Roll all Night (and Party Every Day)” by KISS.

Affective investment is supposed to be at a high level in response to rock anthems. These songs celebrate rock, they celebrate fun, they celebrate youth, they celebrate the freedom that makes up an important part of rock. In effect, the rock anthem provides a message about what rock and roll is supposed to be—fun, youthful, involved, and a symbol
of unity. In addition, the repeated lyric takes the form of a slogan, which usually expresses some basic premise or rock-and-roll value. Thus, anthems are themes for rock and roll; they are re-assertions of what rock is all about, and they maintain rock as a musical genre and as a forum for affective investment. As such, anthems are ideological tools of the rock-and-roll aesthetic. As rhetoric, their sound and the response they encourage represent what rock is supposed to be about—in the shared vision of the star and her/his audience, at least. By comparing an individual anthem to the general expectations of the genre, critics can construct the artist’s aesthetic vision of rock and roll.

Situated in the rock-anthem context, “Rock Music” is a curious violation of the genre. In fact, my placement of it in this genre extends more from my attempt to construct the context than from its seeming fit. That is, “Rock Music” provides a good example of how a song—in performance—responds and calls up a context rather than a specific indexical meaning. “Rock Music” works against the anthemic context, but the dialectical tension of “Rock Music” with the rock anthem is just as significant to the response as are the connections between “Rock Music” and the contexts into which it more clearly fits, ideologically and aesthetically.

“Rock Music” fits the generic categories of the anthem in only two obvious ways—its referential title and its nature as a performative statement of some kind about rock. Otherwise, “Rock Music” seems like an anti-anthem, a parody of the rock anthem as a musical instance of the rock-and-roll ideal. The hook line is indiscernible. No lyrics are comprehensible or provided. Over repeated listening, I was able to make
out one possible lyric, in which Francis seems to be singing, "Ain't got no one, ain't got no thing." This lyric serves to create a mood that is very different from the anthemic one, emphasizing alone-ness and separation. Compare this to, say, to Bob Seger's hook: "You can come back, baby, rock and roll never forgets."

In "Rock Music," rock and roll is a story about loss, drawing on the blues tradition, which addresses the presence of loss and sorrow in life rather than celebrating life as a youthful, exuberant party built on unity and fun. The mood created by the vocals and music of "Rock Music" is mysterious, demented, nightmarish; it does not invite participation in the form of singing along. How can audiences sing along with primal screaming? How can audiences utter phonemes that are not discernible? Affective investment here, to the extent that it is possible with the mood of "Rock Music," connects with a feeling of being alone, subsumed in quiet rage.

Musically and vocally speaking, then, "Rock Music" has a hook-line, but it is obscured and largely unrepeatable, in direct opposition to the distinct, utterly knowable, hook of the rock anthem. Francis' "Rock Music" vocal also violates the conventional punk vocal, which has been described as the voice of youth, the voice of the crowd (Grossberg, 1986). To the extent that it allows for singing along, the grain of Francis' voice suggests a wholly different kind of body with which to empathize, in comparison with the body of the rock star singing the rock anthem. Why would anyone want to empathize with Francis' body in voice-twisted, gnarled, pained, and screeching incoherently?
Within the rock-anthem genre, "Rock Music" epitomizes a challenge to the conventional rock and roll aesthetic and, in so doing, articulates a competing rhetoric of rock. To the extent that any anthem rock song celebrates the "essence" of rock somewhat, "Rock Music" works aesthetically to celebrate an essence not usually considered to be very important in contemporary hard rock. The peculiarities of performance in "Rock Music" work to establish a post-punk, alternative aesthetic for rock, one that emphasizes the avant-garde and blues origins of rock and roll. In their specific context, the Pixies generally subverted dominant rock modes of performance, emphasizing distortion of rock motifs like power chords, excessively expressive vocals, and celebratory lyrics. The sad minimalism and quiet rage of the Pixies works through and against the anthem genre to create an alternative to mainstream notions of what rock music is supposed to represent.

The Pixies’ anti-anthem represents the destruction of rock rhetoric—it presents a horrible body of noise that works against the body of standardized, syncopated, controlled noise that comprises classic rock. "Rock Music" works against rock music at a primal, affective level. It circumvents the response usually accorded to anthems, creating a melodramatic space outside the mainstream of rock rhetoric.

