

Semiotic Definition of Rock Music

Katsunori Takeuchi

Introduction

An attempt to define the term “rock music” must be nothing but a reckless adventure. Today, rock music is a vast continuum of extreme variety. Anyone who likes rock music can immediately say whether a certain song he or she hears is rock or not, but can rarely explain why he or she distinguishes it from other types of music, and what’s worse, often does not realize what rock music really is. A musical historian would answer that any fast beat song with 12 bars and a three-chord progression is called rock-‘n’-roll, and rock music derived from rock-‘n’-roll. However, suppose that a young girl sings “Locomotion,” a typical 12-bar-and-three-chord-progression song, in gentle arrangement in an educational TV show, and that she sings it in a clear, beautiful voice so that the children before TV sets can hear her English pronunciation. This “Locomotion” is not so much rock music or even rock-‘n’-roll as a pop song with rock-‘n’-roll flavor. By contrast, a famous rock band in the 1970’s, Grand Funk Railroad’s “Locomotion” is truly rock music. Both versions consist of 12 bars and three-chord progression. What makes the difference between the two versions? How can we elucidate the source of this difference?

The difference between these versions of “Locomotion” seems to result from two factors: *form* and *content*. The 12 bars and a three-chord progression are the basic form of rock-‘n’-roll and also of a great deal of rock music, but this form can be applied to many other genres such as pop songs, jazz songs, and of course, blues which is the father of rock-‘n’-roll. Then what makes this all-round form the suitable format of rock-‘n’-roll? It is intensity. The rendition of “Locomotion” for children learning English is weak in beats and rhythm, while Grand Funk Railroad’s is very strong. The

intensity is sometimes generated by the strength of instrumental sounds. A strong hit on a bass drum and a weak one sound like the same tone at different strengths, but, as far as each makes the other conspicuous, namely as far as they are different, they can be thought to render different tones. The difference of tone is caused by the difference of intensity. Here, we can see that 12 bars and a three-chord progression are the *form* of rock-'n'-roll and that the tone or intensity which makes the form sound as rock-'n'-roll should sound is the *content* of rock-'n'-roll. This *form-content* structure will be the key concept in the course of our arguments.

Durable Form

The outstanding characteristics of the form comprising 12 bars and a three-chord progression are its simplicity and elasticity. This form is said to have developed from the rhythm of labor on the cotton fields when black people were working as slaves. As they repeated the same labor day after day, this form, in a blues song, repeats to the working rhythm again and again. Blues musicians adopted this form at the beginning of the twentieth century at the latest, and in the 1950's, as many black people moved up to Chicago and Detroit for the purpose of taking a job at an automobile factory, Chicago blues men, such as Muddy Waters and Buddy Guy, changed the tempo of the form into the much faster one, which represented the rhythm of a faster city life and factory labor, not of slow labor on the plantation. It came very close to the rock-'n'-roll rhythm pattern.

As we can see now, the form of 12 bars and a three-chord progression is very simple, and elastic. It can be faster or slower, and it is repeatable. As it is a representation of life and labor and as life goes on while constantly changing, it can accept any change, any impact, any copy and paste, any improvisation or whatever. Unlike the chord progression of classical music, which exists solely for the purpose of following and supporting the chief melody and is too complicated to admit much scope for improvisation, impact, change, and so on, the 12 bars and a three-chord progression

can support a variety of melodies at the same time, and still it can be the same song. (It can become a different song, if some conditions are fulfilled. For example, if the lyrics are changed.)

Let me take two chord progressions for example. One is the pattern of blues and rock-'n'-roll. The slashes indicate the bars. It is in four-four time.

(1) C/C/C/C/
F/F/C/C/
G/F/C/G/

Suppose that the following melody line goes in the first four measures.

(2)

The image shows two staves of musical notation in 4/4 time. The first staff, labeled '1', contains a melody line starting on middle C (C4), moving up to G4, then down to F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3, F3, E3, D3, and ending on C3. The second staff, labeled '4', shows the melody continuing with a whole note on C3, followed by a double bar line.

If this melody is changed into the following one, the progression keeps on going without any problem.

(3)



(2) and (3) can be included in the same song as different ways of singing the same phrase, or they can be in different songs as different melodies. On the other hand, the chord progression of Waldteufel’s “Skater’s Waltz” is as follows. Dm: G means that Dm is the upper structure of G.

