

Marxist thought, The Frankfurt School and the music industry

Some might argue that music industry companies are on a downfall. Well-known bands such as *Radiohead* are selling their newest CD *In Rainbows* directly from their webpage for whatever price you want to pay. Thus, cutting out the so-called middleman – in this case, the record company *Capitol*, owned by major label *EMI* (<http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1666973,00.html>). At the same time *Prince* has been giving away one of his latest CD's *Planet Earth* for free with every purchase of the Sunday newspaper *The Mail*. This was met with negativity from some people in the music industry, who have referred to it as madness and an insult to the business (www.guardian.co.uk/media/2007/jun/29/business.pop). What we see here is the tendency for well-known bands and artists to actually abandon the major companies to go independent.

So, is this relevant with regards to Marxist, and post-Marxist theory? That is what I want to examine in this essay. First, I will briefly cover Marx's theories on base and superstructure. I will look at the media companies known as *The Big Six* (www.freepress.net/ownership/chart/main), and try to find links between them and the four major record labels known as *The Big Four* (www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/jan/20/popandrock.musicindustry). I will also be looking at top 20 charts from the *iTunes* Music Store, trying to find links between the artists and *The Big Four* (<http://www.doipod.com/itunes-chart/top-100-itunes-songs-uk.html>). Furthermore, I will review the different musical genres in the popular

music charts, and attempt to divide them into sub-genres in order to determine examples of predictability, standardisation, and mass-production.

Before looking in to the business of the music industry it is first important to understand the work of German Philosopher Karl Marx. Mainly interested in studies of ideology – the study of ideas, Marx believed that; ideas in a society are determined by its material basis, thus the material basis will actually control the way that people think about the society around them (Long & Wall, 2009, p. 284). Marx worked with a concept he called *base* and *superstructure*. The *base*, he referred to as the economic foundations, or material basis of society. The *superstructure* as the culture, and the social organisations we live by, in other words, the way people think about the world. The idea of the Marxist philosophy is that the *base* controls the *superstructure*, which thereby justifies: “[...] a particular organisation of society, and rather than being open advertised as such, and available for scrutiny and evaluation, they were [...] presented, not as one possible and historically situated way of thinking, but as self-evident truths” (Long & Wall, 2009, p. 284). This self-evident truth I will get back to later.

So, when looking at the music industry according to Marx’s theories, the economic power -the *base*, could represent *The Big Four*, namely *EMI Music*, *Sony Music Entertainment*, *Universal Music Group* and *Warner Music Group* (www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/jan/20/popandrock.musicindustry). On the other hand we have the *superstructure*, the culture, or in this case, the music that we as the society want to listen to, as Theodor Adorno pointed out, “the contemporary form of popular art” (Adorno, 1975, p. 12). If the theory of Marx is right the *iTunes* chart is dominated by the major labels, and this “would be accepted by both the powerful

themselves and those they exercise power over, simply because it acquired the status of truth” (Long & Wall, 2009, p. 285).

When looking closely into the *iTunes* chart we find some rather interesting facts: 16 out of the 20 songs are either directly or via subsidiaries owned and controlled by *The Big Four* (see Appendix 1). To provide you with a few examples I refer to this week’s current number one: Katy Perry featuring Snoop Dogg, *California Gurls*. This song is owned by *Capitol Records*, however the label is a subsidiary of *EMI Music* (www.emimusic.com/about/history/timeline/). Another example is this week’s number 7 on the chart: Jay-Z, featuring Mr Hudson, with the song *Young Forever*. Jay-Z is signed to *Atlantic Records* that started out as an independent label, mainly releasing *Rhythm, Blues* and *Soul* music, but it is now a subsidiary of *Warner Music Group* (www.wmg.com). Even more interesting is this week’s number 9: 3OH!3 featuring Ke\$ha – *My First Kiss*. This song is owned by *Photo Finish Records*, which actually proclaims to be an independent label, dealing mainly with alternative music. However, when doing a bit of research you will discover that *Photo Finish Records*, with their status as an indie label, still have to rely on the distribution of *Atlantic Records*, which as mentioned earlier, is a subsidiary of *Warner Music Group*. What is interesting here is that even an independent label like *Photo Finish Records* needs the acceptance, money, and help from one of *The Big Four* to be able to distribute its music. Added to this overview of the *iTunes* top 20 music chart is the fact that the only four songs not owned and controlled by *The Big Four* are songs from the soundtrack for teenage TV Series *Glee*. These songs are owned and controlled by *Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation*, owned by *News Corp* – one of *The Big Six* (www.freepress.net/ownership/chart/main/). When looking closer at *The Big Four*