In the intertextual context, my response to "Rock Music" is a response to a kind of uniqueness—to an attempt to violate expectations at an aural and conceptual level. My treatment of this song as an anthem, as a representative version of rock and roll, connects with my agreement with its imagined thesis—that rock and roll is not supposed
to be merely about celebration and fun and that it harbors a good deal of space for loneliness, loss, and strangeness; that fragments of weirdness always exist in the rock corpus but are suppressed; and that value exists in calling them up and making them a constant part of rock. The generic title, "Rock Music," is a referent to the nature of rock as reinventing rock, the way it always comments and builds upon previous performances of rock (both listening and music making). But the title also ends up commenting on the process of reinventing rock—a demand that the re-inventions must strip rock to its core but that it must keep on reinventing or re-imagining the core. "Rock Music" tells me that rock music always must be an abstraction of the unstated; the silence in rock is just as much as the overstated—the anthemic—and this must occur at the level at which the listener makes an affective investment into rock. Horrible sound is a direct way to communicate silences.

Conclusion to "Rock Music"

My favorable response to "Rock Music" relates both to its self-reflective nature as an aesthetic argument and also to the minimalist aesthetic and the accompanying values it projects. Like all rock songs, "Rock Music" is a re-interpretation of rock music, but what it selects for re-interpretation—how it abstracts certain aspects of rock and roll in the specificity of its performance—is not the typical selection one would expect from a rock anthem. The rock-anthem genre is built on the use of the slogan—the anthem is expressive, direct, and coherent; it affirms rock's move toward jouissance, the pleasure of interacting with the text. "Rock Music" points out, however, that a central place in rock and roll exists for attitudes not directly connected to fun, youth,
and a feeling of belonging. It emphasizes qualities of rock that
normally are left out of the rock anthem, and, in so doing, it revises
the notion of the anthem as well as notions about what rock is supposed
to be in the first place.

In challenging the basic notions about rock, “Rock Music,” in my
response, comes to be a significant factor in challenging notions of
rock authenticity. My taste judgments can be understood as a search for
a warrant for determining rock authenticity. In this case, my idea of
authenticity is rooted in rock’s employment of punk and avant-garde art
fragments: these contexts become warrants for judgments about
authenticity, and authentic style can be defined in terms of the dark,
minimalist contributions made by “Rock Music.”

The popular music text is not a coherent message that can be
transferred from source to receiver. The text is a complex symbol
system that operates at a number of levels, in a number of contexts,
simultaneously. Critics can gain a rich understanding of popular music
texts by identifying the various ways in which musical signs fit into
contexts. In this example, my response to “Rock Music” is rooted in a
complex intersection of contextual influences; thus, examining this
response adequately required a focus not only on musical data and the
immediate listening situation but also on the contexts—punk taste
culture, surrealism, anthem rock genre—that informed my responses. An
accurate picture of the rhetorical dimensions of a popular music text, I
argue, depends on an approach that links aspects of the response to the
context. This example illustrated one way that this picture could be
produced.
CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this concluding chapter, my purpose is to summarize my work in the preceding chapters, relating them to the research question articulated in Chapter 1. In addition, I will discuss the limitations of my research as well as future directions for the study of musical rhetoric.

The research question guiding my work was, "What symbolic dimensions of music must be taken into account in a schema for conceptualizing and studying popular music as rhetoric?" This question emerges from a need to understand the symbolic work of music--how music influences listeners, how it comes to be a site for sharing meaning and values, and how it works to produce new meanings from existing ones. My review of music studies in the field of rhetoric revealed that such studies relied too heavily on the translation of musical data, ignoring the various contexts that play an important role in shaping the listening experience. My research question emerges from this exigence, asking, in effect, how music can be reconceptualized as a rhetorical process so that it can be studied more effectively--with attention to the process by which it becomes meaningful in a given listening experience.
In Chapter 2, I expanded my literature review to cover research and theorizing about popular music in a variety of fields. The research covered in this section was divided into two general areas—work that emphasizes the representation of musical form (and thus traces music’s influence to the power of formal elements) and work that emphasizes the social relations that govern the production and consumption of music.

