

EMOTIONAL ECOLOGIES AND MUSICAL FIRST AID AT THE EDGE OF REASON (Mind You: Baby, This Is Serious...)

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“All by myself, don’t wanna be all by my-hy-seeelf,” lip-synchs Bridget Jones, who is otherwise clearly emotionally-challenged.¹ Wearing those adorable pajamas of hers, she is playing air guitar and drums to the heart-wrenching song by the same title, pretending to be the actual singer of the song, Jamie O’Neal. Those of us who have seen this movie before are all too ready to infer that this is some two bottles of red wine, 24 cigarettes, 6,000 calories (but mainly from chocolate bars) and two hours before or after one or another Mark Darcy-like crush has dumped her. Of course she knew all along that this was going to happen; of course there will be absolutely no messages anymore today; and no, she won’t be going to the gym tonight. Instead, she’ll be busy being all by herself.

Such is the story the title sequence of the romantic comedy movie *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (2001), the first one in the Bridget Jones trilogy, tells. The video clip is available on YouTube. “[M]e on Friday and Saturday nights lolz,” comments YouTube-user MizzK via Google+ in May 2014; “me every day of the fucking week,” responds user Eliza Ketcher about a month later; and, “[t]his pretty much sums up my existence,” adds user MsCraigWolfe123.² Clearly, the fact that so many, typically female and North Atlantic,³ users on YouTube express just how well they can relate to the character of Bridget Jones speaks volumes about the workings of the books’ and the movies’ commercial success. Why and how the movie

became such a blockbuster is a complex question which critics and scholars alike have addressed. For instance, Emil Stjernholm argues that director Sharon Maguire presents the character of Bridget Jones as a “site of affect” which is at the same time capable of bending the thresholds of shame, thus suggesting a sense of agency and empowerment to the audience (Stjernholm 2014). Much more could be said about the both wacky and charming, in any case profoundly disarming, sincerity of the movie’s protagonist. I admit that I’d love to keep going on about Bridget Jones, but my interest in this short essay is not so much why so many of us can relate so well to Bridget’s clumsiness in matters of the heart (and socially acceptable general behavior, for that matter – after all, this kind of isn’t how you normally buy pregnancy tests in Austrian pharmacies, or is it?⁴). Rather, I’m interested in why the title introduction’s scene of Bridget trying to out-emote Jamie O’Neal rings such a familiar bell with MizzK, Eliza Ketcher and MsCraigWolfe123 (in the following, I’ll only name MizzK). More generally speaking, I want to ask why, for all three commentators – and by extension, for so many of us – does emotional deep-sea diving in so-called schmaltz music seem to be such a familiar strategy to ease our pains and longings (if only for a short while). Screaming along to a sentimental ballad like “All By Myself” amounts to blissfully marinating in an otherwise entirely unwelcome sentiment, in this case loneliness, rather than fight-

ing or dissolving it. Singing along and dancing to a drippingly pathetic piece of music instead of soothing your inner state of emergency with, say, a line of comforting poetry, is not an escapist strategy, I argue; quite to the contrary, it might be such a powerful tactic of dealing with the emotionally unbearable precisely *because* it amplifies that which is already overpowering. Why on earth would we choose that?

Searching for possible answers to this question, I would like to mention three aspects of the self-therapeutic efficacy of strategically singing your heart out alongside one or another big-voiced pop diva.⁵ I'll briefly explore 1) the physical, and 2) the socio-relational dimension of this strategy, both of which feed into 3) the emotional benefit and pleasure of singing along, which, as I argue, empowers you to temporarily manipulate, pretty much in real time, what I would like to suggest is your emotional ecology. Singing along with Jamie O'Neal can ground Bridget Jones and MizzK emotionally, if only for a short while. I'm interested in the mechanisms of this process rather than in the altered emotional states it produces. For the sake of brevity, I'll stick to the initial example of North Atlantic sentimental pop music, even though important work has been done on sentimentality in other popular musics of the world. My musings are of a general nature, though, and not limited to any specific repertoire. The basic assumption is straightforward: in asking how Bridget Jones and Jamie O'Neal are able to pull all these strings, and how MizzK and fellow YouTube commentators are able to have theirs pulled, I'm not looking for the textual, the what and the why. If anything, I'm looking for texture, the how: for the experiential, the intuitive, and the immediate. In other words, the lived experience, the concrete, and the personal. This, then, also sets this essay apart from most of the (vast) literature on music and the emotions, which for my purposes here is of limited use due to its pervasive focus on musical expressiveness and subjectivity, an interest resting on, and I believe invested in prolonging, the implicit (and heavily North Atlantic, ethno-centric) premise that music has content to express.⁶ Both the authority claimed by North Atlantic musical criticism and aesthetics and the somewhat dated

notion of canonic repertoire hinge on the idea that musics can be judged on the basis of their expressive "sophistication." I tend to think that with regard to this movie scene, both Bridget Jones and MizzK couldn't care less about expressive sophistication. What they do care about, however, and what makes their musical experiences so valuable to them, is a rather intimate moment of intensity of experience, both bodily and emotional. It is the nature of this kind of moment, and especially music's role in facilitating such a moment, that I'm interested in here.