we also see connections to the *The Big Six* in two cases: *Universal Music* is owned by *General Electric* and *Warner Music* is owned by *TimeWarner* (www.freepress.net/ownership/chart/main/). Therefore when applying Marxist theories to the music business we see clear signs that the *base*, being *The Big Four*, is controlling the *superstructure* – the popular music. So what does this mean with regards to the quality of the popular music?

After listening to every song on the chart a few times I see some clear connections within each genre, but also believe that it can be divided into subgenres. For example, the pop tracks topping the chart can be described as *electro-pop*, such as Lady Gaga with *Alejandro*, Ke\$ha, Taio Cruz featuring Ludacris with *Break Your Heart*, and Sean Kingston and Justin Bieber with *Eenie Meenie*. In contrast to these, a more classical pop sound is present in songs like Katy Perry featuring Snoop Dogg with *California Gurls*, Train with *Hey Soul Sister* and Travis McCoy featuring Bruno Mars with *Billionaire*. Last we have all the songs from the *Glee* series. These are all cover tracks of earlier hit songs, therefore I will not be going into much detail about them, other than to question why people want to listen to a badly made cover of *Hello, Goodbye* when the Beatles made the real deal in their own flawless version in 1967. This is just my point of view though. Referring back to the *electro pop* genre then, each song consists of a rather minimalistic verse, with an edgy synthesiser bass line; a sound universe borrowed from underground genres, for example such as the British *dub step* genre. It also has a really catchy chorus and a simple melody that allows you to sing along. All songs are constructed with an intro, verse, chorus, verse, chorus, bridge and then ending with two choruses – a standard pop song structure. With regards to pop music with a more classical sound however, we discover that these

songs are built in the exact same way, and the only thing that actually distinguishes from the contrasting subgenre *electro pop* is that the synthesisers have been replaced with guitars and bass. Also it is interesting to note that none of these songs exceed 3 minutes and 30 seconds - the standard length of a radio song. Furthermore, when looking in to the *Hip-Hop/Rap* genre we find B.o.B with their songs *Airplanes* featuring Hayley Williams, and *Nothin' On You*, featuring Bruno Mars. In the same genre is Drake with *Find Your Love*. These songs are nothing but simple pop songs disguised as *Hip-Hop* with a verse being rapped and a chorus sung, but still made up of a standard pop song structure.

Using my case study of the *iTunes* top 20 chart, there is indeed a standardisation present where when applying a Marxist theory, the dynamics between a verse and a chorus, the classical pop song structure and the length of the songs are presented to us as a self-evident truth, completely out ruling experimentation and reinventions of the music as we know it. Theodor Adorno of the *Frankfurt School* has argued that “the autonomy of works of art, which of course rarely ever predominated in an entirely pure form, and always permeated by a constellation of effects, is tendentially eliminated by the culture industry, with or without the conscious will of those in control” (Adorno, 1975, p. 13). Similarly, when looking at the case study of the *iTunes* chart it is possible to argue that the music industry indeed has traces of a production where songs are created on a basis of rules of structure, more than it is a form of art. Based on the above information one could easily argue that the music consumed by the masses is helping to maintain the society as it is in its present state. When looking at the work of post Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci and his theory of *hegemony*, Gramsci argues that “Under the