In the first group of studies, I found a number of concepts useful for representing various aspects of the musical symbol in the listening experience. Musical form may be expressed in terms of traditional musicological concepts—such as notes or rhythms—or in more connotative ways—through its emotional content or its capacity for generating meaning through association (ascription). The various concepts and theories discussed in this section led me to two competing conceptualizations of the influence of musical form. First, musical form is presentational and inventive; it is a unique and dynamic experience with the power to take listeners out of themselves, and it supersedes processes of meaning and signification that make up a more central part of other cultural forms. Second, musical form gains its power to influence through intertextual and social connections—form is suggestive, but the listeners do the work of making sense of it by association. My own view is that these two competing positions need not contradict one another; a rhetorical understanding of popular music would capture the listening experience effectively by acknowledging the tension between them. Music’s presentational power works within and with reference to a web of signification and expectations; yet, its associative power is both limited and enabled by the capacity to inspire
jouissance. Removing either position from the equation (at least at the onset of a study) limits the range of possible explanations for the rhetorical work of music in a given case.

The second group of studies—on musical form and social relations—is characterized by a similar tension. The key assumption here is that popular music is not autonomous and neither is the listening response to it. Listening does not occur in a vacuum; it is necessarily informed by personal factors, social factors, and prior listening experiences. The question in this section is to what extent social structures inform the listening experience and the response to music. Subculture studies, for example, romanticize the oppositional tendencies of subcultures that produce new meanings, social relations, and values—often around musical objects. But explications of the meaning of music for subculture members typically are static, attributing individual response to social operations and to the homological "fit" between ideology, social structure, and artifact. Such studies clearly demonstrate that responses to popular music are not autonomous of social factors; however, they too easily reduce responses to popular music to dependence on social factors.

Two recently articulated approaches respond to the problem of linking response to music and social structure. Grossberg uses the concept of affective investment to illustrate how taste cultures form around similar ways of responding to music. In Grossberg's perspective, signifying practices are not central to the response to music; instead, listeners invest affect in different ways in different kinds of music. Collectives exist to the extent that different listeners invest affect
in the same way in a given musical form. Thus, the meanings and taste judgments fans give to music are not determined by homological connections; homology, ideology, and meaning are of marginal importance in Grossberg’s view.

By contrast, Frith produces a more elaborate structure of social organization, meaning, and ideology in articulating the concept of discursive formation. Taste judgments and signification are vital in Frith’s view; taste judgments, in fact, are the currency of popular music. The discursive formations he discusses—bourgeois, folk, and pop—are elaborate versions of taste cultures that organize value, taste, performance, social structure, economic relations, and other factors associated with the production and consumption of music. For Frith, responses to music are learned and can be explained and understood with reference to the operations of a musical discursive formation. This articulation thus provides a complex way to connect the influence of musical form to the social structures that govern it.

Clear to me is that reconceptualizing music means the critic cannot come up with a conclusive way of telling what music means—there exists no magic formula or method for doing so. Music means something different for different people because each listener brings so many different kinds of experiences and frameworks into the experience with music. Such an argument typically is criticized for relativizing or for sinking into the depths of postmodern nihilism and despair, but my assumptions about rhetoric challenge such criticism.

Rhetoric is well suited to resisting the slip into nihilism because rhetoric is concerned with the possibility for meaning and
influence in the musical text. In Aristotle’s classic definition, rhetoric asks what is available for persuasion in a given case. Contemporary rhetoric no longer focuses merely on persuasion, of course, and I use the term symbolic influence in this study to replace persuasion as the goal of rhetoric. The rhetorical study of the musical text, then, asks what is available in popular music to influence the audience? The literature review on popular music’s form and connection to society demonstrates many available symbolic influences of music. Above all, it points out that music’s symbolic influence can be explained only through a complex connection of text and context, a connection that goes beyond the simple notion that music works for its listeners by representing feelings or meanings and creates shared context by transmitting these representations. Interpretations, ascriptions of meaning, and evaluations of taste are explainable by reference to contexts that inform them but are not reducible to such reference. Studying music as rhetoric requires critics to explore a range of possible contexts and to demonstrate how such contexts become available to the listener and to the potential response to music.

