

## Chapter 2

# Songs of Social Protest and Context

**Abstract** The present chapter focuses on the first variable of the triadic model (context-lyrics-music) introduced in the first chapter: the various dynamics of context-positioning in an SSP. Re-elaborating from Stefani (*Una strategia di pace: La difesa popolare nonviolenta*. FuoriThema, Bologna, 1993), I suggest five different types of relations between an SSP and the context/opportunity it is performed in or conceived for: “Specific relation”, “Indirect relation”, “General relation”, “Phatic relation” and “Paratextual relation”. After that, I suggest that an SSP can also be written/performed by “positioning” the political action (or lack thereof) in some particular chronological (“Before”, “During” and “After” the protest) and spatial (“exposed”, “clear”, “ambiguous/neutral”, “hidden/rejected”) location. I then proceed to cross this classification with Greimas’s theory of modalization (e.g. Greimas in *On meaning: Selected writings in semiotic theory*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, MN, 1987) and separate the modalities of “Doing/Not Doing” from those of “Being/Not Being”, in order to distinguish between songs whose main ideological point is to underline the very action of protest (“Doing/Not Doing”), and songs which instead are inclined to describe a context/situation/character/etc. (“Being/Not Being”).

### 2.1 Typologies of Context and Levels of Pertinence

If the analysis of a soundtrack is inseparable from the movie that it accompanies, it should be equally difficult to keep the distances between a song like “The Preacher and the Slave” and the Industrial Workers of the World, or between “Bella ciao” and the Italian *Resistenza*. On the other hand, we know that, once provided with certain characteristics, a—say—Sci-Fi theme may be employed not only for the particular movie it was written for, but for many Sci-Fi movies. No disrespect to the great composer that he is (on the contrary: I am basically saying that he was able to create a musical topos), but nearly every theme John Williams wrote for a Sci-Fi or action movie can be exchanged with one another, without serious collateral effects in the movie-music relationship of pertinence. Move the *Star Wars* theme to

*Superman*, or the *Superman* theme to *Indiana Jones* and ask anybody who have not seen those movies (if there are any left) if they feel something strange or inappropriate in the soundtrack. Similarly, a song like Gil Scott Heron's "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" (released in 1970) is not just cast in a specific time/space frame. It certainly reflects an identifiable historical period (the late 1960s) and geographical area (USA and New York in particular), due to the mentioning of people like civil rights activist Whitney Young, hurdler Willie May, songwriter Jimmy Webb ("Jim", in Scott-Heron's song) and many others, all Americans and at their career prime during the late 1960s. However, despite a long list of names, places, brands and else, the song is relevant to many contexts and none in particular, and certainly remains extremely current even nowadays, when several entries in that list may look outdated. It is surely no coincidence that this song has been quoted, featured or of course sampled (the drum pattern remains one of the most recognizable in the whole hip-hop sphere), in numerous songs, movies and other media, including Justin Chadwick's *Long Walk to Freedom*, a film about Nelson Mandela, therefore about another country and a much longer timeframe.

Examples like these show that both the type of relationship and the degree of pertinence existing between an SSP and the context it is generated within, or applied to, are important and far-from-obvious issues. Whether a specific event of protest (a street demonstration, a labor union's rally, etc.), or a casual occasion (a concert, a record, etc.), different forms of relation may be established between the SSP and the given circumstance.

Back in 1993, Gino Stefani (one of the godfathers of musical semiotics as a field, and a scholar chiefly interested in social and political contextualization of popular music) had suggested three different types of singing activity to be performed within an event of social protest: *ad hoc* (when a song focuses exactly on the event's topics), *area* (when the song related in a more general manner), *generic* (when the song—unrelated to the event's topics—is mostly employed for creating group feeling). Using that model as template, but with significant variations, I now propose the following classification (see also Fig. 2.1):

- (1) *Specific relation*—This type of relation qualifies a song that is specific of the circumstances that originated the given event: the song's lyrics *talk about* such circumstances and *exist because of* them (not rarely, it may be one of the event's participants to actually write the song). If we consider, for instance, an event of social protest related to (or in memory of) the tragically-famous Soweto uprising in South Africa in 1976, we know that songs like Hugh Masakela's "Soweto Blues" (1977) or Peter Gabriel's "Biko" (1980) are "specific" to that context. "Soweto Blues", indeed, refer directly to the massacre as a whole (with a particular emphasis on the involvement of small children: "Children were flying bullets dying, The mothers screaming and crying"), while "Biko" focuses on one of the key-figures of those events, the activist (and subsequently martyr of the anti-apartheid movement) Stephen Biko. In other words, the pertinence of these SSPs to that particular context is total, and roughly corresponds to Stefani's "ad hoc" type of song.