The Physical: Knowing with Your Body

The anthropology of the senses has rapidly gained currency in recent decades, suggesting that we experience our bodies and the world around us through the senses more than we're typically inclined to acknowledge. By virtue of its emphatic openness to the holistic human experience of the everyday, this healthy research trend has taught us how to try to think through cultural practices through our senses more than we've dared to do so far. In the rationalist environment of the North Atlantic academy, this continues to be a daunting and brave undertaking; and yet, the consideration of the felt bodily intensity of specific cultural practices has managed to change the field's epistemologies and sensitize scholars to the academically less easily graspable, less manageable and less controllable aspects of what it might mean to be alive. When it comes to aesthetic experience, however, the body's role in guiding our intuitive response to the sensation of the unspeakably beautiful or intense remains to be explored in much greater depth and perhaps much more radically too, in spite of promising proposals that have already been made.⁷ Facing that challenge, philosopher Richard Shusterman has tried with his somaesthetics project to advance the "critical study and meliorative cultivation of the experience and performance of the living body (or soma) as a site of sensory appreciation (aesthesis) and creative self-stylization."⁸ One key idea in this sentence strikes me as particularly important in better understanding how both Bridget Jones and the MizzK gang on YouTube know with their bodies that singing along

with Jamie O’Neal will do them good: the body as a site of sensory appreciation. Conceiving of your body as a site – where are we when we listen to music, after all? – here, happens through your body *feeling* yourself sing your heart out, and usually back in, along with a playback song.

“Where are we when we listen to music?” is a provocative paraphrase of Hannah Arendt’s famous chapter heading, “Where Are We When We Think?”, in her posthumously published and seminal *The Life of the Mind* (1978). This is not a new question, of course. Most prominently and recently, perhaps, philosopher Peter Sloterdijk has offered a few thoughts on this issue in his book *Unworldliness* (1993, *Weltfremdheit* in the original German). Sloterdijk’s interest, however, is different from mine here; my question resonates more with Stjernholm’s appraisal of Bridget Jones’s body as a “site of affect” than with Sloterdijk’s exploration of the pathology of “that madness psychiatry knows nothing about” due to which philosophers sometimes yield seemingly “bizarre questions” such as “where are we when we think?” And if in the preceding sentence I’ve used the word “resonates,” then this reveals what to me this seems to be all about: resonance.

To start with, music is not an object. We can stand across from a painting and look at it as an object. But when we hear music, or someone’s voice, then the sound event and we as persons share the same auditory space. It is in hearing, as an act, that our very being can become tangible to ourselves as a site – through our affective¹⁰ and emotional response to that which we hear. Provided we let ourselves in on the sound event, hearing can temporarily put us in touch with ourselves, allowing us to experience ourselves as who we are, in this very moment, on the affective level: as “sites of affect” where our selves unfold, and where they can relate to Bridget Jones dramatizing her life (and that of others, for that matter). In stirring the affective and emotional responses of the moment and making them resonate, “All By Myself” is capable of putting MizzK in touch with both how and who she is, quite literally, at the very moment she indulges in watching the clip. There is a bodily side to this that goes far beyond the physical

and cognitive aspects of affect. In a different context and with a focus on the ethical dimension of Islamic listening traditions, anthropologist Charles Hirschkind has identified bodily predispositions toward specific auditory practices which invest

the body with affective intensities (Jousse’s “gesticulations”), latent tendencies of ethical response sedimented within the mnemonic regions of the flesh. The vocabularies of ethical affect, bodily sensation, and moral actions invoked both by preachers and sermon listeners, in this regard, function as instruments for objectifying and organizing sensory material, in accord with long-standing discourses on ethical cultivation. Following Foucault, we might describe the practice as “a technology for the constitution of the self that cuts across symbolic systems while using them.” (Hirschkind 2006: 82f.)