The rhetorical study of popular music needs to go beyond the goal of finding what music means. In Chapter 3, I describe a schema for studying music that I developed through synchesizing my findings in the literature review and integrating concepts from rhetorical theorists who have confronted similar questions to mine. In short, the schema I develop includes three key concepts—musical data, text, and context. Musical data are the connotative dimensions of music—its sound. The text is the object of the listener’s response, the structure of meaning
and value constructed in the listening process (and governed by contexts that come into play). The text also can be viewed as a constellation, a "hypertext" composed of fragments of contexts suggested to the listener by the music. Context is a pattern of experience that governs the ascription of meaning, investment of affect, or judgment of value. Contexts take many sizes and shapes, requiring much interpretive work by the critic to articulate which contexts are appropriate and significant in a given critical response to music.

Finally, the concepts of data, text, and context are tied together by a perspective on criticism that calls for the critic to take the role of text production rather than interpretation. Instead of analyzing a text to find how its deeper meanings have become encoded, the schema calls for critics to explode the musical text, asking how the fragments of context within it can be followed outside the text. In other words, it asks how the critic can construct a text by describing the contexts that give significance to a response to music.

In Chapter 4, my criticism of "Rock Music," a song by the Pixies, illustrates how the schema would work to explain one response to music. Significant contexts (significant patterns of meaning and value) are identified and explored to explain how they inform the production of a response to the musical data. In my criticism of "Rock Music," I demonstrated how a number of musical and social contexts--such as punk rock, punk taste culture, surrealism, argument, anthem rock, and alternative rock--contributed to the formation of a response to this song. I explore the significance of each of these components to my interpretation that "Rock Music" somehow represents a significant
statement about punk rock and about rock music. My conclusion to this illustration demonstrates how “Rock Music” communicates an understated element of rock music—that rock music harbors a space for the avant-garde, the surreal, and the non-expressive, however much these contexts are suppressed by that the celebratory excesses of anthem rock.

Instead of reading like an explication of a text, criticism of music, according to my proposed schema, reads like a discussion of forces that are felt in a given text. In the end, the production of the text by the critic includes much more than description and interpretation of musical data. It also includes a thorough discussion of contextual warrants for the interpretations.

Evaluation of the Schema

The purpose of my study is to propose a schema that extends other approaches (both inside and outside the field of rhetoric) to popular music, accounting adequately both for textual and contextual factors associated with music’s symbolic influence. In this section, I evaluate the proposed schema, considering its positive aspects and its needed refinements.

The bulk of recent writing on music demonstrates problems with treating music as a representational form of communication, a carrier of messages (Frith, 1995; Frith, 1988; Grossberg, 1992; Middleton, 1990). Still, even if musical meaning is not so simple to pin down representationally, its critics must acknowledge that popular music comes to mean something for people who listen to it. In any given case, the significance of music may be tied to ascribed meanings, pleasurable feelings, or aesthetic fulfillment, and the advantage of the schema
described in this study is that it is capable of acknowledging each of these processes. The schema is geared to answering the question of how music comes to be meaningful, not how it can be translated into a linear message. As Frith (1995) argues, the important question is not how music represents value but how it produces value in performance. This schema possesses a pragmatic orientation as it attempts to understand how music produces value or significance as a symbolic aspect of the listening experience. The schema, then, does not so much replace theories of representation as provide warrant for their use and emphasize their refinement by critics.

Further, the schema explodes the concept of music as encoded message by including non-musical data. Music is not autonomous—that much is clear and pretty much agreed upon by students of popular music. Yet, the study of musical texts often requires some kind of bracketing off from culture or society. Such bracketing of text and context seems contradictory to students of popular music who understand music as a social event. Using the schema enabled me to connect the text to social conditions—many of the contexts that I found operating on my response to the text—without relying on arguments that social conditions determined my response or that the response happened despite what I brought into it. In other words, the conception of context as something dynamic and dialogic helped me to avoid creating a schema that was just another variation of the model of representation. Understanding elements of text as fragments of different contexts allowed me to consider both musical and non-musical influences, keeping me from treating popular music as autonomous from social factors but also
keeping me from treating music's meanings as unproblematically caused by social factors.