(4) C/C/Dm: G/Dm: G/
 Dm: G/Dm: G/Cmaj7/Cmaj7/
 Am/Am/Dm/Dm/
 G7/G7/C/C/

The melody line on the first four measures is this.

(5)



Then, suppose that we change this melody line in this way.

(6)



It ceases to be “Skater’s Waltz” though the chord progression admits the new melody. Why do such differences occur? We have to consider the elusive relationships between chord progression and melodies. Now, we can look at this problem from the semiotic point of view. When we compose or sing a song, we utter a sound, try to connect the sound with another sound, and avoid the discontinuity between those sounds. It is the first sound that naturalizes, supports, and gives expressiveness to the next sound, and vice versa. Unlike the sounds of a buzzer or a horn of a car, in musical works, a sound cannot have expressiveness in itself. We constantly connect each sound unit with another so that there arises beauty as a whole unity. So it is as if we put many sound units into several boxes in a row so that all the boxes can be connected in order. We usually choose just one unit for one box from many choices, because one mouth cannot utter two sounds. Here we notice that these units correspond to a paradigmatic class, and that a series of boxes correspond to a syntagmatic class. Ferdinand de Saussure explains, by this binary concept, how components of a word relate to one another. He says that the word *quadruplex* consists of two parts, *quadru* and *plex*. The former is associated with quadrupes, quadrifrons, quadraginta, etc., and the latter is associated with simplex, triplex, centuplex, etc. These associations form the paradigmatic classes, and the connection of the two words from each class is the syntagmatic class. (Saussure 180) Music is also made up of these two classes. The sound unit or a fragment of a melody is chosen from a paradigmatic class, and as a whole, like a series of boxes, the fragments connect with one another and the chord progression or a syntagmatic chain arises. For example, if the very first measure of “Skater’s Waltz” is the first unit¹, we can assume several types of units in the second, third and fourth measures which can follow the first unit without breaking the tonality. ((7) and (8))

(7)



(8)



The chord of the first box is C, and then the second, third and fourth chords or boxes have a great variety depending on the type of unit or the fragment of the melody. In short, in “Skater’s Waltz,” the melody leads the tonality and the chord follows it². As a result, the can progression can involve a great variety. To choose a unit is to choose a box.

On the other hand, as in (2) and (3), in blues and rock-‘n’-roll, even if a melody has great variety, the chord progression doesn’t necessarily have to undergo so much variation. Namely, blues and rock-‘n’-roll are chord-oriented while classical music is melody-oriented. In blues and rock-‘n’-roll, the chord progression leads the tonality so that the melody can have much room for deviating from the continuous mood of the music, and yet the strong chord-oriented tonality, since it is separate from the melody,

- 1 A composer or a listener does not always come up with the first measure as the first fragment to write or memorize. What I insist on here is that, from the first measure or from any other measure, we catch a melody in a consistent relay or chain of possible notes.
- 2 In (4), the melody in the third and fourth measures is on the complex chord, Dm: G. This is because there arises the pleasant tension caused by the parallel progression of the melody’s movement from C to Dm and the bass part from C to G, and this is the evidence that the melody leads the strong independent tonality resisting the movement of the bass part. We can find a similar tension in rock music like C: C C7: B ♭ /F: A/ Fm: A ♭ , but it is clear that each upper structure includes the chief note of the lower structure. In Dm:G, it does not, which means the melody leads the Dm itself which is very different from the bass part, G.

is not affected by that deviation. The chord tolerates the deviation of the melody. In classical songs, as we have seen, when a melody deviates from the tonal mood, the chord follows it and the whole song transforms. The melody leads the tonality and dominates the chord.

To adopt linguistic terms, in rock-‘n’-roll and blues, the syntagmatic line is very strong, and it enables many paradigmatic melodies to arise without its tonality being affected by the impact of that paradigmatic variety. It is like everyday language, whose syntax is always abused but never gives way. Classical music is like poetry. In “Skater’s Waltz,” the chord progression doesn’t preexist the melody. In other words, the syntax arises simultaneously with the melody. To choose a fragment of a melody is to choose a chord. In other words, the melody decides the chord, that is to say, classical music creates the syntagmatic line itself, like poetry. So when one changes part of the melody, one changes the tonality and the chord. Namely, when one changes the paradigmatic unit, one is liable to change the syntagmatic line. There is very little capacity for changes in a paradigmatic class. That means a paradigmatic unit and the syntagmatic structure are closely related, just as in poetry. That is why rock-‘n’-roll and blues are elastic and classical music is fragile.