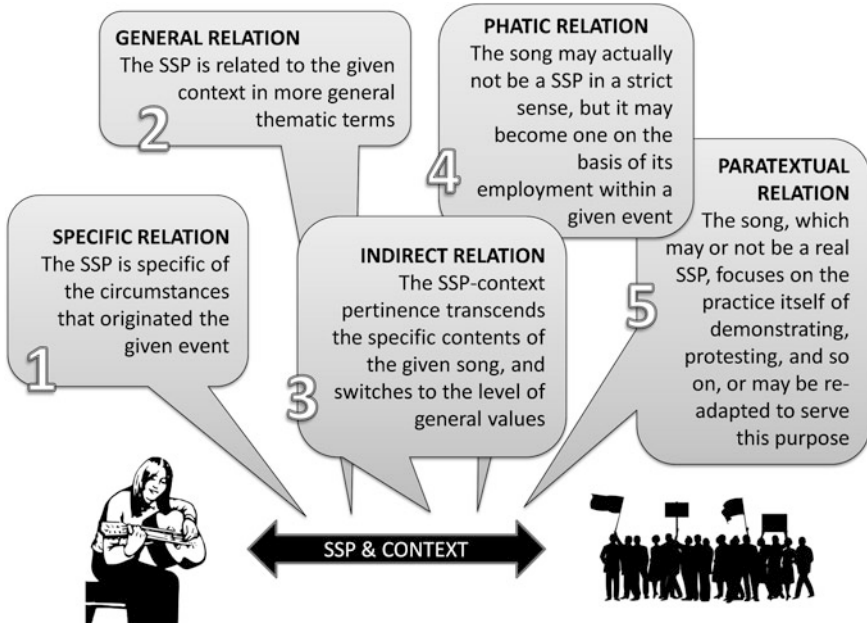


Fig. 2.1 SSP and context: relations of pertinence

(2) *General relation*—In this second degree of pertinence we find SSPs that are related to the given context in more general thematic terms. If we keep up with the same example of “Soweto Blues” and “Biko”, we know that these songs can be, and have been in various circumstances, applied to wider contexts than just Soweto massacre-related occasions. Any other manifestation against apartheid, referring to any of the many events in apartheid history, are suitable contexts for such songs. In fact, even events that are *not* about apartheid, but still address questions of racial discrimination, segregation and persecution, are suitable contexts for these songs. Not by chance, “Biko” was a key-moment (if not *the* key-moment) in all the concerts that Peter Gabriel gave in support of Amnesty International (particularly the *Conspiracy of Hope* and *Human Rights Now!* tours, in 1986 and 1988 respectively). Of course, having said that, there are songs that are naturally “general”, and may be addressing certain themes without necessarily pointing the finger on a particular circumstance or character. Eddy Grant’s “Gimme Hope Jo’Anna” is a *general* anti-apartheid song (“Well Jo’Anna [Johannesburg] she runs a country.... She makes a few of her people happy, She don’t care about the rest at all, She’s got a system they call apartheid, It keeps a brother in a subjection, But maybe pressure can make Jo’Anna see, How everybody could a live as one”), as well as Niels Andersen’s Danish children song “Jeg har set en rigtig negermand” (“I have seen a real negro”) contains a general message of anti-racism (“Let not the color of skin be a factor, We must meet with wholesome and honest minds”).

- (3) *Indirect relation*—In this third degree of pertinence we find SSP-context relations that switch from “topics” to “values”. If, let us say, an event is organized to protest against unemployment and low salaries, and still someone comes up with a rendition of “Soweto Blues” and “Biko” (against, for instance, another Gabriel’s song, “Don’t Give Up”, which is in fact explicitly about unemployment), where is the pertinence? The pertinence exists at the very moment we transcend the specific contents of these songs, and we realize that they are about such values as “justice”, “equality”, “freedom”, and others, which are perfectly applicable to a topic like unemployment. The moment “Biko” goes “You can blow out a candle, But you can’t blow out a fire, Once the flames begin to catch, The wind will blow it higher” is a moment that just *any* movement of social emancipation, justice and the likes can relate to, with basically no exception. To my understanding of Stefani (1993), this and the last category I suggested are grouped into what he called the *Area* songs: it seemed to me like a distinction was necessary.
- (4) *Phatic relation*—In this peculiar case, the song may actually *not* be an SSP, in a strict sense, but it may become one on the basis of its employment within a given event. As Roman Jakobson’s well-known formulation of the “phatic function” of language goes, the idea is that this kind of song serves more a purpose of enhancing contact among the participants at the event, rather than describing the latter’s themes. Funnily enough, thus, in the very field where topics and contents seem to be indispensable, we find a type of SSP *pro tempore* where lyrics are almost irrelevant, and what matters is the song’s ability to create “the right atmosphere”. This is why songs like “Hey Jude” or “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door” are not unlikely choices among the participants at an event of social protest. What we find here, at this point, is an enlarged perspective of what an SSP is or can be. I certainly do not wish to bring this notion to an extreme of the “anything goes” type: obviously, songs like “O Sole Mio” or “YMCA” are hardly ever heard on a political demonstration. What is relevant, here, is to state clearly that the SSP is a relatively flexible semantic field that can be restricted or expanded thanks to this element, the context, that proceeds in parallel motion with music and lyrics. Incidentally, this, too, is what happens in the field of functional music. Sure, Hermann or Morricone would write original and specifically-filmic music, but so many directors (Kubrick, Lynch, Kaurismäki...) are eager to *recontextualize* existing music that was created for other purposes. Exactly like film music, however, one cannot just choose *any* song, just because it is famous and known by every event participant. Obviously there is a certain quality in the songs chosen, and more often than not I find that songs that express feelings and ideas of “empowerment” (in the sense defined by Rappaport et al. 1984) are the most suitable to become this *pro tempore* SSP’s: it is the idea to “take a sad song and make it better” or “take these broken wings and learn to fly” that probably appeal the most. It is a sentiment of self-growth, self-esteem and redemption that works very well in its possible “social” application. The “sad song” can easily be, indeed, racial discrimination or unemployment. In Stefani

(1993), this relation is perfectly correspondent to what he called a “generic” song.

