

Musical and Extra-Musical Factors Contribute to the Meaning of Popular Music: A Critical Analysis of “Zombie” by the Cranberries

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How to cite this paper: Song, J. S. (2022). Musical and Extra-Musical Factors Contribute to the Meaning of Popular Music: A Critical Analysis of “Zombie” by the Cranberries. *Advances in Journalism and Communication*, 10, 199-208.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ajc.2022.102013>

Received: March 31, 2022

Accepted: June 10, 2022

Published: June 13, 2022

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Abstract

From the perspective of communication, this paper puts the study of popular music in the field of media, communication, and culture, discusses the interaction between popular music, culture and society. It is worth mentioning that when people become the audience of a musical work, they not only pay attention to its musicality, but also discuss social issues, publicity, and even extra-musical information related to the performers of the song. Such extra-musical information sometimes goes beyond the musicality of the work and affects the public's judgment on the meaning of the musical work. As a part of the cultural industry, popular music is worth studying. This study focuses on a specific song, “Zombie”, and analyzes the impact of musical and extra-musical factors on its meaning construction. It attempts to provide a broader perspective on the interpretation of the music market and tries to bring enlightenment to the promotion of the cultural industry.

Keywords

Popular Music, Critical Analysis, Authenticity, Social Issues, Propaganda

1. Introduction

At the end of the music video of the Irish rock band The Cranberries' *Zombie*, a little boy lay on the floor with bruises all over his face, and the black-and-white picture creates a sense of depression (The Cranberries TV, 2009). This is the real scene taken by the director of the music video, Samuel Bayer, in Northern Ireland. The song was published in 1994 and expresses lamentation about the death of two children by the Irish Republican Army in the 1993 Warrington bombings (Savage, 2018). Through this music, The Cranberries pointed its way to protest

against the war, which was strong and high-profile. In fact, it is a very common way for celebrities to express their protests against social issues through music. As [Street \(2013\)](#) said, “music has long been a site of resistance”, whether in folk music or slave labor songs, anti-war or protests against the law, music has been making a voice for resistance ([Street, 2013](#)). The Cranberries is a famous Irish rock band. They entered the music market with the single “Dreams” in 1992. With the debut album “Everybody Else Is Doing It, So Why Can’t We?” in 1993, they achieved great success. “Zombie” is included in the second album “No Need to Argue”, which was released in 1994. The song was written by lead singer Dolores O’Riordan, it has been successfully launched in many countries and has achieved good results in the music list in Ireland, the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Belgium, Austria, Australia, Germany and Canada, and won the “best song” of MTV Europe Music Awards, it is worth noting that in 2011 “Zombie” returned to the 94th list in the UK ([Wikipedia, 2019b](#)). To date, the music has been played more than 900 million times on YouTube ([The Cranberries TV, 2009](#)).

Whether it has received attention in the early days or regained popularity in recent years, it seems that people are attracted not only by its musical factors such as melody, lyrics, and singing style, but also by extra-musical factors like the message it conveys, the current social issues, and the situation in which the song is cited. Together, they construct the meaning of the song, which makes people realize that the factors affecting the audience’s understanding of music are very complicated. This paper will study the MV of *Zombie*, analyze the musical and extra-musical factors reflected in this song discuss how these factors interact to construct the meaning of this song, it attempts to provide a broader perspective on the interpretation of the music market, and tries to bring enlightenment to the promotion of the cultural industry. And there will be a conclusion follows these analyses.