This does not mean that the pattern of 12 bars and a three-chord progression never changes. There are many variant patterns in rock chord progression. However, these variants are not decided by the directive force of the chief melodies like in classical music (as I argued with reference to “Skater’s Waltz”), but the chord pattern differentiates itself interacting with the relatively small force of the melodies. For example, the Rolling Stones’ “Brown Sugar” has the following chord progression.

- (9) C/C/F/F/
 C/C/B \flat /C/
 G/G/C/C/
 G/G/C/C/

The differences from (1) are that (a) C/C/ in the third and fourth measures in (1) is changed to F/F/ in (9), and (b) the fifth to eighth measures are changed from F/F/C/C/ to C/C/ B ♭ /C/, (c) the ninth measure to the twelfth measure are changed from G/F/C/G/ to G/G/C/C/, and (d) the ninth measure to the twelfth measure repeat one more time. First, C/C/F/F/C/C/ in (9) is a shortened pattern of C/C/C/C/F/F/C/C/ in (1). Second, B ♭ /C/ is a substitute for G/F/C/G/ because the first six measures are the shortened version of the first eight measures of (1) and so the next measures tend to follow the tonality of G/F/C/G/. Namely, “Brown Sugar” tentatively terminates one chord progressive circulation in the first eight measures. Finally, G/G/C/C/G/G/C/C/ is the double repetition of G/F/C/G/ in that both patterns are based on the same tonal force from G to conclusive C.

Of course, the melody of the song has some influence over the chord progression, but it is not so strong as in “Skater’s Waltz.” We can find evidence for this theory if we put the melody of “Brown Sugar” on the formal blues chord pattern of (1). It works very well over the first four measures. Even if we replace B ♭ /C/ with the shortened GF/CG/ of (1), or even if we replace G/G/C/C/ with G/F/C/G/, no great problem occurs. The only problem is that the last four bars are left because of the difference of 12 bars (blues) and 16 bars (“Brown Sugar”).

It is clear that the variant chord progressions of rock music are caused by replacement and selection of the limited chord patterns. This is reminiscent of the creation of narrative in Russian folktales as analyzed by Vladimir Propp. Like folktales, rock music is really culture for the masses. In a sense, it is not something created out of nothing, but something selected, put together, and endlessly modified. It is easier to handle.

Rock Contents or Connotation of Violence

We have seen how durable and elastic the form of 12 bars and a three-chord progression is, and how rock music has derived from this same strong pattern. It is

thanks to the durability and elasticity of this musical form that rock musicians can express violent feelings. As I argued above, “Locomotion” for kids and “Locomotion” by Grand Funk differ in their intensity. The forms are the same. Because of the difference in intensity, while the former is weak, the latter is violent. How do we sense the degree of intensity? For example, every note of Grand Funk’s version is very loud, the vocalist shouts, and the electric guitar sound is distorted. The rock music format, by its durability and elasticity, or by its strong chord tonality somewhat separate from the tonality of melodies, allows these violent deviations to thrive.

Now, we have come to the crucial point concerning problems of *content*. Contents or melodies are the chief factor that moves the audience. Why do melodies move us? A melody is a tone proper. Our language necessarily involves tones. In music, some melodies combine with words or lyrics, and some do not. In classical music, some melodies express concrete and abstract human feelings, aspects of natural phenomena, religious faith, very concrete physical movements, or whatever, all of which language cannot express by itself. The melodies of “Skater’s Waltz” brilliantly express how a skater smoothly moves, jumps and spins. They not only describe those movements but also make the audience feel as if they themselves were moving like a skater. Also, they render the gracefulness that we feel in seeing skaters. Some melodies in classical songs enhance the meaning of the lyrics. As Roman Jakobson mentions, a tone modifies and enhances the meanings of words in poetry (Jakobson 213-214), and so melodies in songs take the task of tones in poetry. They sometimes express and even arouse human feelings, and sometimes strengthen or surpass the linguistic effects. This is why we are moved by music. In this aspect, there are two points where rock music is different from classical music. First, melodies in rock music do not express as wide a variety of human feelings or impressions of natural phenomena as those in classical music. Especially, they do not describe concrete feelings and movements. They just make us feel vehemence, speed, anger, explosion, and so on. Second, they do relatively little to enhance the meaning of the lyrics but work for another effect. What is important in

