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Semiotics in Beatles' Album Sleeves: Rubber Soul and Abbey Road

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ABSTRACT

As one of the, most influential rock bands in history, Beatles left the world a legacy of great musics and fashions of the day. Numerous studies have been conducted about their music texts, but rather few have been done in the visual elements of the band's contribution, which is an indispensable part of their artistic treasure. This study focus on the sleeve of two of their most successful albums: Rubber Soul (1965) and Abbey Road (1968). Through the application of semiotics framework by Roland Barthes, the research analyzes the signifier and the signified to solicit the implied cultural meaning of the layout. More specifically, this research tries to answer how this sleeve design successfully supports the aesthetical arguments of the band and the commodification of this album as music industrial product.

Keywords: *Semiotics, the Beatles, Abbey Road*

I. ABOUT BEETLES

The Beatles is one of the most influential rock band in popular music history. Its members include John Lennon (Vocal & Guitar), Ringo Starr (Drums), Paul McCartney (Vocal & Bass) and George Harrison (Lead Guitar). Starting in Liverpool in 1960s, the band established their iconic sound through a rather comprehensive pioneering artistic endeavour, from Rockin Roll, Psychedelic Rock, Hard Rock to Popular Ballad. The band garnered numerous Top awards in western popular music history, including 14 Grammy Awards, No.1 in Billboard Top 100 musician list and Most Excellent Order of the Britain Empire (1965), to name a few. Many researches has be conducted on their music, but comparatively fewer have been done about their album sleeves, which is indispensable in setting up their iconic status in music history. This research thereof tries to look into their several CD album sleeves to analyze what these sleeves communicate to the viewers. Through the application of semiotics, the researcher tries to decode the hidden information encoded in the special arrangement of various visual elements. To be more specific, the researcher tries to solicit the signified and the signifier to

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show how these sleeves communicate to the viewers the music's aesthetic orientation and how the overall design aligns with the music thoughts.

II. CD CHOICE AS CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

The most important part of consumer behavior is the understanding of buyer decision making process, both individually and in groups. Current consumer behavior studies focus on the characteristics of individual consumers, such as demographics and behavioral variables in an attempt to understand peoples' wants. However, acknowledging this current trend, this research looks into the extent and how the individual behavior are affected by his "self-identity" in pop music industry setting, through the study on the individual characteristics as well as environmental conditions, within which the "self-identity" will be used as an anchor point or central research focus on specific variables without disregarding other parameters.

Among the different versions of the definitions towards consumer behavior, the researcher agrees with and adopts the one from Belch and Belch (2007 in Perner, 2008), who defined consumer behavior as "the process and activities people engage in when searching for, selecting, purchasing, using, evaluating and disposing of products and services so as to satisfy their needs and desires."

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Early in 1940s, the key figures in Frankfurt School (T.Adorno, M. Horkheimer) proposed the concept of "Cultural Industry" which had a profound impact on the cultural studies afterwards. Under their critical analysis, art became an "commodified" product that is based on the conceptual framework of mass production and consumption, which further develops into an entertainment industrial system that necessitates large scale reproduction and dissemination. The consumers lose their individual aesthetical needs and critical judgement while being alienated in this process of mass commodification (Steiner, 2013).

The second wave of cultural criticism in western countries came from Birmingham School, including Simon Williams and Stuart Hall. As the former director of Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Hall's most influential theory is on the mass' interpretation of media cultural product through a series of encoding and decoding (Hall, 1973, 1980a, 1980b, 1997).

Visualization of Music Through Image

Many scholars define the age we live in as "Visual Age". When we try to know something, its visual presentation becomes the starting point. For such widely distributed commodity as CD, its outside design is of vital importance to its appeal to the target audience. Actually, it is no

exaggeration to call our age as “the Era of Packaging”. Packaging Design has been established as a new and dynamic cross-over discipline in more and more Chinese Higher Education Institutions over the past 20 years. Packaging communicates to its viewers the characteristics, uniqueness, product ideology and aesthetic value. We are living in an age of Visual Culture, and product packaging maximizes the potential of images and text to make itself distinct. In the case of CD music, CD sleeves is the carrier to tell the audience the philosophy of the music digests on its inside polycarbonate discs. In other words, CD sleeve is a method of visualizing the music inside. To precisely articulate the stylistic and aesthetic ideas of the musicians, sleeve designers carefully check the music per se to make their artistic creation faithfully representative of the musician’s artistic pursue and clearly propagative of the music’s aesthetical arguments.