2. Musical Factors in “Zombie”

2.1. Rock and Roll

Compared to the other songs of The Cranberries in the early days, the rock style of “Zombie” is more obvious. When evaluating them, [Buckley \(2003\)](#) once pointed out that their second album had no changes except “Zombie”, whose sound is “angry grunge” and the lyrics are aggressive ([Buckley, 2003](#)). During the performance, O’Riordan asked the band to play the drums harder, and she clearly positioned the work as rock ([Savage, 2018](#)). To some extent, rock means the rebellion in the form of music, through distorted guitar, aggressive drum beat and the bad attitude of singer ([Keightley, 2001](#)). Rock music is not only fun, it is always seen as related to “more” things, not only about romantic love, sex, rebellion against the system, social problems and lifestyle, but also serious music ([Christine, 2004](#)). This form of music provides a world view that combines musical practice with musical preferences, makes aesthetic and ethical judgments in-

fluence each other (Keightley, 2001). “Zombie” is not only a band’s creation in music, but also shows their thinking about social issues, and intuitively expresses their anger and grief. It was a kind of rebellion and criticism of the war. Such criticism is contagious and can be easily integrated into people’s daily life (Keightley, 2001). Rock music is considered to be the eager venting method for teenagers (Christgau, 1981), at some point, people use this seriousness and rebellious attitude to distinguish themselves and others’ musical tastes. Rock seems to give this song a more powerful life, and it also gives the audience a stronger sense of impact, making it one of the most powerful works.

2.2. Authenticity of Music

There are many explanations for “serious” in rock music. Authenticity, as the most important value of examining music, guides rock culture from the edge to the mainstream (Keightley, 2001). Authenticity is regarded as the core of rock music, and it is a judgment standard for rock music to evaluate music and musicians. By this standard, rock culture emphasizes the serious attitude towards music and is related to the individual dilemma in society (Keightley, 2001; Weinstein, 2009). This authenticity is reflected in many aspects, such as the true expression of emotions, the serious themes involved in the song, original creativity, community awareness and even clothing (Keightley, 2001; Weinstein, 2009; Timothy, 2003). The reason why “Zombie” can be loved by the audience is also inseparable from the authenticity of its songs. First of all, from the perspective of creation, audiences are more likely to accept the musicians who create their own songs. The audience usually associates the author with the “self”, believing that the songs created by the singer are the true expression of his inner feelings, which is one of the criteria used to distinguish art from entertainment (Baumann, 2001; Keightley, 2001). The Cranberries completed the creation of this song independently, and each lyric is their truest thoughts. In an interview with *Classic Rock* (2017), O’Riordan recalled that she was on tour in the UK when the attack occurred and that there were frequent bombings in London as well. She reminded people that these bombs can explode at any time, which may endanger the safety of anyone, and people should not ignore such things (Emma, 2017). So, she wrote her anger in the lyrics:

“Another head hangs lowly, child is slowly taken”

“And the violence caused such silence”

...

“But you see it’s not me, it’s not my family”

“In your head, in your head, they are fighting”

...

“We must be mistaken”

...

“Zombie, Zombie, Zombie”

These straightforward lyrics are deeply criticized, and O’Riordan’s singing style

adds a stronger color to the expression of this emotion. As Weinstein (2009) said, the use of sound in singing is also a reflection of the authenticity of music. In the past works, they gained the audience's love with sweet songs and ethereal voices. However, in this work, they used a completely different way of presentation. The original acoustic guitar was replaced by an electric guitar to produce a suitably expansive sound, and the drums were aggravated. O'Riordan's lilting vocals are adjusted to an almost primal howl (Savage, 2018). They use art as a form of expression, combining the skills of singing and the application of technology in artistic concepts, reflecting the originality and authenticity of musicians (Timothy, 2003).