rock lyrics is not so much meaning as rhythm. Chuck Berry sings, “Go Johnny, Go, Go” not because he sings about Johnny’s journey, but rather because the rhythmic accents of the words are appealing. Part of the function of these words is to deliver effects of the sort usually provided by melody. The words exist not so much for their meaning as for a melodic function separate from a linguistic level. This is not to say the rock lyrics do not have any sense. It is a matter of degree. The Beatles shout, “I wanna hold your hand,” and they sing about young love. However, the shouts, the repetition, and the sound of the words are far more important than the literal meaning of the words. The words work as they tell the audience that the song is about young love, which is all they need to say, and immediately the shouts insist on the vehemence of the love to the extent that it overwhelms the literal meaning of the words, which shouts firmly captivate the girl listeners. “I Wanna Hold Your Hand” is an excellent example of the melody involving the shouts. Many other songs involve more intensified and all the more disordering shouts. The Beatles’ “Twist and Shout” is a counter example to “I Wanna Hold Your Hand.” In this song, the vocalist’s chief purpose is to shout, and the meaning of the words is merely an indicator to show that the shout is a human voice. The words contribute to the song in that they give physicality to the disordering force of the shouts.

In addition to these extraordinary shouts, rock singers have many other ways to express vehemence, excitement, high feelings, fascination, intoxication, ecstasy, etc — all those *rock-‘n’-roll* feelings, the ones not so heterogeneous as those expressed by classical music — which classical singers sing *about* but never show directly. For example, when a classical singer sings “Ich Liebe Dich,” he sings about love, and the melody expresses the vehemence of the love. On the other hand, when the Beatles sing “I Wanna Hold Your Hand,” they not only shout, but also move their bodies, shake their heads, improvise some melodies, namely *disrupt the contents* both to sing about love and to show their own excitement in singing. These factors are not the only ones to disrupt the contents. The beat and rhythm are so strong that they almost interfere

with the vocal sound, which we never see in classical music, but which is a very attractive aspect of rock music. Saxophone and electric guitar sounds always interfere with the vocal parts. It is a cross-disruption called interplay.

This disruption or the destroying of the contents is itself a violent action, and it is this violence that heightens the musical intensity mentioned above. The intensity makes Grand Funk's "Locomotion" what it is, and rock music what it is. Now, we can understand the importance of the rock *form* better. The above stated durability and elasticity of the form of rock music are important because they can absorb the inexhaustible disordering power of the violence to and of the contents.

Thus, unlike other types of music, rock music does not represent, but shows violence itself by endless clashes and recoveries arising between form and content. It is this aspect that makes an electric guitar the symbol of rock music. The distorted sound rendered by Gibson's electric guitar and Marshall's amplifier, which is the common characteristic of most rock songs, is itself the disrupted, and at the same time disruption-proof sound. It is distorted, or destroyed, but never stops for that. It corresponds to the shouts of human voices. Human beings cannot continue to shout for two or three hours, but the electric guitar can. Indeed, the electric guitar is the instrument for semiotic violence, and of course should be the symbol of rock music.

However, we understand that, no matter how violent rock music sounds, rock singers do not always sing about violence. On the contrary, they always sing about love, peace, nature, life, and so on. What is the relationship between violence and love, sound and subject, at this point? Here, to make it clear, let us look at a critical term, *connotation*, which Hjelmslev invented and Roland Barthes borrowed from him in his *Fashion System*. Barthes takes an example of an instructor teaching him the meaning of signals.

[I]n the first system (or the highway code proper), a certain color (perceived, but at no point named) signifies a certain situation; in my instructor's speech, this

semantic system, making a verbal structure (*a sentence*) into the signifier for a certain concept (a proposition). (Barthes 30)

He continues:

My teacher's speech is, so to speak, never neutral; at the very moment when he seems simply to be telling me that red signals an interdiction, he is telling me other things as well: his mood, his character, the "role" he wishes to assume in my eyes, our relation as student and teacher; these new signifieds are not entrusted to the words of the code being taught, but to other forms of discourse ("values," turns of phrase, intonation, everything that makes up the instructor's rhetoric and phraseology). (Barthes 31)

He summarizes these systems as a real code, a terminological or denotative system, and a rhetorical or connotative system.