Research Methodology

Semiotics is the study of signs. This study uses semiotics to look into the metaphors and aesthetic value of the CD sleeve. To be more specific, the researcher uses Ferdinand Saussure’s framework to analyze the information that the sleeves try to communicate to the viewers⁴. Swedish semiotics scholar F. Saussure (1878, 1881) was the founder of the modern semiotics and his thoughts were further developed by French scholar Roland Barthes. In Barthes’ theory, he separates a sign into two dimensions, namely the Signifier and the Signified. The former is the construction of the sign and the latter is the concept or meaning of such construction. Based on structuralism linguistics, Barthes applied its key concepts to the realm of cultural criticism under the basic framework of structuralism. Today semiotics is one of the major research methodology in cultural analysis, cultural criticism and media criticism. Scholars worldwide have applied it to movies, magazines, fashions and advertisements. For example, Barthes himself is famous for his works of analyzing and criticizing the fashions in France and Japan through his personal observation of the popular culture and life style in France.

For Barthes, his most concern is on how meaning is embedded into visual presentation. The realization of the symbolic meaning of a certain image is to reinforce its rhetoric function. Through a systematic analysis of the image’s basic elements, we can find the symbolic meaning of the visual signs and discuss the connotations and implications of its rhetoric stories and metaphors.

Under Barthes’ perspective (Barthes, 1966, 1977), an image can be deconstructed into three

⁴ Koerner maintains that Saussure was not influenced by Durkheim (*Ferdinand de Saussure: Origin and Development of His Linguistic Thought in Western Studies of Language. A contribution to the history and theory of linguistics*)

parts: semantic information, de facto description and implied meaning. The viewer receives the cultural information while facing these visual elements. Visual rhetoric is not a static and individual function; on the contrary, it is an active visual transmission process with a specific goal to communicate meaning and realize the aesthetic affect.

IV. ABOUT RUBBER SOUL ALBUM

Published in December 1965, Rubber Soul is The Beatles's sixth studio albums. Produced by George Martin, the album took only four weeks(1965/10/12-1965/11/11) to catch up with the Christmas market and was published by Parlophone and Capital for UK and US markets respectively. The album achieved high artistic achievements in terms of both artistic and commercial aspects. The musics (including 14 songs) are rather comprehensive in genre. The bands used music idioms like Rhythm&Blues, Pop, Folk, Heavy Rock, Soul and Psychedelic Rock, and the album was regarded as a pivotal point in the band's career as the formulation of their artistic maturity. In 2012, Rolling Stone magazine rated this album as the fifth in "the greatest 500 albums in History", which was followed by UK Recording Association's designation as "Platinum" status which hit an awesome figure of 600000 copies sold in US market alone.

Rubber Soul Sleeves



Figure 1

The sleeve design is rather unique for the band. Firstly, no band name was printed, which was the first time for the band and very unusual in the year of 1965. Secondly, the prolongation effect was a coincidence when the cameraman Bob Freeman tried to show the band some cover photos he took previously in John Lennon's room. John was wearing a casual jacket. Bob

displayed his several shots on a sleeve-sized board and slide the board a bit backward to reach a certain distortion effect. The band was amazed by the new prolonged effect and immediately decided that that was what they wanted for the new album.

The signifier level in this sleeve can be analyzed in three parts: the band, the background green trees and the album titles, all in its distorted form. The band profile picture was put up front, with the sequence from left to right as George, John, Ringo and Paul. George, Ringo and Paul looked towards the left side to the sleeve, which displayed more of their right face sides; John looked straight forward at the viewer, which showed his entire face. This signifies his central position to the band and the “soul figure” status. Actually, if we connect such stance to the previous discussion of the album’s artistic position for the band as their unique soundscape formulation point and John’s contribution to the band’s development as a whole, we can understand such choice is by no means random, but rather meticulously calculated. The green trees was added afterwards in the production period (if we can recall that the photo was taken in John’s room). The “virtual” forest exhibits a sense of time and space in their distorted form. Dark green color signifies the artistic life is rather robust and creative, and forest signifies a “virtual” space of imagination. This further leads to a metaphor of distorted psycho-status of human’s soul. This further signifies both the comprehensiveness and inclusiveness genre-wise and the psychedelic nature of the album. The album title *Rubber Soul* is a pun, according to the post-production interview with John Lennon. The idea came from Paul McCartney when he read a critical term of Mick Jagger (the lead singer of The Rolling Stones)’s singing style as “plastic soul”. If we put the album in a more historical background, The Beatles as the leader for the first wave of British Invasion were facing upfront challenge from The Rolling Stones, and the year 1965 was a rather critical point of the two bands’ market competition. The album title was put at the upper left corner of the sleeve. The color red makes a sharp contrast against the general dark green and dull background, rendering it rather stand out. The font size is rather unbalanced: from left to right, the letters decrease in size and “soul” is significantly larger than “Rubber”. This signifies an unstable mental situation. Overall, the signifier indicates a feeling of esoterism, an ecstasy of drug using (possibly), and a boldness and adventure in artistic pursuit, which all corresponds to and underscore the psychedelic nature of the whole album.

V. THE ALBUM ABBEY ROAD

Rock ‘in Roll is the first wave of western rock music that started from USA in 1950s. It has a strong root in upbeat blues music. In UK, as the most influential rock band of their time, the Beatles revolutionized many aspects of Rock ‘in Rock through a series of historical albums,

which spearheaded the so-called the first wave of British Invasion by many pop music critics . Their 1969 album *Abbey Road* is regarded as one of the most successful albums in western rock music history. *Rolling Stone* magazine rates it as the 14th in 500 greatest Albums of All Times.