2.3. Music Video

The expression of authenticity in this work is also reflected in its music video. As Lester said, we are moving towards a visually mediated society, and our understanding of the world is more by reading images rather than reading texts (Paul, 2003). The music video of "Zombie" expresses the singer's intention very intuitively, which plays a great role in understanding the song. The Cranberries chose Samuel Bayer as the music video director. He filmed the "Smells Like Teen Spirit" music video for the Nirvana. In the music video of "Zombie", he clipped the band's performances to real video recordings, using a pattern of performance and narrative. In the shooting and editing, montage is used to cross-parallel the band performance and historical event images, and the two complement each other to express the theme, when we see the rock band performance, we also know the content of the video. The director applied the real images taken in Ireland to the MV, making it a topic of discussion. There are three main subjects, children, soldiers with guns and graffiti in the city. The MV uses narrative techniques to show people the impact of war on children. This kind of real image is obviously much better than the performance of the actor, and it has "authenticity." This authenticity is seen as a value, an emotional perception between the performer and the audience (Keightley, 2001). These real images can bring a sense of impact to the audience and evoke resonance. To some extent, it also makes the audience more approve of the attitude of The Cranberries. In the performance of the band, it can be divided into two parts. The first part is the scene of the band performance, which is the best understood. The band members express their inner anger through exaggerated and powerful actions, accusing the war of suffering. In another part, the lead singer O'Riordan is covered in gold, standing in front of a cross surrounded by silver-coated children. This part of the performance echoes the real image in the MV. For example, children in the film play in reality, and the children around the cross sit calmly, clasp their hands together, and pray silently. In another example, when a soldier armed with a gun attacked a child in the second half of the film, the child in another scene was screaming in pain.

After analyzing *Zombie's* music style, lyrics and music video, it is not difficult to see that this song conveys strong anti-war sentiment. This has allowed it to

gain the support of many like-minded audiences and has also given it an important role in political propaganda. However, this effect is not always positive. It may become a cohesive song in a specific social issue, or as a commercial promotional song to arouse people's dissatisfaction. It is worth noting that these extra-musical factors also affect the audience's construction of the meaning of this musical work. In the next section, extra-musical factors of concern will be discussed.

3. Extra-Musical Factors in "Zombie"

3.1. Musical Works Involving Social Issues

Langer & Knauth (1953) regarded symbols as the basis for human to understand things, which is helpful to understand the world we live in and make a basis for our judgment (Palczewski, Ice, & Fritch, 2012). Therefore, symbols become a way to understand and recognize things. Based on this analysis, more details can be found in this music video. First, the color symbolism refers to the use of color as a symbol in various cultures (Wikipedia, 2019a). Since this understanding of color is based on different social and cultural environments, it has different meanings (Smith, Whitfield, & Wiltshire, 1990), and the background of the song needs to be considered in the interpretation. The music video is mainly in black and white tones with a small number of color lenses, which are dominated by blue and red. The black and white tones emphasize the seriousness of the music video, consistent with the theme of the song, and also express the band and director's mourning for the two innocent children who have just passed away (Jill, 1997). Red usually symbolizes blood and violence (Jill, 1997), expressing the damage caused by war. As a cool color, blue gives the audience a cold, melancholy feeling (Jill, 1997). Secondly, there is such a scene in the MV: a person is leading a dog, and the dog is eating the bones on the side of the road. Connect this scene with the scenes of soldiers with guns, graffiti of the war and children injured in music video, as if to convey to the audience that war will eventually consume human beings. The contrast between black and color, joy and death highlights the "Zombie" thinking about war and life.

The success of "Zombie" is partly due to the impact of specific social environment. As mentioned in the lyrics "It's the same old theme since 1916", in fact, since the Easter of 1916, the dispute between UK and Ireland has run through the entire century. During this period, the Irish Revolutionary War, The Troubles, Bloody Sunday and other events broke out. The public is deeply aware of how terrible the damage caused by war, so it is more yearning for peace. The emergence of "Zombie" provided a channel for the public to express emotions. The Frankfurt School believes that music is a source of strength, a positive resistance code, and the public uses music to shape individual and collective identity (Street, 2013). O'Riordan said in explaining the song that she did not indicate any terrorist organization in it, which is a song with humanity. In other words, the message conveyed by this song is against all terrorist attacks or wars and is