Hirschkind calls this the soma-ethical predisposition of the bodies of sermon listeners, who have grown up in a tradition within which believers transduce a listening experience into an ethically charged affect. His idea of the soma-ethical is inspired by the above-mentioned Richard Shusterman’s musings about the somaesthetic dimension of being alive (Shusterman 2002; also, see 2008). With recourse to Wittgenstein, Shusterman argues that bodily reactions and experiences are not objects of our aesthetic judgment; rather, they fine-tune our responses and ability to attend to experiences of “art”: “Attention to what Shusterman calls our somaesthetic feelings, in other words, may enable us to shape our (aesthetic) responses, hone our skills until these become part of our unreflective cognitive equipment” (Hirschkind 2006: 229). Replacing “moral” with “emotional” and “ethical” with “affective” in the first Hirschkind quote given above, then, works just fine for my purpose here: Bridget Jones and Jamie O’Neal are both “preachers,” while MizzK is a sermon listener, and it is the “mnemonic regions of the flesh” that, due to the body’s accrued emotional sediment, resonate so readily to “All By Myself.” This, then, is one of the places where we are

when we listen to music. We need our body to locate that very place, and we need the listening experience to make our body resonate so that we can find that very place, deeply in the sediments of our own flesh.

The Socio-Relational: Getting Up Close and Personal

Musing about the aura of Céline Dion's music, music critic Carl Wilson identifies an "archetypical narrative" that tends to draw fans to any particular kind of music: "In your darkest moment, you hear a song or read a book that lets you know you aren't alone. It may be the most intense sort of artistic encounter we have" (Wilson 2007: 109). But, Wilson goes on, usually the musician is "someone like Kurt Cobain. When the talisman turns out to be something so trite as [Céline Dion's] 'My Heart Will Go On,' the empathy can shift to doubting the subject's mental fitness" (ibid.). Wilson's book on Céline Dion is a sincere account of the author's struggles with his own private, but also very common, notions about musical values and depth, something most popular music critics wouldn't readily attribute to the music of a Céline Dion. And yet even Wilson has to admit that on some listeners, there is a significant impact of that "trite" music of Céline's which doesn't have to do with the construction and representation of personal narratives, and to which an enigmatic, dark figure like Kurt Cobain, presumes Wilson, is much more becoming than a presumably shallow ballad diva selling cheap emotions and instant gratification.

The insinuation here is, of course, that there is a significant degree of sincerity, emotional and otherwise, in Kurt Cobain's music but not in Céline Dion's – an implication which ties in with my earlier remarks on music criticism's emphasis on the value of subjectivity and expressivity. Curiously enough, popular music journalism has, to a noteworthy degree, happily bought into these values, inheriting them from the usually white, male, and affluent critics of historical European "art" music. Truth is, Céline Dion's music isn't about emotional sincerity; it's about emotional intensity and about making that very intensity available on demand. And it's indeed about letting "you know that you aren't alone" in

those moments of emotional intensity. In this sense, one might be tempted to conceive of Céline Dion's as an emotional object,¹¹ except that music isn't an object, as I claimed above. I'd therefore rather call listening to Céline Dion an emotional strategy, for it allows disparate people to find solace in experiencing that other people have also gone through the same emotional turmoil. Céline Dion's artistry is much less about musicianhood than it is about excelling in reaching people emotionally (and something similar could be said about Kurt Cobain), but it yields something beyond private emotional repercussions in individual listeners. For "emotions may be private, self-feelings, but they are eminently social. They are about the social self that emerged from participation in the social world," argue Wentworth and Yardley (1994: 36). Emotions find expression in interpersonal encounters, be they virtual or non-virtual, and these encounters are moments in evolving social relationships, argues Kay Milton (2007: 63) with reference to Parkinson (1995: 277); "getting emotional" is first and foremost an interpersonal activity, in which "people present their own image of themselves to each other." As such, emotion always has a socio-relational genesis, and it is this very genesis which becomes tangible when singing along to "All By Myself," all the while absorbing the idea that you aren't, in fact, "alone."

When Céline Dion, or Jamie O'Neal, for that matter, sing, they offer a conduit which is capable of bringing innumerable emotionally challenged listeners in contact, thus mediating a virtual community of anonymous, and thus safe, companions in emotional turmoil. Feeling that others feel what you feel, in complete privacy and yet in the comforting company of all those other unknown people who you can imagine singing along too, is reassuring to Bridget Jones and MizzK, and endorses their desire to sing their hearts out, to fully embrace that poignant intensity that otherwise threatens to be overpowering.

Emotional Ecologies?

