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Musemes in Affect. Philip Tagg's Model of Music Analysis

ABSTRACT: The paper is an attempt to synthesize the most important aspects of a model of popular and film music analysis proposed by British musicologist Philip Tagg.
Tagg, using the category of musemes – universal meaning units, isolated from the musical structure of the composition on the basis of criteria established for every given case – examines selected pieces using multi-level semiotic analysis. In his model Tagg takes into account both the importance of the broadly understood cultural context and the intertextuality of the piece. He also emphasizes the role of affect in musical communication, which is necessary to fully understand the meaning of a musical work.

KEYWORDS: popular music, musical analysis, semiology of music

Neither the interdisciplinary approach in musicological research nor the use of analytical methods in relation to popular music seem controversial in musicology today. However, when in 1979 British musicologist Philip Tagg, who was 35 at the time, presented to the world his newly devised model of multilevel analysis of popular music, in his doctoral thesis published with the title *Kojak: 50 Seconds of Television Music. Towards the Analysis of Affect in Popular Music*, he had to face the kind of criticism usually meted out to the most innovative ideas. True, the trend towards a natural science perspective, which finally confirmed the legitimacy of interdisciplinary research in musicology, had already begun in that field a few years earlier, and the use of the achievements of linguistics in music analysis, postulated by Tagg, by that time had a history going back more than a dozen years.[1] However, at the end of the 1970s that process had not yet been completed. Also, research into popular music, initiated during the 1960s by Wilfrid Mellers, in the following decades was still trying to overcome the problems of lacking its own tools, dominance of a methodology proper to his-

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[1] An example of applying concepts and schemas worked out by linguistics in the area of music analysis is provided by the research of Nicolas Ruwet, conducted from the mid-1960s (cf. Middleton, 2002, p. 187).

torical musicology, and having only a few scholars working in that field (Moore, 2003, pp. 2–4).

Philip Tagg's main postulate, innovative in relation to the state of musicological research he encountered, was to recognise popular music as a fully-fledged subject of scholarly research. A few years after the publication of *Kojak*, in an extensive article summarising his motivation for conducting this kind of research, Tagg (1982, pp. 37–38) recalls the indulgent attitude towards treating popular culture as a serious subject that he faced in the early 1980s. Taking a stand in opposition to the prevailing trend, the author concerned himself with that which – as he said – was reaching Western populations on a growing scale and with great frequency, as a very large part of the culture in which they participated. According to Tagg, music, and in particular popular music, the product of a market reality where the authors and recipients are more easily identified than in artistic music (Tagg, 2001, p. 30), should be examined above all in the context of the process of communication. For this reason in his article he proposes:

> Let us assume music to be that form of interhuman communication in which individually experienceable effective states and processes are conceived and transmitted as humanly organised nonverbal sound structures to those capable of decoding their message in the form of adequate affective and associative response (Tagg, 1982, p. 40).

He then remarks that music as a means of communication is a group activity, and thus can be a carrier of 'emotional identity', attitude and models of behaviour of specific groups. Thus an analysis of a musical composition should above all be able to answer the question 'Why and how does who say what to whom and with what effect?' (Tagg, 1982, p. 40). This oft-repeated question by the researcher significantly takes into account not only the transmitter, the recipient and the content of the message, but also the manner of its transmission. As has been remarked by Alicja Jarzębska, Tagg's idea in this context develops the model of communication proposed by Jean Molino and later popularized by Jean-Jacques Nattiez, where the main category is the 'trace', constituting a 'neutral message, without reference to the world of human interests and values', created by the transmitter (composer) and decoded by the recipient (listener) (Jarzębska, 2001, p. 76):

Table 1. J.-J. Nattiez's model of musical communication[2]

Poietic process	Trace – neutral level	Aesthetic process
Composer (transmitter)		Listener (receiver)

Source: own study.