not limited to the Irish bombings. This has largely allowed this work to reach a wider audience. In the BBC report, it was pointed out that in 1990s, this song was a gift for people in Bosnia and Rwanda. However, in recent years it also belongs to the civilians who suffered terrorist attacks in Manchester, Paris and Egypt (Savage, 2018). As Street said, music is a form of social solidarity. Some critics regard music as the pinnacle of society and even a model of human solidarity (Hesmondhalgh, 2013). In fact, there are many musicians who express their attitudes towards social issues through music. For example, FKA twigs expresses her attitude towards feminism through M3LL1SSX (Fairclough, 2017). However, the audience does not always pay tribute to such works. Beyoncé, who is also actively promoting feminism, is considered to be too commercialistic. She understands what the public wants her to show, so she tries her best to cater to the audience and encourage more people to support feminism. As a result, she can also benefit from it (Fairclough, 2017). It can be seen that when creating such musical works involving social issues, the motivation for creation is also one of the criteria for the audience to evaluate works.

3.2. The Role of Publicity

Popular songs have always been one of the means of propaganda (Street, 2013), and this kind of propaganda is also reflected in political activities. As Frederick (1983) argued that the use of music in western countries has a dual purpose of propaganda. Nationalism was aroused in the war. When people hear music that reminds them of their hometown, this nationalism was expressed through music (Frederick, 1983). Governments or social organizations apply music to their propaganda and social activities, using music as part of the framework of action, interpreting and expressing the concept of social movements, and giving the public a hint through music. This approach demonstrates the cognitive approach of social movements proposed by Ron & Andrew (1998). They believe that people view the world through a framework according to their preferences. Culture produces a cognitive practice and becomes a resource for social movements, and music is one of the manifestations of culture (Ron & Andrew, 1998). “Zombie” has also been used in political propaganda. Since this song has evoked the audience’s resonance, spread around the world, social organizations realized its influence and used it to call on human beings to stop wars and call for peace. For example, when the 1998 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Ulster Unionist leader John Hume and SDLP leader David Trimble to thank them for peacefully solving the problems in Northern Ireland, The Cranberries was invited to perform “Zombie”. Both the creative background of the song and the content that it wants to express are closely linked to the 1998 Nobel Peace Prize. Through this example, we can see how music is linked to political issues. However, it can only be seen as a form of political propaganda and packaging form that has no substantive effect (Street, 2013). In other words, the problem is solved by the British and Irish governments, not The Cranberries.

Music can be used to evoke and express officially recognized emotions and identities. When this power is recognized, it cannot be denied that it may also be counterproductive. In other words, music can also arouse public rebellion or dissatisfaction, which the government does not want to see (Street, 2013). In order to avoid such emotions, music censorship came into being. “Zombie”, for example, although this song has topped the list of music in many countries, the best result in the UK has stopped at the 14th place, which was probably influenced by the BBC’s decision to ban the song music video. As I mentioned in the previous analysis, there are a lot of real images taken from Ireland in the music video of this song. Among the images of these riots, there are many scenes that the UK government does not want to be seen by the public. The most sensitive scene is that a little boy playing with other children with a gun in his hand (The Cranberries TV, 2009). This was strongly opposed by the BBC and RTE. Although they did not completely ban the song, they re-edited the music video and deleted many scenes, just focusing on the fragments of the band performance (Savage, 2018). In this way, the government is trying to shift the focus of public attention from the war issue to the song itself to prevent public dissatisfaction. However, as a form of expression, music should be protected (Street, 2013). Fortunately, its official version has been retained and is still being distributed worldwide through YouTube. In an interview with Rip it Up, Hogan (1995) said that the move to ban the original video broadcast was clearly a failure (Hogan, 1995, cited in Savage, 2018). In fact, music involving social issues, especially political issues, will not only be hindered by the government, but also criticized by the public. O’Riordan, the author of “Zombie”, was accused of ignorance, taking sides in the conflict. There are many similar events. For example, U2’s “Sunday Bloody Sunday” is an expression of anger over the Bloody Sunday event, with critics accusing the band of being too partisan; Paul (2003), former member of Beatles wrote Give Ireland Back to the Irish was banned by the BBC.

