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Middle Eight

Critical Musicology Study Day on 'Authenticity'

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The most recent of the informal Critical Musicology study days focused on the concept of authenticity in popular music. The day consisted of seven short papers on this subject and was followed by a group discussion of issues raised by these papers.

In his opening paper, ' ''We stripped it apart like a car and put it back together totally again'': music's authenticity-speak in the age of digital technology, c.1985', Dai Griffiths (Oxford Brookes University) was keen to draw attention to the way that sampling technology had been interpreted, both in terms of practice and of discursive context, as a marker of identity. His historical framework made reference to earlier practices of cover and intertextual reference from the early 1960s onwards. Referring to A Tribe Called Quest and Beck, even with samples, it looked as though racial authenticity was still at issue. The role of sampling in the rendering of authenticity was also considered by Rupert Till (University College, Bretton Hall) in his paper 'Club cultures and authenticity'. Making reference to hip-hop and dance music, he suggested that there are different authenticities for different kinds of popular music. Drawing on Sarah Thornton's (1995) study of club culture in which the underground is considered authentic and the commercial, inauthentic, Till gave examples of some of the alternative means by which it is considered possible to be financially successful and yet retain an aura of authenticity.

Rebecca Berkley's (University of Southampton) paper was concerned with the 'Perception of authenticity at GCSE' and highlighted some of the problems involved in teaching and examining composition in schools where no clear guidance is given regarding the issue of 'originality'. Mark Duffett (University College, Warrington) also considered 'originality' in his paper 'The real thing? Elvis, authenticity and popular music', in highlighting the apparent invincibility of Elvis's authenticity for his fans despite their recognition that Elvis had songwriters writing for him. Duffett suggested that the root of Elvis's authenticity for fans may be found in his family's roots in poverty. In 'Construction and critique of the authentic pop icon in the music and cover art of Pulp's ''This is Hardcore'' ', Nikki Dibben (University of Sheffield) considered the means by which Pulp undermine notions of authenticity on this album: for example, in the songs, attention is drawn to the act of listening and to the illusion of musical 'works' as finished products; in the cover art, attention is drawn to the act of looking and the fantasy (and disappointment) of fame through the insertion of band members as unseen spectators of glamorous models in seedy locations.

Robynn Stilwell's (University of Southampton) paper, ' ''Chrome-plated heart'': Melissa Etheridge composing gender and sexuality, but on whose terms?', focused upon changing conceptions of Etheridge's music as authentic for different audiences in relation to shifts in her image(s). Related to this, in the final paper,

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'Constructing authenticity: a tripolar model', Allan Moore (University of Surrey) proposed a model that does away with the notion of authenticity as inscribed, focusing upon *who* is being authenticated rather than *what*. This model consists of first, second, and third person authenticity, with the performer, listener, and absent other authenticated by these modes, respectively, though Moore was quick to assert that in most cases all three modes operate to some degree. Much of the lively group discussion focused upon Moore's model, and the notion of authenticity as ascribed – whether to a performer, performance, or work, and so on – by a perceiver. Liz Leach (University of Bristol) made the suggestion that this would be reliant upon a perceiver making judgements about the intention of the performer (or performance, and so on) given contextual knowledge on their part. However, following Peter Kivy, the question 'is authenticity just a synonym for ''good''?' was also raised, and the extent to which thinking about authenticity closes rather than opens doors was discussed.

References

Thornton, S. 1995. *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Cambridge)

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