The general terminology used was also somewhat helpful in that it enabled me to pull in the various concepts and methods discussed in the literature review. As I stated in the introduction, my goal was not to try and replace existing work on music but to build on it. The general terms of the schema enabled me to bring in concepts like taste culture, authenticity, and musical style without making my analysis dependent on any of them.

The generality of the schema, however, represents the first of a few problems with it, as well. Much of my analysis was made possible because I had just produced a thorough literature review on concepts and methods for studying popular music. The terms of the schema are so general that, in themselves, they do not supply specific direction on what exactly analysis should concentrate. For example, I was able to understand my response in terms of my participation in punk taste culture and I was able to discuss the terms of that taste culture. Critics may not always be aware of the contexts available to them.

My description of the elements in the schema is especially weak in terms of musicological analysis. Although I am concerned that specific direction in terms of musical data (e.g., look to chord structure or rhythm) could lead researchers to ignore important musical elements, my description of musical data is vague enough so as not to be heuristic. Again, a critic with deficient understanding of musicology could miss important contextual elements that manifest in chord structure or rhythm. My own understanding of musicology certainly is not at a level
that I would refer to as *expertise*. Thus, my own analysis may have
missed important musical factors due to my lack of training in
musicology. A more thorough integration of a concept such as the
museme—which is somewhat general despite being musicologically
originated—could help mitigate this problem. Another concern is the
inward focus of analysis using the schema. Although I developed the
schema in part as a way to emphasize the importance of the listening
experience (including the social and cultural conditions of the
listener), I fear that elements of this experience—described as
contexts—may be reduced to textual components by the schema. The use
of key concepts like text, context, and data may represent the musical
experience as a purely mental one, one that occurs primarily within the
mind of the listener-cum-critic. One response to this problem would be
to refine the notion of context so as to integrate better the affective
and physical response to music, but even this move, my critics may say,
would risk reducing such experiences to signifying practice.

Despite these problems, my work in this area represents a good
start toward developing ways to deal with popular music’s rhetorical
nature. The schema needs refining—particularly, through application to
other texts—but that much should be true of any newly articulated
method or theory. This study has been beneficial to my continued
efforts at studying music because it provided me the opportunity to
explore a wealth of literature on music, enabling me to understand how
exactly my own ideas fit into existing scholarship. The schema
developed in this process thus represents a synthesis and extension of
existing work on popular music.
Limitations of the Study

The breadth of my research question made my efforts to develop a schema for the rhetorical study of music almost unmanageable. Popular music, as a diverse contemporary cultural form, works in a variety of ways that can be called rhetorical or symbolic. Considering the social and cultural variations of contemporary popular music (most of my literature review covers research on music conducted only in the United States and England) and considering that popular music has a history that extends thousands of years, my answer to the question includes a much narrower range of focus than the question may imply. This problem is mitigated somewhat by the fact that my key sources—particularly Frith, Middleton, Lull, and Grossberg—already have synthesized, evaluated, and extended thousands of approaches to popular music. Thus, despite the breadth of the materials available, my readings of the key pieces of research provide me with a ticket to the conversation on music, a level of expertise significant enough to allow me to contribute positively to the discourse.

A second limitation of my study is that I developed my schema primarily through readings of other works on music and rhetoric and through my own intuitive thinking on these topics. While these methods certainly are valid and sufficient, they are limited in that interaction with popular music, music fans, or popular discourse on music (such as that by critics and musicians) enters into my theorizing in secondary ways. As a music fan with a wealth of experience listening to music, reading about music, and talking about music, my work is certainly
informed by such influences. Still, since academic studies of popular music are so diffuse and the field so fragmented, approaches that begin with the actual practice of musical production and consumption are needed. My current study did not assume this focus, which is necessary to avoid fitting musical communication inappropriately into the already ample stock of theory and method about other forms of communication.

A third limitation of my study is a series of contradictions that I imagine I will spend a career trying to resolve. First, even though I argue in several places that music is not reducible to representation of meaning, is not autonomous of society, its significance is not merely textual, and its study should not be limited to individual texts, the schema I develop and my illustration of it in Chapter 4 are not clearly exemplary of these arguments. My approach may be criticized as a more elaborate means of reading meaning and culture from a text but as a means of doing that just the same.