3.3. Music Used in Advertisements

In many cases, when music is used in advertising, it will raise public discussion about the meaning of music. Advertising is often accused of not being loyal to the song’s original meaning or changing the meaning of the song through some techniques (Klein, 2009). Advertising gives music a new meaning usually through four means: picking a part of the music, reinstrumentalizing its score, changing the lyrics or mixing with other songs (Klein, 2009). In 2018, a series of videos were released on Tik Tok, a short video social app. The contents of those videos are various scenes of people’s daily life and are uniformly accompanied with the logo of Supreme. The slogan of the event is “All Things Can Supreme”. Once these videos were released, it attracted a lot of public follow-up and became one of the hot topics at the time. Originally, this was just an ordinary marketing campaign. However, when the public discovered that the background music of these videos was an excerpt from “Zombie”, it caused a lot of people’s dissatisfaction. In this video, only the repeated “zombie, zombie, zombie” parts in the

song are selected, and the original song is not used, but the remix version is made. In the short video of fifteen seconds, it is even difficult to find “Zombie” if you do not listen carefully. If people do not know the background of the song, but only hear the lyrics, the public may not feel that there is any problem with the use of this song. As Meier said, “when popular music is used as a form of promotion, what it actually sounds like and says is secondary to what it does” (Meier, 2017). This inappropriate use of songs is outside the legal constraints, in other words, this kind of behavior requires cultural and moral constraints.

3.4. Performer’s Influence

Music is interpreted by the public in conjunction with “non-music” information about the performer. A song gets public attention not only because of music itself, but also because of any record of the singer’s life (Brackett, 1995). “Zombie” has gained worldwide attention again, following the death of O’Riordan, the lead singer of The Cranberries. Irish President Michael D Higgins was the first to pay tribute, and other tributes followed from the music industry. She has had a huge impact on rock and pop music in Ireland and around the world and is hailed as the pride of the Irish music industry (de Demelza & Edel, 2018; Ronan, 2018). “Zombie” has considered as her most important, successful and meaningful work. The background of the song was re-raised, and her creative journey was once again displayed in front of the public. From those interviews before her death, the public was able to see her motives for creation, and her own evaluation of this work, and her response to criticisms (Savage, 2018). All this has deepened the audience’s understanding both of her and the song.

In general, the meaning-making of musical compositions is indeed influenced by many extra-musical factors. The results of some of them are consistent with the author’s original intention: *Zombie*’s lyrics and music video are spread as anti-war tools, making it a banner in a specific social context. However, when it is given a particular meaning, it also causes the audience to resist its use in meaningless and entertaining situations. At the same time, the personal information related to the performers has also become an important factor in the audience’s interpretation of the work.

4. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the song “Zombie” of The Cranberries, it can be seen that in the process of shaping the meaning of music not only contains musical factors, but also contains many factors other than music. First of all, the music style lays the foundation for the song. “Zombie” as a typical rock music reflects the seriousness and rebellious spirit of rock. Entertainment is not the only thing about rock, its theme can contain many serious social themes, providing the audience with a system of resistance and expressing dissatisfaction. Authenticity is the core of rock, which is reflected in whether the song is original, the performance of the song and the motivation of the musician. “Zombie” as a classic anti-war song, its creative background is very worthy of attention. This social

background will affect the audience's interpretation of the song. However, no matter what kind of works, there will be controversy and criticism. On the one hand, because of the socially sensitive issues involved, the government will prohibit the spread of certain music in order to prevent public dissatisfaction. On the other hand, the public will also question the political position of musicians. Due to the sensitivity of the song itself, improper use in business can also cause public resistance, and this problem can only be constrained by culture and morality. Finally, the record of the musician's life also affects the audience's interpretation of the meaning of music.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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