Arguing against subjectivity and expressivity as key components of the power of music demands re-

thinking the presumed clear-cut boundary between so-called musical content and so-called musical context. This is very much in line with the intellectual project of cultural analysis scholar Mieke Bal, who seeks to bring into focus the complex intertwining of content and context. For Bal (2002), even when we encounter a painting, we frame experiences rather than experience an object in a context. By extension it could be said that when we listen to music the way Bridget Jones listens to “All By Myself” in the title introduction of the first Bridget Jones movie, we *make sense* of that listening experience, and as I have tried to show, we very much do so on both the physical and socio-relational levels.

All of this resonates well with the theorization of emotion, which acknowledges the physical and social side of feeling. We might want to think of belting out a kitschy song alongside a recording of it as a strategy to manipulate our emotional ecology. For if, expanding Bateson and Félix Guattari’s (2000: 27f.) take on Bateson, ecologies are a set of relations of culture and matter within which human beings dwell, then we can conceive of the physical (“matter”) and the socio-cultural dimensions of that strategy as ecological registers, the articulations of which impact our current emotional state. In other words, in reverting to Jamie O’Neal, Bridget Jones is able to ground herself for the four minutes and 48 seconds of the song because the listening experience, through its bodily, relational and emotional impact on her, intensifies her mental state to such a degree that this state itself becomes an object, and therefore more easily modifiable within her complex emotional ecology.

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Why, then, in mainstream public discourse, do we have this urge to belittle schmaltz, kitsch and the Mariah Careys of the North Atlantic pop music rigmarole? Possibly because we’re still so fond of that old idea of music having a meaning. Eric Carmen’s “All By Myself” or any of its covers don’t proffer “a meaning.” They only offer the experience of one facet of what it might mean to feel, right here

and right now. Excessively self-indulgent at times, completely overdone at other times – in any case, way too much. That’s why it’s one of the musics we love to hate,¹² and that’s also precisely why it’s crazy enough to work (sometimes, for some). This, then, is in keeping with both the public taunt of kitsch and the quite different, more appreciative language the sales figures speak. So *baby, think twice* when you feel that impulse of laughing at Bridget Jones again, or at MizzK for that matter: *be sure before you close that door.*

Notes

- 1 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8iTZm8-mbA>, last accessed September 17, 2014.
- 2 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8iTZm8-mbA>, last accessed September 17, 2014.
- 3 I use the term “North Atlantic” as an adjective referring to the Global North and more specifically here, those areas of the Global North bordering the Atlantic Ocean rim, i.e. North America and Western Europe.
- 4 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GTCKAy3buxo>, last accessed October 14, 2014.
- 5 Or male balladeers, of course. It would be instructive here to delve into questions of gender role ascriptions in North Atlantic popular culture, which unfortunately is way beyond the scope of this short essay. The same applies to singing voice techniques and, specifically, the relevance of timbre manipulation in vocal belting.
- 6 Further on this, see Rei Terada (2001), and especially the chapter on “Nobody’s Passion: Emotion and the Philosophy of Music” (pp. 92–99); and, Malcom Budd (1985).
- 7 As an example, I would here like to mention Tomie Hahn (2007).
- 8 From the mission statement of Shusterman’s *Journal of Somaesthetics*. See <http://www.journals.aau.dk/index.php/JOS>, last accessed October 18, 2014.
- 9 “... eine Verrücktheit, von der die Psychiatrie nichts weiß” (Sloterdijk 1993: 194).
- 10 Affect “is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act. *L’affection* (Spinoza’s *affectio*) is each such state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body (with body taken in its broadest possible sense to include ‘mental’ or ideal bodies)” (Brian Massumi’s “Foreword” in: Deleuze & Guattari [1980]1987: xvi); it is “the myriad of emotional movements within the body occurring below or outside of consciousness, the

vast sea of emotionally charged perceptual response that traverse the body without being assimilated as subjective content” (Hirschkind 2006: 82).

For the working purposes of this essay, please see a YouTube clip which in my view illustrates concisely what affect is and does: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Bmhj0rKe8>, last accessed October 19, 2014.

- 11 “Emotional object,” here, is a reference to Christopher Bollas’ notion of the “generational object,” a term which Bollas uses “to identify those phenomena that we use to form a sense of generational identity” (Bollas 1992: 255). Emotional objects, then, would be phenomena we use to form a temporary emotional support group. Also, see Morris (2013); Morris uses the concept of the generational object to better understand the attractiveness of “sentimental” popular music of 1970s North America and Europe.
- 12 This expression is, of course, with reference to Washburne and Derno’s edited volume, *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate* (2004). With a view to the issue of our attraction and repulsion with “bad music,” Washburne and Derno offer a significantly different set of ideas than I do in the above. Still, I wish I had thought up this book title myself.

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