Abbey Road is the 11th studio album of the band, produced by George Martin and co-authored by John Lennon and Paul McCartney. It includes 17 songs and published by EMI company in September 1969. In 1970 it was nominated the Best Album in the 11th Grammy award. Musically speaking, the album greatly extended the vocabulary of Rock'n Roll, coupled it with highly refined production technology, complicated harmony, classical opera music, full orchestration, synthesizer and pop vocal style. The whole album gives a rather modernistic flavor comparing to their previous works, projecting an atmosphere of mystery and grandeur. Most of the music was recorded in *Abbey Road* studio, and the remaining part was done in *Olympics Studio London* and *Trident Studio* for recording and post-engineering.

The Album *Abbey Road* Sleeves

Though the original sleeve design was based on Everest mountain, which was actually the cigarette brand of the recording technician of this album, finally the band accepted Paul McCartney's proposal to use *Abbey Road*, the street where EMI recording studio located, as the title of the album (so as the scenario of the sleeves). Early in the morning of August 8, the camera man Ian McMillan took six shots of the band photos of crossing the intersection in front of the studio, and selected one as the CD sleeve which became the legend in popular music history.

In contrary to the surrealistic sleeves of the band's previous albums, such as *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) and *Revolver* (1966), this one looks rather realistic. The signifiers include two parts: the foreground (the band, the attire, and dress color, the zebra marking) and the background (the *Abbey Road*, the cars along the street, the trees, the buildings and the intersection). The sequence of the band is John Lennon-Ringo Starr-Paul McCartney – George Harrison, which signifies the leadership of John's core position to the band even since its inception. However, the color of their attire is rather different from each other. White (John), black (Ringo), grey (Paul) and blue (George) indicate their individual characteristic. Even the dress code signifies their contrasting style. John wears a rather fashionable suit and shoes, Ringo and Paul put on formal suits while George is in shirt and jeans with sport shoes. The signifiers tell a highly united band in strict order while remaining its member's individuality, especially when we think of it is the band's second to the last album (the band was officially

disbanded in 1970).

The Zebra marking shows the order and rule that the band is following, which signifies the artistic pursue is rather conservative and follow the society mainstream taste. Actually Abbey Road is one of the “pop” music album of this rock band during its more than its 10 years life span.

The background part include the Abbey Road, the cars and the cars along the street, the tress, the buildings and the intersection. The cameraman purposely shot from an upfront middle-of-the-way angle, signifying an endless long way the band had been through and would still go on. The atmosphere is modern and quiet. We should acknowledge the 10 minutes traffic control from the city administration for this photo-taking. The green trees, in contrast to the blue sky, signifying the robust nature of the band’s artistic creativity. We can peak a bit of the buildings behind the trees, which is enough to tell the modern world that this album is created for, the mass to be more specific. Lastly, the static(along the street) and moving(in the middle of the street) signifying the contrasting nature among the 17 songs inside this album. Actually, the whole album is divided into two sections: the first 8 songs are traditional singles while the later 8 songs are arranged in a medley fashion. Especially the last 4 songs (She came through the bathroom window, Golden Slumbers, Carry that weight, The end) were composed by Paul, where he used lush orchestration to make them rather symphonistic and progressive in nature, in contrast to the first part which were written in a rather “lighter” and traditional rock genre.

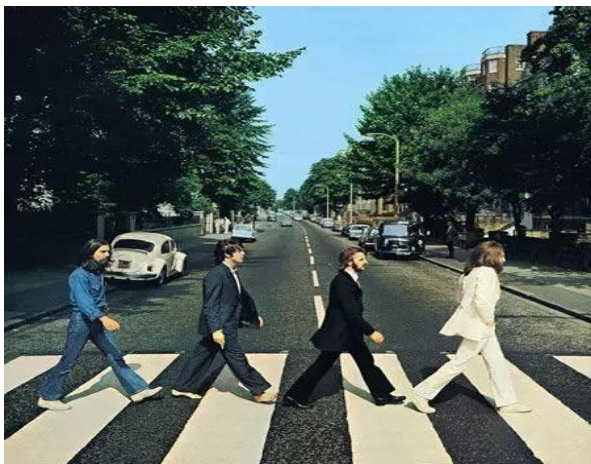


Figure 2

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper analyzes the visual text of the album Rubber Soul and Abbey Road sleeves. Through the above analysis, the researcher concludes that the sleeve design was not a random shot of the band’s daily routine, but rather a careful design by the designer to project the aesthetic

value and pursuit of the band. The visual elements all together contribute to the idiotic icon status of the band and is an classical example of how visual elements in packaging help to commodify the music product in general. However, since this study only focus on one of the band's album sleeves, the researcher suggest more studies to be done to the other important albums of the band.

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