Tagg adopts this tripartite division, but rejects the neutrality of the 'trace', claiming that every coded transmission is wholly dependent on the intention of the transmitter (musician) and/or the reaction of the listener, who interprets the

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[2] Graphics from: J.-J. Nattiez (1990), after: A. Jarzębska (2001).

message in the context of a particular culture. Thus what is important in Tagg's model is the human factor: the author of the model ignores Roman Ingarden's view of a work of art as an intentional object, for him the message has no reason to exist when divorced from the transmitter and receiver who endow it with meaning. For this reason Tagg, unlike those analysts who represent a more conservative approach, tends to focus research not on the notated score of a composition, perhaps supported by a specific performance or enlivened by the researcher's musical imagination, but the effect of a particular performance, i.e., that part of the message transmitted by its author which reaches the recipient aurally and is accepted by her consciously or unconsciously. Greatly simplified, the model proposed by Tagg looks like this:
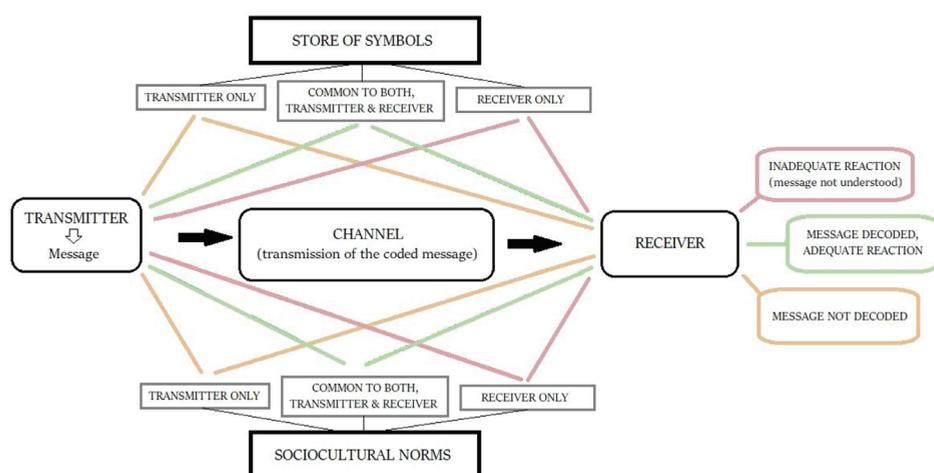

Figure 1. A simplified model of Tagg's musical communication
(based on Jarzębska, 2001; Tagg, 1999)

In order for the above model to be correctly understood we need above all to examine more closely two aspects of music communication: competence in decoding the message understood as a sign (i.e., an issue belonging to music semiotics)[3] and the affective (emotional) reaction of the listener. The first of them should not cause any problems: according to Tagg, a message may be correctly transmitted and decoded only in such cases where the transmitter and the receiver share a store of symbols. Otherwise we are dealing with lack of competence, which makes communication using musical signs impossible. The second aspect, the affective reaction, is an issue with which Tagg is particularly concerned, and which in fact is the

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[3] According to the *Encyklopedia muzyki* [Encyclopaedia of Music], 'the subject of music semiotics includes both notation signs (e.g., the neumes of the Gregorian chant), and the relationships between signs within a musical structure viewed in terms of analogy to verbal language'; clearly, in the case of Philip Tagg's model we are dealing with the latter understanding of semiotics. (see Chodkowski, 2001, s.v. *Semiotyka muzyczna* [Music semiotics]).

main element of his model of analysis. Tagg's understanding of affect reflected in his model originates from the baroque period and music rhetoric of that time, described later by German musicologists by the term *Affektenlehre* (Buelow, 2001). The common denominator of the baroque affect theory and Tagg's approach is the nature of the music sign itself: the musical figures identifiable in a composition are meant to reflect nature not illustratively, but by showing the

> [...] temper, disposition or frame of mind, passions and mental reactions characteristic of man (Lang, 1963, p. 436; after: Tagg, 2001, p. 46).