- (5) *Paratextual relation*—I shall also take the liberty to add another degree of pertinence, that in a way crosscuts the other four, and that was not really mentioned in (Stefani 1993). Some songs, either SSPs (like in the first three types of relation) or not (like in the fourth), may not address a topic of social protest as such, but may rather focus on the practice itself of demonstrating, protesting, and so on, or may be re-adapted to serve this purpose. For this reason, I see them belonging to a “paratextual” dimension of the context. Examples include Pete Seeger’s “We Shall Not Be Moved”, which describes the resistance against the police during a demonstration (“We’re young and old together, we shall not be moved.... We’re women and men together, we shall not be moved.... We’re black and white together we shall not be moved”, etc.) or—back to anti-apartheid songs—“Little” Steven Van Zandt’s *Artists United Against Apartheid* song “Sun City”, which describes the active decision, from the part of many rockstars, to boycott playing in the South-African luxury resort—and symbol of racial segregation—Sun City (“We’re rockers and rappers, United and strong, We’re here to talk about South Africa, We don’t like what’s going on.... You got to say I, I, I, Ain’t gonna play Sun City, Everybody say I, I, I, Ain’t gonna play Sun City”).

## 2.2 Time-Space Units

However obvious this may read, the construction of contents, in songwriting (and, to an extent, in performing as well), is not only implemented by the mere development of a theme, no matter how complex and articulated this development may be. Contents must be also “positioned” in a conceptual space/time environment that goes beyond simple narrative choices (that is, when and where the action takes place in a song): this “environment” is not only an objective/empirical one (as we have seen in the previous paragraph), but it also has subjective/existential properties.

Engaging into more interdisciplinary work, this notion is not dissimilar to what in natural sciences is known as concept of “Umwelt”, in the terms postulated by German biologist Jakob von Uexküll (although, of course, I am now using this concept on a more metaphorical level). The German equivalent of “environment”, this word—in Uexküll’s formulation—came to designate a much more complex notion, usually referred to as “subjective universe” (Sharov 2001: 211), or also “semiotic world of organisms” (Kull 1998: 304). The starting assumption is that the environment inhabited by an organism is not merely the actual environmental niche, but is a larger not purely physical ‘environment’, of which the niche is just a part, that is perceivable and meaningful in its entirety only from the perspective of that particular organism. Uexküll (1982: 29–30) exemplifies this concept by describing the completely different meanings that a flower may have to a young girl

(an element of decoration), an ant (a path for reaching food), a cicada-larva (construction material), and a cow (fodder). An Umwelt is the result of a Merkwelt, which corresponds to the specific perceptive field of an organism, and a Wirkwelt, that is, the field of actual interaction between the organism and the environment. Perceptual and operational elements come to establish the specific Umwelt of the given organism, which is exclusive for each species, community, individual, class, family and so forth. The Merkwelt and the Wirkwelt are constantly in action, as the organism (also called a “structure”, or a “receiver of meaning”) affects and is affected by the environment (the “counter-structure”, or “carrier of meaning”). In that sense, the process is described as an “Umwelt circle”.

Now. Without indulging too much on theories that may lead us astray, what matters here is that songs, like any work of art, are always in a Merkwelt-Wirkwelt articulation, in that they may take *both* the roles of structure and counter-structure. A song like “Yesterday” is of course (and quintessentially) a song located in a “past” time Wirkwelt, so it *operates* in the past, but this location is not limited to the employment of the past tense and a clear reference to a time that is gone (“Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away”). The temporal positioning is also a subjective, existential condition of the narrator/author (and consequently, of the song itself as artwork), who approaches the song with past-oriented feelings and attitude: he is nostalgic (“I long for yesterday”), he expresses remorse for something he did (“I said something wrong”) and regret for something he did not understand (“Why she had to go, I don’t know”), and so forth. Not only does the song *talk about* the past: it is conceptually located in it.

On the other hand, songs like Eric Clapton’s “Tears in Heaven” or Bob Dylan’s “Most of the Time” do not present the same continuity, because while the operational field is now the present, describing an imaginary dialogue between the author and his prematurely-departed son in the former case, and an assessment of the author’s current emotional state of the art in the latter, the existential location of both pieces is again, and very clearly, in the past (both singers are mourning for the loss of a life and a relationship respectively). Therefore, if the identification of a song’s Wirkwelt is generally a not-too-demanding task, dictated, as it is most of the times, by the text’s surface, the existence of a Merkwelt, too, creates a much denser Umwelt.