(10)

3 . *Rhetorical system*

2 . *Terminological system*

3 . *Real highway code*

<i>Sr</i> Phraseology of the instructor		<i>Sd</i> "Role" of the instructor
<i>Sr</i> /Red is the sign for stopping/ (Sentence)	<i>Sd</i> "Red is the sign for stopping" (Proposition)	
	<i>Sr</i> Perception of red	<i>Sd</i> Situation of interdiction

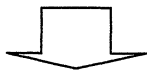
(Barthes 31)

To adapt this scheme to my thesis, I can propose the following diagram. Now we understand that disruption of the contents in rock sounds intensifies musical vibration

on the level of connotation, and that connotation intensifies the desire for love. All of these operate in a signifying process. That means rock musicians show all the violence on semiotic levels, and never inflict it on actual objects. This is the very nature and, at the same time, the very limit of rock music.³

(11)

3 . *Rhetorical system*



intensify and
overwhelm

2 . *Terminological system*

3 . *Real love code*

<i>Sr</i> Shouts or violent disruption of the contents		<i>Sd</i> Intensity
<i>Sr</i> /I wanna hold your hand/ (Sentence)	<i>Sd</i> “I wanna hold your hand” (Proposition)	
	<i>Sr</i> To hold the other sex’s hand	<i>Sd</i> Situation of love

No matter how rock musicians wield violence, it is never and should not be objectified. Rock music has to be subject to this limit in order to be rock music. It was Jimi Hendrix who broke through this limit by breaking off his guitar. Breaking a guitar is neither connotation nor even denotation. It is not to play it, nor is it to *play semiotic violence on the instrument*, but the violence itself.⁴ It is real. Nor was it ruled by a code when he did it for the first time. Jimi terminated rock music with his hands. His guitar

3 This is a great difference of rock-‘n’-roll violence from that involved in playing video games. In fact, when we play the instruments in rock music, we are *doing violence* — we pick up the guitar and beat the drums — though that violence is immediately translated into the signified of intensity without finding the actual object, other than the instruments, to inflict that violence on. In playing video games, we see and manipulate violence but never do it. This is why video games cannot be the true safety valve for our violent feelings.

was a sacrifice for the masses, and for the coming of a new concept of rock music. Barthes says that connotation is in an “ideological order.” (Barthes 29) It is true that rock music is from the culture of the working classes. It has evolved from black slaves’ rhythms. When rock musicians shout, ideologically speaking, the violence with which they connote intensity is the violent destruction by the working classes of the norms set by the bourgeoisie. When Jimi destroyed his guitar, he destroyed both the limit of rock signification and the connotative ideological artifact together. It was the suicide of rock music and the ritual for a new order. By his performance, from the real to the connotation, and from ideological signification to a ritual, Jimi expanded the possibility of art, and, in a new concept of rock music, it came to symbolize freedom. So at this point I have to add a fourth layer to the diagram above. It is the connotation of freedom. This is why many rock songs were accepted by the antiwar movements in Jimi’s time.

However, what I have argued so far suggests another possible destruction of this new connotation. When all the self-destructive signification of Jimi’s rock connotes freedom, it is entrapped by ideology again. The same cycle must have ensued.

Conclusion

The definition of rock music is this. The form, or a measure structure and chord progression has the elasticity, durability and strong tonality which permits the contents to be disrupted without danger. The musicians disrupt the melodies, which violence connotes intensity. The connotation of intensity gives vehemence to the subject. This definition is broken by the definition itself. Semiotic violence represses and conceals the possibility of real violence of the sort performed by Jimi Hendrix, and the manifestation of which is the negation of the definition. Namely, this definition is a self-destroying definition, and, for this, rock music sounds highly free.

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- 4 This point shows that to play rock instruments has been potentially to be on the boundary between exercising physical effects, verging on subtle violence, on the instrument, and performing the proper musical operation, both of which are simultaneously called *play*.

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