In this way they are to evoke in the listener certain states or emotions premised by the composer, or at least evoke them in a manner which does not leave the receiver in any doubt. The fundamental difference between the original theory and a musical figure causing an affect is, according to Tagg, the fact that baroque effects are unchangeable: the catalogue of rhetorical figures is constant, and individual figures always have the same emotional meaning. On the other hand, figures found in a composition analysed using Tagg's model are on every occasion identified by the researcher on the basis of his/her adopted criteria and do not have meanings of their own: their meanings are not constituted until analogies to similar figures are found by the analyst in other works belonging to the same cultural community (Tagg, 2001, pp. 45–50). This indicates the communicative role of cultural context shown at the bottom of Figure 1 as 'sociocultural norms'.

Tagg, when formulating the basic premises of his model, emphasises the theoretical character of research. For this reason he regards it as vital to introduce appropriate terminology that would allow free formulation of hypotheses regarding the affective influence of musical figures. Therefore he starts by identifying the 'basic units of musical expression', otherwise known as 'items of musical code': musemes, museme stacks and museme strings (Tagg, 2001, pp. 106–110). **Museme** is a term borrowed from Charles Seeger and, used similarly, encompasses three consecutive tone elements (tone beats) between which there could appear two progressions. This, in turn, enables the identification of a complete, independent unit, constituting a logical element of the construction of the musical whole or carrying information about the mood. Thus Tagg describes the basic elements of musemes – *tone beats* – as 'musical phonemes', while musemes themselves are the basic units of musical expression that cannot be divided into smaller elements within a given musical system without asimultaneous change of meaning, and are compared to morphemes. It should also be noted that while Tagg uses changes in pitch as the main example of identifying musemes, the rhythmic schema or harmony may be an equally important unit of meaning, and their significance is additionally determined by aspects such as timbre (instrumentation), dynamics or articulation. According to Tagg, musemes not only construct the melodic line of a composition, but also its accompaniment. The music which reaches the listener is thus not a series of single musemes – separate items of music information – but a set of information that appears simultaneously. Such simultaneous compositions of musemes are described by Tagg as **museme stacks**. Every significant modification of any of the elements of the set, and even

a change of the relationship between individual musemes (such as the volume of one relative to another) intervenes in a musical structure that carries certain information. Therefore it changes the musical code, and in this way also changes the message at the level of the whole set. While a stack of musemes is a category more usually referring to vertical systems, in music there are also some wholes made up of consecutive musemes, described by Tagg as **museme strings**. According to Tagg the most basic example of a museme string is the musical phrase, although he also includes in that category much larger and more complex constructions, such as multipart musical forms. Also in that case every change of even single musemes or intervening in their mutual relations (e.g., changing the sequence of motifs in a phrase) results in a change in the musical code and modification of the message received by the listener.

Establishing the range of the three terms discussed above allows one to distinguish in the work being analysed those elements which the researcher, in the process of interpretation, endows with meaning. Philip Tagg identifies a number of various methods of interpretive analyses, the most important of which from the methodological point of view is, according to him, the technique of **inter-objective comparison.** In contrast to the intersubjective approach, which presupposes concordance in reactions by different subjects to the same phenomenon, Tagg defines the interobjective approach in analysis as

> […] structural consistency between different pieces of music and consistency in the type of para-musical accompaniment to those different pieces of music (Tagg, 2001, p. 112).

This then is a situation where the elements of musical code, associated with some paramusical factors, appear in similar form and under similar circumstances in different compositions. Since applying this method freely may lead to glaring overinterpretations, resulting, for example, from preferences that change over time for some musical scales, or systems dominant in a given culture, Tagg recommends applying the method of interobjective comparison to musical genres and functions close to those specific to the object being analysed. He also notes at this point that although this usually results in finding a narrow area of application (e.g., English-language popular music from the 1960s and 70s when analysing punk rock), film and television music, in view of its stylistic eclecticism, enables the use as comparative material much more diverse compositions, including classical music in a wider understanding of the term. For this reason, in order to minimise the risk of 'working blind', he allows the researcher to be helped by other competent persons in the initial stage of analysis, i.e., collecting interobjective comparison material. The collected material, presented to the researcher as structurally and expressively similar to the composition being analysed, is then subjected to detailed analysis at the level of individual musemes, stacks and strings, confirming or falsifying analogies to the object being analysed (Tagg, 2001, p. 113).