With this in mind, the main idea I intend to propose here is that an SSP can be written and performed also with a sense of “positioning” the social/political action (or lack thereof) in some particular (more or less metaphorical) chronological or spatial location, that may or may not be coherent with the *whens* and the *wheres* appearing on the surface. For instance, talking about time units, a SSP can ideally take place “before” the protest (when it addresses something that should, could or will happen), “during” the protest (when it addresses something that is or is not happening), and “after” the protest (when it looks back to something that did or did not happen). Talking about space units, despite the fact that ideological/political elements are always present in any stage of music-making, in some instances they are more manifested than in others, creating (or not), specific cognitive/cultural associations with a given genre/act/repertoire. In this sense, I argue that these degrees of display/perception may involve specific nuances of “spatial visibility” of the protest.

### 2.2.1 *The Time Umwelt*

As I mentioned, I propose here three basic existential positions “in time”. Of course, the issue is more complicated than this, and deserves further scrutiny, but—I dare suggest—this may be a fair beginning of the discussion (see also Fig. 2.2).

- (1) *Before the protest.* There are forms of protest that are projected in the future, as something that *should*, or straight away *will* happen (or so the authors hope—needless to say, “We Shall Overcome” remains the prototype), or even—turning the social concern from “hope” to “fear”—*could* happen, if no significant precaution is taken (the band Wilco hold the peculiar record of having predicted the 9/11 attacks not once but twice in the same album, through the songs “Jesus, etc.” and “War on War”), and this can go as far as to depicting *dystopian* scenarios of imaginary futures when things went very wrong exactly because nothing was done to prevent certain events (like XTC’s apocalyptic post-atomic conversation between father and son in “This World Over”: “Will you tell them about that far off and mythical land, And how a child to the virgin came?, Will you tell them that the reason why we murdered, Everything upon the surface of the world, So we can stand right up and say we did it in his name?”<sup>1</sup>).

In fact, dystopia as such is probably the ideal topic by which to discuss the complexity of a song’s Umwelt, and its frequent discrepancy between Wirkwelt and Merkwelt. Also, as it happens, it is arguably the most recurrent rhetorical device, employed in popular music (certainly within the area we commonly identify as “rock”), to address one’s own dissatisfaction towards a given social-political situation, or—better said—“the system”, “them”. The myth of “the system” as an evil, conspiring force that is distant and in fact opposed to “the people” (in turn a counter-myth) is a true *topos* that we find in literally hundreds of songs of political content. Within this group, a remarkably high percentage employs dystopian scenarios as visual and narrative representation. Future hyper-technological, de-humanized, post-atomic, mind-controlling, Langesque-Kubrickesque depictions pop up so often that the temptation is to conclude that George Orwell’s *1984* is by far the most-read literary work by rockstars.

Once more, as one of the main arguments of the present monograph is the centrality of music per se in SSP, representations of this kind are not something we only detect from the lyrics. To make just a few examples, songs like Pink Floyd’s “Welcome to the Machine” (where “the system” appears in the ever-hated disguise of the music industry), Emerson Lake and Palmer’s “Karn Evil 9” (on the album *Brain Salad Surgery*, featuring a cover by H.R. Giger, the dystopian painter by definition), or entire albums like Frank Zappa’s *Joe’s Garage* or David Bowie’s *Diamond Dogs* (directly

---

<sup>1</sup>It should not be surprising that XTC, the authors of the atheist anthem “Dear God”, would basically forecast religious matters as the cause for the end of the world. Some may argue that 32 years later (the song was written in 1984) the prediction sounds more likely than ever.

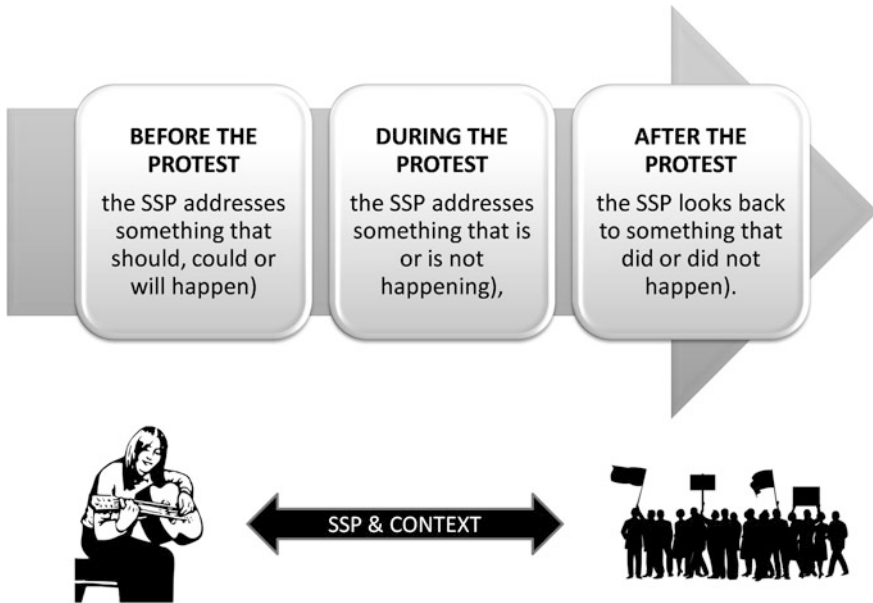


Fig. 2.2 SSP and context: the time Umwelt

inspired by Orwell’s masterpiece) create a solid and coherent continuity between musical and lyrical aspects, via strategies such as futuristic sounds, cacophonies, Sci-Fi soundtrack atmospheres, pathos-rich performances, etc.