Likewise, I do not demonstrate here an attempt to explore popular music's influence in a social setting beyond my own listening practice, and my illustration focuses on a single text. My approach does demonstrate, in fact, that the response to music does not end with the explication of a single text but must include significant contextual factors. Still, as a reaction to work on the rhetoric of music that attempts to move more deeply into individual texts, the schema I develop suggests a much more wide-ranging critical project, which I will discuss in the following section.
Future Research on the Rhetoric of Popular Music

By reconceptualizing popular music as inter-textual and, if the reader will allow, as inter-contextual, I have developed a schema that assists critics in going beyond the interpretation of musical texts. Beginning with a text, a critic employing this schema can understand the response to the text as a process that connects the listening experience to a number of patterns of experience that govern it.

The most obvious need for future research in terms of the schema is for further testing and refining. In the evaluation section above, I noted several aspects of the schema that require further work. Continued use of the schema by rhetorical critics would provide further tests of its usefulness and refinement of elements that are not effective. The most obvious refinements could come in the area of connecting the schema to other approaches to music. For example, by connecting the schema more explicitly to Frith's discursive formations, critics can develop complex understanding of how individual texts and genres are articulated to listeners within the framework of a given formation. Continuing my research of the Pixies' music, for example, I might emphasize how the Pixies' avant-garde impulses connect the pop and the bourgeois discursive formations. Other refinements to the schema could include a more explicit connection of its concepts to concepts such as taste cultures or musemes.

Continued use of the schema also would help to enhance understanding of popular music as rhetorical. Studies of several songs by one artist, songs by different artists within the same musical style,
or comparison of songs across musical styles would lead to more precise and meaningful explanations of music's power to influence. Such studies also would help to develop understanding of the ways musical styles, genres, and performers are articulated to audiences at given historical junctures.

An alternative approach to using the schema would be not to begin with a text but to end with one. As Becker and McGee suggest, listeners construct texts and messages from a mosaic of possible influences. A fan of punk rock, for example, may listen to hundreds of punk songs and non-punk songs in a given time period, may read dozens of books on punk rock in a lifetime, may attend many concerts in a year, and may be engaged daily in conversation about music and culture, replete with taste judgments that Frith argues are the common currency of popular music. Studying punk music as rhetoric in this case may proceed not from the reading of a single punk text but from the treatment of the collected texts and experiences with music that inform an individual's understanding of what punk is, why he or she values it, and how its creators employ fragments of rock and roll and other cultural discourses in producing it.

Taking McGee's notion to heart—that a "postmodern" shift in contemporary culture means audiences' and critics' most vital practice has become text construction and rhetors' most vital practice interpretation, critics of rhetoric and popular music could proceed using the schema by examining how culture has been interpreted by given performers, styles, and institutions and how audiences may formulate the meaning of music based on their experiences with it. From this
approach, critics would investigate, say, how the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame uses bourgeois cultural practices to legitimize rock and roll and how this affects visitors' construction of rock and roll as an ideological form. Using my proposed schema, critics would investigate how the myriad bits of the mosaic that constitute the Hall would add up to a message about rock and roll, how the Hall constitutes a text that tells the visitor what rock and roll is.

Alternately, critics may begin with a musical style, asking, for example, why swing music is emerging at this point among fans of punk music—-in other words, asking against and within what musical and social contexts must swing be read. Using the schema, critics would actually construct (or illustrate how fans construct) swing style as a text—explainable only in terms of the fragments of context that inform it. Similarly, critics may investigate the messages communicated by musical styles by addressing the various fragments of context that may be observed by a given fan of the style. Using the schema would lead critics to focus not only on the music itself but also on the discourse that surrounds the music—such as arguments made in fanzines, expressions of musical taste in internet groups, or, perhaps, interviews with fans themselves. This approach would mirror the ways fans construct their musical taste preferences on an everyday basis.

Whether or not such research on popular music is framed in terms of the schema I developed in this thesis, the contribution I hope to make is in convincing critics to avoid moving more deeply into the musical text in order to understand how the text works in consumption. Musical form itself harbors no inherent meaning; its cultural and social
significance derive from what situated listeners put into it
--conceptions of taste, affective involvement, personal beliefs.
Understanding music’s rhetorical power requires a critical move into the
social, aesthetic, and cultural contexts that inform it.
List of References


