

Lecture Notes on Kinds of Analysis/Inquiry

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Poietic – Neutral - Aesthetic

This section draws heavily on Jean-Jacques Nattiez's book *Music and Discourse*.¹ Drawing on work by Charles Sanders Peirce² and by Jean Molino, Nattiez proposes two ways in which processes of signification might be understood. The first he calls "a classic schema for 'communication':"

"Producer" → Message → Receiver

The second is subtly but crucially different:

Poietic Esthetic
Process Process

"Producer" → Trace ← Receiver

These diagrams are found on pp. 16 and 17.

The differences between the two diagrams are in the name of the central node and in the direction of the second arrow. In the first diagram, calling the central node the 'message' implies that it has meaningful content that was placed there by the producer.³ This content is then delivered to the receiver. The receiver is acted on by the producer by means of the message.

In the second diagram, the central node is called the trace. This emphasizes the material reality of the results of the producer's actions – in the case of music, most likely either marks on a page or else sound vibrations. The trace does not "contain" meaning; rather, it is up to the receiver to construct meaning as she interacts with the trace. This active

¹ Trans. Carolyn Abbate, Princeton University Press, 1990.

² Peirce is pronounced like "purse", so that "Peircian" is pronounced PURSE-ian.

³ The producer is in quotes to account for things like the musical equivalent of madlibs.

process of the receiver is emphasized by the reversal of the second arrow, so that it now points from the receiver to the trace.

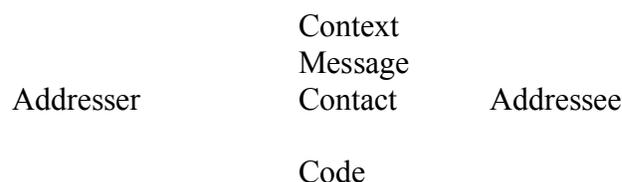
In this conception, producer and receiver each have their own active processes involving the trace. The producer makes or shapes the trace; this is called the poietic process, from the Greek verb meaning ‘to make’. The receiver constructs an understanding of the trace; this is called the esthetic process, from the Greek word for the faculty of perception.

This understanding gives rise to three kinds of analysis. Poietic analysis seeks understanding of the poietic process, how the trace came to be. Esthetic analysis examines the esthetic process, how it is that the receiver (or a receiver) understands the trace. Finally, analysis of the neutral level focuses solely on the trace itself, without concern for how it came to be or how it is understood. It is not neutral in the sense that the questions asked about the trace are supposedly without perspective or agenda – it is neutral in the sense that poietic and esthetic considerations are excluded, or neutralized.

These distinctions are especially important for 20th-century music because esthetic and poietic processes can be radically different; sometimes what the listener makes of the piece has little to do with how the composer constructed it.

To illustrate, let’s take pitch-class set theory as an example. Pitch-class set theory is well geared to analysis of the neutral level; it can give us a set of factually true statements about the notes on the page, without concern for any larger relevance of those true statements. It has the potential to inform poietic analysis, but only if we can make an argument (i.e. an argument about but lying outside of pitch-class set theory itself) about why some particular use of pitch-class set theory could plausibly be considered to have something to do with how the piece was constructed. Similarly, pitch-class set theory has the potential to inform esthetic analysis, but only if we can make an argument (i.e. an argument about but lying outside of pitch-class set theory itself) about why some particular use of pitch-class set theory could plausibly be considered to have something to do with how the piece is heard by some listener or listeners.

It may seem that this understanding of signification takes an overly skeptical view of communication – after all, in many cases there is a very strong correspondence between the understanding of the producer and of the receiver. For example, if we order a certain kind of pizza and receive that same kind of pizza, and if the person who delivers the pizza is happy when we pay the amount we were told to pay plus a customary tip, the satisfaction of all parties seems a good indication that communication has occurred. Nattiez would not deny this, and offers a scheme from the linguist Roman Jakobson that helps explain how this works.



Here's how Jakobson explains this diagram, as quoted by Nattiez.

“The addresser sends a message to the addressee. To be operative the message requires a *context* referred to...; a *code* fully, or at least partially, common to the addresser and the addressee...; and finally, a *contact*, a physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication.”

In the case of music, whether or not we can speak meaningfully of a message is a big question, one dealt with by the field of musical aesthetics. Setting that aside, though, with 20th-century music the context for the music may be quite remote, strangely enough more so than the context of much 18th- and 19th- century music. Most crucially, the composer and listener may well not share a common code. Here is one of the key contrasts with earlier tonal music. Tonal music can be compared at least approximately to a language, with typical patterns that are understood as meaningful in musical terms (e.g. the surprise of bVI in a deceptive cadence). Though there are surely some differences, it seems quite reasonable to believe that we understand this music in a roughly similar way to the way the composer understood it – we share a common code. With 20th-century music, with so many composers heading off in different directions, it is quite likely that we as listeners will be unfamiliar with the style of the music, with its code.

This doesn't mean that we should give up on this music, or dismiss it as incomprehensible. It does mean that poietic and esthetic analysis are likely to be different. And it means that if we don't keep the distinction clearly in mind, we may get quite confused about what it is that we are trying to do and how we should be going about it.

Description – Analysis – Interpretation

It's helpful to be able to sort kinds of things that we might say about music, and one way of doing this is by using the categories of description, analysis, and interpretation.

The easiest of these to understand is description. At its simplest level, description involves factual, objective statements. “There are sixteen C's in the first five measures of this piece.” “The clarinet has only five different notes in the first section of this movement.” These kinds of statement are clearly objective description, easily verified or disproven. They are examples of analysis of the neutral level.

Description can also move into subjective, esthetic territory. Consider the following statement. “As the passage progresses, the rise and fall of the notes grows from a gentle undulation into an intensely dramatic swing from register to register.” This is clearly

more subjective than the statements in the preceding paragraph, but it seems still basically descriptive in character.

It is quite restrained in comparison to this: “In this short piece, Schumann plumbs the depths of the human condition, from the most tender and intimate longing to terror at the edge of the precipice at which the self dissolves into chaotic unbeing.” This clearly goes beyond description, most obviously in that we are left with no idea of what the music actually sounds like. Because it deals with meaning, it is an interpretive statement about the music. Because meaning does not reside in a physical trace, interpretation will deal with the poietic or the esthetic process, sometimes both, sometimes without clearly differentiating between the two, as in the example given. (The example gives the impression that this is both what Schumann meant to express and that it is what we will or can hear in the music.)

Analysis occupies a middle ground between description and interpretation. It is difficult to describe exactly – in general, it should give the reader some kind of insight into how the music works. This can be poietic, talking about why the piece’s construction is coherent (or incoherent); it can be neutral, talking about coherent (or incoherent) patterns in the trace itself; or it can be esthetic, talking about we make sense (or fail to make sense) of the music.

The borders between description and analysis and between analysis and interpretation are both quite fuzzy – in many cases, we have trouble making definite distinctions. But the categories still have utility as a general way of thinking about things we might say about music, or about things that other people say. In particular, these categories can help us in assessing the goodness of fit between the kind of thing we want to say and the kind of thing we are actually saying.