- (2) *During the protest.* Then of course, an SSP can be almost a *real time* one, addressing something that *is* (or is not) happening or being/not being done. This can take the shape of either a description of negative social/political events that *call* for a protest (as in Billy Bragg’s “The Price of Oil”, addressing the war in Iraq), or the protest action as such (as in the above-mentioned Pete Seeger’s “We Shall Not Be Moved”, conceived—as we said—to be sung *during* demonstrations, as a message to the police).

Needless to say, this particular temporal condition brings us back to the original, circumstantial and event-bound nature of SSPs, when the role of the context was possibly the dominant one, and (to reiterate the jargon employed in the last paragraph) *specifically* pertinent songs were statistically more likely to be written. Still commenting on the *Wirkwelt-Merkwelt* dichotomy, it is interesting here to notice that songs of this sort, which are consistently situated in the present at the moment they are written and performed “where they were supposed to be performed”, introduce once again the discrepancy at the moment when their specific function ceases to exist (because the context as such is not there anymore), and instead activate a process of crystallization that make them suitable for other events (turning from specific to general or even indirect relation of pertinence). The original contents turn from circumstantial to metaphorical, the *hic et nunc* becomes



a *semper*. Rubin “Hurricane” Carter (from Bob Dylan’s song “Hurricane”) ceases to be Hurricane and becomes a synecdoche for any Afro-American victim of racist abuse; the Johnny of “When Johnny Comes Marching Home” ceases to be the symbolic soldier of a specific conflict (the American Civil War) and becomes a soldier for *any* war, etc. This is in fact so true that quite often songwriters write *specifically-pertinent* songs *already* in a metaphorical mode, without being too specific, and—so to speak—investing on the long-term value of the song.

We can notice the difference by describing two songs with similar format and lyrical solutions: the mentioned Peter Gabriel’s “Biko” and U2’s “Pride (In the Name of Love)”. The former, as we already said, is a song about anti-apartheid martyr Stephen Biko, and starts with a pinpointed contextualization of the events, a sort of cinematic “establishing shot”: “September ‘77, Port Elizabeth weather fine, It was business as usual, In police room 619”. After that, the song proceeds to name unmistakably the protagonist of the song, Biko, making no mystery, throughout its whole duration, on the whos, the wheres, the whens, the whats and the whys of this song. U2’s “Pride”, in turn, is also a song about a specific character, Martin Luther King, and it also adopts the strategy of precisely-located verses: “Early morning, April 4, a shot rings out in the Memphis sky”. However, the huge difference is that the protagonist is never mentioned, and it takes the listener to know a bit of history to understand that those verses refer to King’s assassination. U2, instead, prefer to focus on the universalization of King’s message, love among people of all kinds, and the pride deriving from the nobleness of such value (a pride that, unlike earthly life, cannot be killed). Coherently with this choice, I believe, U2 placed the “early morning...” passage as the *concluding* stanza of the song, unlike Gabriel, who had instead used the “September ‘77...” part as the very *opening* of his own piece. In a way, U2 are playing Melville here: the “whale” (Martin Luther King) becomes visible only at the very end of the text, while, throughout the rest of it, the protagonist exists only as representation (“in the name of love”—and of course it is no coincidence that the very religious Irish band, singing about a religious figure, would use a lyrical formulation that is typical of religious parlance, “in the name of”, equaling love with God).

The result, of course, is that, while it is virtually impossible to dissociate “Biko”-the-song from Stephen Biko-the-person, rock fans may easily be unaware that “Pride” is actually a song about Martin Luther King. Now: does this difference make “Biko” a less suitable song for *other* contexts of social protest, outside the (luckily outdated) South-African apartheid? Obviously not: the song is still very popular in contexts of civil rights and anti-racist demonstrations. In fact, to be precise, it was Peter Gabriel himself to take the first step of generalization of the song when, in the mid 1980s, he used it in his concerts as an opportunity to address apartheid as a whole, and not only the circumstances of Biko’s death.

- (3) *After the protest*. Finally, the SSP can also look back, mostly with a sense of disillusionment or resentment, addressing something that *did not* happen, while it should have (as in Paul McCartney’s “Tug of War”, with melancholic lines such as “We expected more, but with one thing and another we were

trying to outscore each other in a tug of war” and “In years to come they may discover what the air we breathe and the life we lead are all about, but it won’t be soon enough”). Occasionally, however, the act of looking back may have a positive connotation, when a past instance of social protest (or characters/ places related to it) is taken as an inspiring example for a current concern (as in the famous case of “John Brown’s Body”, where the act of mourning over the famous abolitionist’s death, occurred in 1859—therefore two years before the song’s composition, becomes an opportunity to inform the listener that the anti-slavery battle will continue just as “his soul is marching on”, and will get such results as hanging [confederate president] “Jeff Davis to a tree”).