hegemony of the powerful, the oppressed accept and actively consent to their oppression because they believe it to natural" (Long & Wall, 2009, p. 287). What Gramsci is referring to when using the word *hegemony* is the way in which society is structured, and how a certain ideology is given to us via what he calls the civil sphere, which includes "[...] organized religion, education, the media and the popular culture [and also the private sphere which includes] family and home" (Long & Wall, 2009, p. 287). If we then look towards lyrics from the *iTunes* top 20 chart, for example, the previously mentioned *California Gurls* by Katy Perry featuring Snoop Dogg, we can see some clear signs that popular music can be analysed as part of the media, which according to Gramsci, is part of the *hegemony* that balances in a society controlled by the minority of rich people. *California Gurls* is a song about the sexy girls from California, and includes ideologies of material status like expensive cars, extravagant clothes, and fancy parties with rich people. In fact the bridge to the chorus goes: "once you party with us, you'll be falling in love", thereby one can argue that the lyric of this song is in fact a message to the masses suggesting; if you work hard, and play by societies rules, one day you too will be able to discover the glamour that life is really about. Another example is the so-called *Hip-Hop* star Drake, with his song *Find Your Love*, which is indeed about finding a girls love. But at the same time Drake praises himself as an individual with lines like "I am more than just an option" and "I am more than just a number". Another post Marxist thinker Louis Althusser has argued that "mass media[s] are seen as providing views of the world which reflect the benefits of those already powerful, whether in the form of game shows that encourage individual acquisition of wealth or movies supporting the value of individual heroism" (Long & Wall, 2009, p. 289). Indeed, this can also be applied to the music industry, and Drake is a fine example praising the achievements of the individual and encouraging the

listener to work hard to achieve what some might call false happiness, such as money and fame.

Another important aspect of the tendency to praise the individual is the way in which the media presents celebrity music stars. These individuals are amongst the most followed in gossip magazines, and the constant bombardment and acclamation of rock and pop stars and the way their lives is presented as glamorous and admirable, which leads me to the next key philosopher - Michel Foucault. Foucault talks about the term *discourse* being “regimes of truth” (Long & Wall, 2009, p. 291). This is referring to material and liberal ideologies, like the ones present in *California Gurls* representing something to aspire to due to the level of media attention it receives. In time, this stereotype of a so-called truth eventually becomes part of the societies’ language and thought – its *discourse*. Therefore one could argue that since the ideology of stardom, individuality, and money is supported by songs like *California Gurls*, due to constant restatement it eventually becomes part of societies’ ideology.

What of course also needs to be questioned in this relation is how *The Big Four*, with the releases of lesser innovative music, can manage to keep their status as the majors. David Croteau and William Hoynes argue that “our daily lives are saturated with media” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006, p. 192). This theory claims that the music business first creates CD’s, which then brings media attention from magazines and television commercials that both advertise a brand as well as the original song. Therefore “everything, it sometimes seems, is now a product and everything is a potential advertisement” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006, p. 192). Furthermore they argue that record companies are “promoting their artist by providing their music free of

charge to music-programming companies who, in turn, supply background music played in apparel stores. The result is “stealth advertising”; the customer is not even aware of it” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006, p. 194). Added to this is also the invention of music video channel *MTV*, owned by *Viacom* – one of *The Big Six* – and all of the music video channels that have followed since. *MTV* is, according to Croteau & Hoynes, nothing but “[...] an endless stream of ads promoting new music releases. The content [is] the ad, and the ad [is] the content.” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2006, p. 195). In that sense music video channels like *MTV* create a type of sneak attack advertisement devoted to major label music. A case study of the soundtracks available for the computer sports games released by *EA sports* this year similarly show an interesting form of sneak attack advertising (www.maxpreme.wordpress.com/2009/07/27/ea-sports-2010-full-soundtrack-list/). The list features B.o.B and Snoop Dogg, who currently are on the *iTunes* chart, amongst many other artists signed to major labels.