Clearly, the most certain way of verifying the rightness of the results of such an analysis would be to investigate the reception of a given work and to collect and compare statistical data. However, since according to Tagg this is not possible at that stage of research, he proposes a theoretical approach, introducing

the concepts of 'hypothetical substitution' / 'hypothetical falsification' (Tagg, 2011, p. 114). This method involves changing an element of the musical code selected from the work being analysed and comparing the modified fragment to the collected material. If the paramusical links associated with the modified museme/museme stack/museme string found in the interobjective comparative material are different from those attributed to the element in its original version, then the hypothetical paramusical association is more likely. However, if the changed element of the code is still linked to the same paramusical categories in structurally analogous fragments of comparison material, the premise is falsified.

In order to demonstrate the truth of his hypotheses and the possibility of using the proposed model in practice, having discussed his theory in detail Tagg analyses a selected work from popular culture – a fifty-second composition that is the opening sequence of *Kojak*, a TV series popular at that time. Since one of his premises is the necessity of holistic treatment of the products of culture, and of taking into account the context in which the musical work was created and received, he analyses in depth not only the composition itself, but its associations with the film material accompanying the opening theme, the position of the series in the 'media culture' of that time, and the circumstances of it being shown. For this reason the analysis presented by Philip Tagg is very extensive, and it would not be possible to present all its aspects here. However, since I do not want to leave out specific examples, I will quote only the selected key elements of the analysis.

Tagg begins his analysis of the opening of the series with a precise outline of the context; according to him, that knowledge is a condition of communication taking place between the author and the recipient of the work. He thus presents the profiles of the transmitters (here: the TV channel responsible for producing the series and its employees, particularly the composer of the music) and the receivers (viewers of the series, particularly Swedish audiences)[4] and the 'communicative situation', the relationship between the transmitter and the receiver, the circumstances in which the viewers watched the opening and the functions it might have fulfilled for them, and finally the significance of the content of the series and its relationship to other productions with similar themes (*Baretta*, *Cannon*, *Columbo*). He also describes in detail the communication channels through which the message reached the receivers: the manner of recording sound and vision, technical features of the equipment most likely to have been used by the receivers, and the manner of 'retrieving' the final message by the researcher: transcription of the opening sequence from listening and comparing its results to the initial score notation. Finally, he describes the manner of collecting the comparative material.

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[4] During the years 1966–1991 Philip Tagg lived in Sweden. At that time he obtained his Master's and Doctoral degrees at the University of Göteborg, where he was subsequently employed. That is also where he conducted the research for his PhD thesis, on which that text is largely based (cf. *Philip Tagg: Curricula Vitae* [online], http://tagg.org/ptcv.html [accessed: 12.04.2016]).

In the next step comes an extensive musematic analysis of the composition. After identifying all the musemes in the work, Tagg divides them into four groups: melodic musemes, accompanying musemes, contrasting motifs and 'miscellaneous' elements that do not fit into the three other sets. He then provides interpretations of individual musemes from each group, beginning with the accompaniment. The first figure he analyses is the bass motif, presented in Figure 2 as 2a.
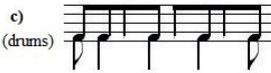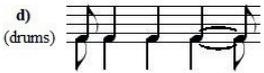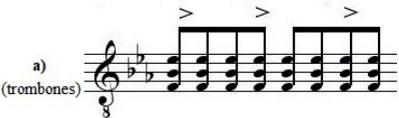
Figure 2. Example of accompanying musemes identified by Philip Tagg
(based on: Tagg, 2001, p. 148)