### 2.2.2 *The Space Umwelt*

In the case of existential positioning “in space”, I would like to focus on the question of the *visibility* of the political message. If we take the examples that we have mentioned in the previous paragraph, there are of course plenty of differences and similarities in the way the respective themes are dealt with and “packaged” into songs. For instance, we mentioned that a basic difference between Peter Gabriel’s “Biko” and U2’s “Pride (In the Name of Love)” is the fact that the two characters they are inspired by (Stephen Biko and Martin Luther King respectively) are easily detectable in one case and more subtle in the other. Biko is repeatedly called out in the refrain of Gabriel’s song, while King is never mentioned in U2’s track. Biko, in other words, is very visible, while King is not. Biko stands in front of the song’s imaginary “camera”, King stands in a kind of off-screen position, letting the values he represented get a close-up instead. I use this cinematographic comparison because the organization of a film shot is very much a question of “space management”. Actors who have worked with the likes of Luchino Visconti or Sergio Leone recall endless preparations of single shots where these directors would ask them to be in one given place, with one given posture, and not one millimeter further. As exhausting as this process may have been, it led to the production of visually perfect sequences like the ending of *Death in Venice* or the showdown in the *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly*. At the same time (and giving one last filmic example), every movie enthusiast knows that in order to provide power and effectiveness to a message, one does not necessarily need to make that message very evident and outspoken. Sergio Leone may use his trademark “extreme close-up on the eyes” strategy to highlight the gunslingers’ contrasting feelings; Fred Zinnemann may think it more suitable to underline the marshal’s loneliness with a bird’s eye shot (I am talking about *High Noon*, of course); Federico Fellini may prefer to almost disguise his protagonists in crowded shots; and finally Michelangelo Antonioni may come up with one of the best murder sequences of all times by not showing the murder at all (the long shot at the end of *The Passenger*).

Visibility and presence are thus not in a directly proportional relation, and that applies also to music as well, SSPs included.

If once more my generalization is excused, I shall underline at least four categories of spatial visibility. The main point, I repeat, is that ideological/political elements are always present at any stage of music-making, yet in some instances they are more manifested than in others, creating (or not) specific cognitive/cultural associations with a given genre/act/repertoire. These associations may or may not be intentional, may or may not be culturally-bound and—most of all—may or may not be encouraged by the creative unit of the song (I say “creative unit” and not just “songwriter/s”, because in fact this visibility can be established at other creative levels as well: a mildly political song may be empowered in its message by a certain production, a certain video, a certain performance, and vice versa). What is important to keep in mind (and, again, to repeat) is that the relationship between the “display” and the “perception” stages is not always directly proportional. “More visible” does not automatically mean “better seen”, although of course there are more chances in this sense. The four categories are the following (see also Fig. 2.3):

1. *Exposed*. An explicit effort is made in order to make a given ideology or political stand visible/audible, so that the audience creates a strong association with the specific instance. For instance, Bob Marley and The Wailers’ “War” quotes several passages from a speech given in 1963 by Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie I to the UN about the impossibility of having peace in Africa until disenfranchisement and racial discrimination persist. The openness of the message is total: Marley gives us a pinpointed message with a pinpointed (real life) reference.