So is there hope for a world where creating music will be about the art and not about manipulation, control and money? Referring back to the theories of Antonio Gramsci and *hegemony* “the oppressed would counter the power exercised by the elite. The powerful would never hold absolute power” (Long and Wall, 2009, p. 287). Independent record companies and unsigned artists have opportunities today, which they did not have 10 years ago. Computer technology and inventions of websites such as *MySpace* has made it possible for independents to record and share music only by use of a computer. This is also shown above in the case of *Radiohead*, who released *In Rainbows* directly from their own website without any help from a label. According to *The Guardian*, artists need, for as long as the majors are in control, to accept the rules of *The Big Four*. However “the majors grip on things has almost gone. For years they

saw it coming but did little to change things.”
(www.guardian.co.uk/music/2008/jan/20/popandrock.musicindustry).

In conclusion I think it is indeed possible to apply both Marxist and post-Marxist theories to music theory. When doing so we get explanations as to why popular music seems very standardised, and in theory it should be possible to apply these ideas to any part of the media business. Naturally, the way I have applied these theories is from my own point of view as tour manager for *Oh No Ono* (www.ohnoono.com) – a Danish band signed on British independent *Leaf Label*, as well as from my own personal view of popular music - songs that I often find very dull and uninspiring. In particular, the work of Althusser and Gramsci has given me good insight in to what reasons may lay behind this standardisation. However, whether I agree with the theories of music maintaining stabilisation in the society I am not quite sure. What I am sure about though, especially after doing the case study on the *iTunes* Music Store, and making my corporate family tree, is that the big media companies have much more influence than what we see present in our everyday life. Hence, this does, as Adorna has pointed out, eliminate a lot of the art within different branches of the media industry, including the music business.

Word Count: [2741]

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Appendix 1:

Top 20 Songs on iTunes in the UK on the 14th of May 2010:

1: Katy Perry (feat. Snoop Dogg) - California Gurls (Capitol Records - subsidiary of EMI) Genre: Pop

2: Usher (feat. will.i.am) – OMG (LaFace Records – owned and operated by Sony Music Entertainment) Genre: R&B/Soul

3: Eminem – Not Afraid (Aftermath Records – subsidiary of Universal Music Group)
Genre: HipHop/Rap

4: B.o.B. (feat .Hayley Williams) – Airplanes (Atlantic Records – subsidiary of Warner Music Group) Genre: HipHop/Rap

5: Glee Cast – Jessie’s Girl (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation) Genre: Pop

6: Lady GaGa – Alejandro (Interscope Records – owned by Universal Music Group)
Genre: Pop

7: Jay-Z (feat. Mr Hudson) – Young Forever (Atlantic Records – subsidiary of Warner Music Group) Genre: HipHop/Rap

8: Ke\$ha – Your Love Is My Drug (RCA Records – a unit of Sony Music Entertainment)
Genre: Pop

9: 3OH!3 (feat. Ke\$ha) – My First Kiss (Photo Finish Records) Genre: Alternative

10: Taio Cruz (feat. Ludacris) – Break Your Heart (Island Records – unit of Universal Music Group) Genre: Pop

11: Glee Cast – One (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation) Genre: Pop

12: Train – Hey Soul Sister (Sony Music Entertainment) Genre: Pop

13: Glee Cast – The Boy Is Mine (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation) Genre: Pop

14: B.o.B. (feat. Bruno Mars) – Nothin’ On You (Atlantic Records – subsidiary of Warner Music Group) Genre: HipHop/Rap

15: Drake – Find Your Love (Aspire Music Group – subsidiary of Universal Music Group) Genre: HipHop/Rap

16: Glee Cast – Lady Is A Tramp (Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation) Genre: Pop

17: La Roux – Bulletproof (Polydor – owned by Universal Music Group) Genre: Dance

18: Sean Kingston & Justin Bieber – Eenie Meenie (Sony Music Entertainment)
Genre: Pop

19: Lady Antebellum – Need You Now (Capitol Records – subsidiary of EMI)
Genre: Country

20: Travie McCoy (feat. Bruno Mars) – Billionaire (Fueled By Ramen - owned by Atlantic – subsidiary of Warner Music Group) Genre: Pop