The bass part, characterised as '*forte, staccato non troppo e pesante*', is immediately linked to bass parts from popular music, particularly such genres as soul and funk and music performed by big bands. He justifies this association by the part's rhythmic activity and the presence of syncopated rhythms (Tagg, 2001,

pp. 150–151). He also refers to the pentatonic scale present in the example, suggesting that it makes frequent appearances in works belonging to the genres in question. As evidence he quotes similar motifs from more than a dozen different works, such as *I Feel The Earth Move* from the repertoire of Carole King or King Curtis's *Memphis Soul Stew*. He then finds a common denominator for paramusical links of the selected examples: he associates them all with nervous, 'ecstatic' mobility and intensity of emotions. He supports his conclusions by using the verbal layer of the quoted works on the one hand and, on the other, juxtaposing the investigated fragment with compositions having a totally different structure and contrasting expressive character: the 29th bar of Wagner's *Siegfried's Idyll* and the beginning of Borodin's *In the Steppes of Central Asia*. He also draws attention to a less direct reference suggested by the bass part presented in the table. Since the composition being analysed is not a song belonging to popular music, and only refers to it in its timbre, Tagg recommends that this motif should be categorised as a classic borrowing, used as a means of stylisation. Thus, firstly, the figure is to bring to mind energy, motion and strong emotions, and, secondly, evoke associations with soul or funk music. Tagg subjects to a similar examination each of the identified musemes, formulating conclusions as to the expressive value of the six different 'layers' of the work: the bass part, the Moog synthesiser, brass wind instruments, the harmonic layer and the part of the French horn. He then interprets the sets of musemes, identified on the basis of the structure of the work (ABA). In each of the sets he takes into consideration the relationships between individual musemes and the links between individual 'layers' with different character, and this leads him to further conclusions regarding paramusical references which appear in the analysed composition.

Another category analysed by Tagg is vision. With the proviso that he is not fully competent in this area and his analysis is somewhat amateurish, he interprets consecutive frames in the sequence of images which accompany the opening, taking into account their duration, manner of animating the transition between scenes, the content and manner of shooting consecutive frames and the font and animation of the title of the series which appears at the end. As in the case of the music, the researcher looks for associations between the opening of *Kojak* and other cinema and TV productions, and then interprets them in the context of the affective message being transmitted. The last element to be taken into account is 'other paramusical aspects' – the actions, clothing and gestures of the hero, his name, personality and the environment in which he is presented. Tagg's conclusion, formulated on the basis of the analysis carried out, is a collection of conclusions from its individual stages; it is not a synthesis of the elements presented earlier, but, rather, a reminder of the assumed meaning of each of the element of the analysed work.

The model of analysing popular music devised by Philip Tagg is undoubtedly of interest to contemporary musicologists. The researcher's interdisciplinary approach is impressive; he frequently notes that limiting oneself almost exclusively to analysing the musical layer is dictated by his competencies, while a full understanding of the composition would require a comparable effort from representatives of many other disciplines, such as psychology, sociology, film

studies, history of art, linguistics and economics – and a model reflecting the complexity. On the other hand one can hardly avoid the charge of subjectivism or even of the method not being scientific, since both the hypotheses put forward during analyses and Tagg's proposed ways of falsifying them are based on arbitrary selection of the comparative material, which theoretically creates the possibility of manipulating the results to fit the researcher's needs. However, the author of the model admits from the start that in his opinion subjectivism in this kind of analysis is not only unavoidable but even justified, in view of the importance of the human factor in his model of communication; he presents it more as an integral feature than a defect of his work, but it would be difficult to expect sceptics to be convinced by arguments of this kind. Tagg himself talks about this method being very labour intensive; editing the audio-video material of not quite fifty-seconds duration took him a number of years (2001, p. 358). Perhaps the reason for the relatively low popularity of this model at a time of enormous increase in analysis of popular music observed in recent years is to be found in these imperfections. However, it is undoubtedly worthwhile to learn about the work of this British musicologist: the results of his many years of research into analyses of popular music and music semiotics may provide a point of departure for much further research.

Translated by Zofia Weaver

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