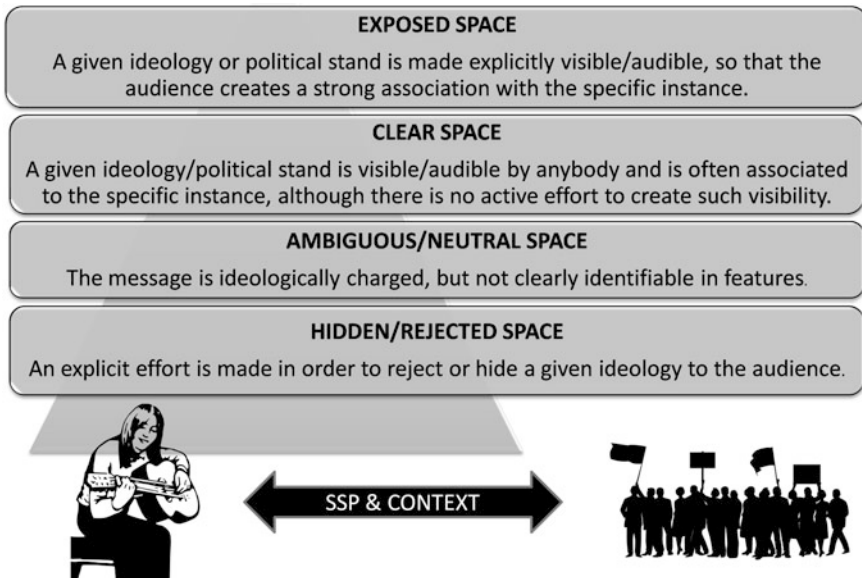


Fig. 2.3 SSP and context: the space Umwelt

2. *Clear*. A given ideology or political stand is visible/audible by anybody and is often associated to the specific instance, although there is no active effort to create (or saturate) such visibility. The difference between this category and the previous one may be best exemplified by focusing on the sender-receiver (that is, artist-audience) relationship in the song/album/genre/etc. The “exposed” message does not require intense cooperation with the audience, as the latter is given all possible tools not to misinterpret the contents. Of course, as we are talking about artwork, the interpretation may still remain flexible, and, in principle, the listener of Bob Marley’s “War” has still the liberty to think that this song refers—or can be applied also—to another context, but when clear references (including names, dates, places) are given, the listener *is aware* s/he is taking that liberty, while in fact the song has a declared focus. The “exposed” message is a message that tells the audience “Listen to me: I am saying this and that”. The “clear” message is, so to speak, less particular: it metaphorically stands in front of the audience with an open message, but without giving such details that would confine its interpretation to specific references. The listeners are therefore invited to cooperate at a certain level, and add a bit of their own contextualization to the music and lyrics they are dealing with. If they do not do that, or if—peradventure—they take a bit too many liberties in the interpretation, misunderstandings may also ensue. A rather notable case was, and is, Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA”, a *clear* (not *exposed*) SSP taking a realistic approach to the effects of the Vietnam war on those that were sent off “to a foreign land to go and kill the yellow man”, which was however mistaken (via the famous refrain, particularly) as a “positive” American anthem, up to be even used by Republican Ronald Reagan in his 1984 presidential re-election campaign (a major offence for the outspoken democrat Springsteen).
3. *Ambiguous/neutral*: The message is ideologically charged, but not in a way that would be clearly identifiable in its constitution, characteristics, political nuances, etc. That may be either because the message is purposively “neutral” (that is, it expresses dissatisfaction for the current state of things and intention to change, but in a way that is openly pleasing to all political views and/or populist, like in many songs for charity events) or “ambiguous” (ambiguity being either intentional—as in many Bob Dylan’s songs—or unintentional). When we think about a song like “One Meat Ball” (a universally-acknowledged SSP, no doubt about that, and mostly known in the version of protest singer Josh White), we hear the story of a man who is so poor that all he can afford to pay in a restaurant is a single meat ball, with no bread or anything else (nor any help from the waiter). There is no passage in which the song launches any direct slogan of the likes of “end poverty now!”, “give a spare coin to the poor guy”, or “the American welfare system is so unequal that it creates people unable to afford anything more than a single meat ball”. This connection is up to us: it is not a difficult one, because the story offers solid tools of interpretation (for instance, the characterization of the poor man is very sympathetic, and it is obvious that the song pities him—as opposed to, say, considering him a parasite of society), but still the articulation of the political message is unclear. What does the song want

from us, exactly? Is it an invitation to change the capitalist system, so that there are no social discriminations? Is it an invitation to be better people and do more for charity? Is it an attack to commercial enterprises, which are so focused on profit that they forget to be a little humane (the waiter in the third stanza turns out to be rather cruel to the man—he certainly could have offered him some bread)? Is it (please, excuse the poor humor of an animal advocate like myself) a subtle pro-vegan parody (the man could have certainly afforded more food, had he chosen bread and vegetables instead of the more costly meat)?

4. *Hidden/rejected*. An explicit effort is made in order to reject or hide a given ideology to the audience. This may happen basically for three reasons: first, the most common, the artist actively wants to make a point that art and politics should not mix, so the work is devoid of any possible connection to social commentaries or the like (except that, of course, one may argue that this active disengagement is a very sound political statement, nevertheless—but perhaps we shall leave this discussion for another occasion). Second, a very common option too, the artist needs to hide his/her political opinion for reasons of personal safety, or risks of censorship: that has been of course a recurrent instance during oppressive regimes (the fascist authorities, in Italy, were particularly active in trying to dig out these “secret” SSPs, which they would call *canzoni della fronda*—we shall see that in Chap. 8). The final option, a bit rarer, consists of the artist trying to make a point *against* political engagement in music, not because s/he thinks that arts and politics should not mix (as we have seen in the first option), but because s/he maintains that the protest artists are cunning hypocrites who make business out of political commitment: they pretend to be “better people”, while they are just “in it for the money”, like everybody else. A famous example, at least in Italy, is the song “Io Canterò Politico”, by the (predictably rightist) singer-songwriter Bruno Lauzi. Written in the tumultuous 1970s, when there was a sheer explosion of protest singers in Italy (mostly of leftist orientation), this song is a *J'accuse* against all those artists who jumped on the bandwagon of political commitment for personal publicity and profit.

Needless to say, these four categories can be applied to all possible levels of music-making: from a single song (like the examples we have mentioned), to a whole album, from artists as such to whole movements/events, from sub-genres to great stylistic areas. Let us just make a couple of random examples. The difference between two 1977 albums like Fela Kuti’s *Zombie* and Pink Floyd’s *Animals* is that the former was so openly (*exposed*) critical of Nigerian government that president Oluṣẹgun Ṣasanjọ sent soldiers to attack Kuti’s Lagos compound, causing Kuti’s mother’s death, while the latter is loosely (*clear*) based on George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, using the rhetorical device of the “political animals” (the ruthless pigs, the obedient sheep, etc.) to launch a critique against capitalist society.

*Exposed* artists in Italy include the likes of openly-communist Claudio Lolli, or openly-fascist Massimo Morsello. In Chap. 6 we shall thoroughly discuss the Lithuanian band Antis, who adopted a theatrical, sarcastic songwriting strategy to poke fun at the *Homo sovieticus* and Soviet life in general. Due also to censorship

reasons, their songs had never *exposed* messages, but the contents were definitely *clear* to the local audience. We also mentioned the *ambiguous* Bob Dylan, a sheer spokesman for the pacifist and civil rights movement in the early stage of his career, whose political and social positions, from his fourth album onward (the aptly-titled *Another Side of Bob Dylan*), became intentionally ambiguous and controversial. We shall also have a chance to mention the Bulgarian band Shturcite: though actively involved in the Bulgarian democratization process in early 1990s (founding member Kiril Marichkov was also member of the Union of Democratic Forces), the band wrote only one political song, “Az sym prosto Chovek” (“I’m only human”), whose message was openly critical of (therefore *rejected*) ideologies (we shall see more about this band and this song in Sect. 3.3).

Then of course we could compare the *exposed visibility* of a movement like Rock in Opposition, a consortium of progressive bands of openly socialist or communist ideas (such as Stormy Six, Henry Cow, Univers Zero and others), active from 1978, mostly in opposition to the music industry, with the *rejected visibility* of the Eurovision Song Contest, not only an event specifically aiming at light entertainment, but also one that has, among its rules, the interdiction to any political content in the songs (and it still remain a mystery how—under the disguise of the merely-historical song—the *very political* Ukrainian song “1944” managed to participate to and even win the 2016 edition).

Finally, some examples can be made among genres as well. Given the outspoken neutrality and/or ambiguity of various mainstream pop genres and sub-genres, we could mention the *exposed* Nazi-punk or the so-called NSBM, National Socialist Black Metal<sup>2</sup> (musically similar to other forms of punk and metal, the lyrics of these two genres are discriminatory of categories such as people of color, Jews, homosexuals, communists and other perceived “enemies”, and of course celebratory of “white supremacy”, Nazi and fascist theories), the *clear* Southern rock (through not outspokenly, it often displays themes of “Southern”—i.e. confederate—pride, white identity, reactionary/conservative politics, and else), and the *hidden/rejected* heavy metal (another typically “white” genre, like Southern rock—and often with similar macho/conservative themes, heavy metal, through both fans and artists, seems however to reject any form of political labelling, often displaying a proud anti-ideological attitude).

---

<sup>2</sup>Perhaps less known than Nazi-punk, NSBM is a worryingly-popular sub-genre of metal in the Northern and Eastern European alternative scene (particularly Norway, Finland, Ukraine and Poland). Examples include the Ukrainian Nokturnal Mortum (with ultra-nationalist, white supremacist albums like *To the Gates of Blasphemous Fire*, *Goat Horns* or *Weltanschauung*, works that are also filled with the very typical right-wing imagery of Northern mythology, pagan rites and medieval Lord of the Rings-esque metaphors); the German Absurd (with heavily pro-Nazi and antisemitic albums like *Asgardsrei*, *Facta Loquuntur* and *Werwolfthron*) and the Finnish Goatmoon (with the numerous apologies to violence and war in albums like *Death Before Dishonour*, *Finnish Steel Storm* and *Varjot*).

To conclude, we can cross this classification with a specific (and classic) semiotic one (Greimas's modalization—see, for instance, Greimas 1987), and separate the modalities of “Doing/Not Doing” from those of “Being/Not Being”, in order to distinguish between songs whose main ideological point is to underline the very action of protest (“Doing/Not Doing”: *We shall overcome; We shall not be moved...*), and songs which instead are inclined to describe a context/situation/character/etc. (“Being/Not Being”: *This world over; John Brown's body...*).

## References

- Greimas, Algirdas J. 1987. *On meaning: Selected writings in semiotic theory*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Kull, Kalevi. 1998. On semiosis, Umwelt, and semiosphere. *Semiotica* 120(3/4): 299–310.
- Rappaport, Julian, et al. 1984. *Studies in empowerment: steps toward understanding and action*. New York: Haworth.
- Sharov, Alexei. 2001. Umwelt theory and pragmatism. *Semiotica* 134: 211–228.
- Stefani, Gino. 1993. Canzoni e difesa popolare nonviolenta. In *Una strategia di pace: La difesa popolare nonviolenta*, ed. A. Drago, and G. Stefani. Bologna: FuoriThema.
- Uexküll, Jakob von 1982. The theory of meaning. Published entirely as Special Issue in *Semiotica* 42/1.



<http://www.springer.com/978-3-319-50537-4>

Give Peace a Chant

Popular Music, Politics and Social Protest

Martinelli, D.

2017, IX, 184 p. 21 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-319-50537-4