



“What Kind of Genre Do You Think We Are?” Genre Theories, Genre Names and Classes within Music Intermedial Ecology

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1. Genre as intermediality

While single genre histories have been quite explored (e.g., Charlton, 1994; Borthwick & Moy, 2004; F. Fabbri, 2008), the notion of *musical genre* is not very much studied in itself, as a theoretical entity (cf. F. Fabbri, 1982, 2012; Hamm, 1994; Moore, 2001; Marx, 2008). This is not that surprising, as it is a crucial notion (possibly, the highest level of abstraction we can deal with as we talk about music), but, at the same time, a very ambiguous one.¹

In this paper, the notion of *intermediality* is employed in a broad and non-plurimedial (Wolf, 2002) sense. Intermediality is here considered as “in-betweenness”; namely, as a form of mediation between different levels of signification. In particular, we address the capability of music to make music out of the “nonmusical” (or, in other words, to “translate” things into music, by using musical-specific means).² The notion of in-betweenness is well summarized and visualized in Crapoulet’s study on the musical artwork as a performance (2008, p. 127); the diagram she displays, in order to depict the musical piece as an intermedial node, is—enlighteningly—not so different from Tagg’s graphic explanation of his semiotic analysis method.³

In short, the idea proposed in this paper is that the intermedial, translating capability of music is well exemplified by the functioning of the musical genres, as we can deduce it by the names of the genres themselves. After a general theoretic framing of the notion of musical genre, the result of an explorative





lexical-semantic analysis of a corpus of genre names is displayed; the aim is to build up a name-based typology of genres (a meta-typology, as genres are already a way by which we classify music) and to understand the possible basic values underlying this typology.

2. A spatial and intermedial conception of music

Our starting point is reconsidering common sense representations of music as a “combination of different kinds of music” and academic theorizations developing the very same idea in the light of Lotman’s linguistically-modeled notion of *semiosphere* (1985; though Lotman was never particularly interested in music, cf. Tarasti, 2002, p. 4).

Many of the visual representations of music that it is possible to find on the Internet are centered on the notion of *genre*, as they depict music as an assemblage of genres.⁴ These representations can work by (i) affinity (e.g., the ones based on users’ activities on social networks such as Last.fm, or on collaborative resources such as Wikipedia) or genealogy (that is, by following a historical-evolutionary development); they can be (ii) synchronic or diachronic; they can be (iii) graphic, logical (e.g., flowcharts), topographic (e.g., maps, 3D sets) or geographic (i.e., they place music in geographic maps). This spatial conception of music, seen as an assemblage of different types of music, finds an illustrious ancestor in the “clouds simile” proposed by Xenakis (1979) and recovered by F. Fabbri (2002, 2005, 2008).

Furthermore, it is possible to imagine music as a four-dimensional macro-generic semiosphere that takes into account the three spatial-topologic dimensions as well as the diachronic variable. It would be a transtextual and trans-medial, ecological (i.e., in a dynamic biologic-like equilibrium) set, which includes a variety of elements: (i) real and possible, (ii) material (people, devices, places, etc.) and nonmaterial (knowledge, values, stories, relationships, etc.), (iii) musical (music itself) and nonmusical (pieces of the world, discourses music translates into music, discourses about music etc.).

Within this ecological system, nonmusical elements are *musicified*; that is, are incorporated in the musical semiosphere, through a process of *semiotic translation* (*intersemiotic translation* or *transmutation*; according to Jakobson, 1959) we might precisely call *musicification*.⁵





3. Definitions of genre and the dynamics of genres relations

Here is a quick review of the main studies dedicated to musical genre concerning popular music. While the works of F. Fabbri have a prominent theoretic purpose, the others are sociological studies based on empirical researches, which theoretical remarks are mainly based on case studies (cf. F. Fabbri, 2012, p. 180, note 5).

Musical genre is a key interest in F. Fabbri's scholarly production (1982, 1999, 2002, 2005, 2012). To sum up, he defines genre as “a set of musical events (real or possible) whose course is governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules” (1982, p. 52) and lists the following five types of rules: (i) formal and technical; (ii) semiotic (that is, related to Jakobson's communicative functions and to enunciation strategies); (iii) behavioral; (iv) social and ideological; (v) economical and juridical. F. Fabbri (2012) stresses the importance of considering his typology (and, more generally, musical genre theorizations and musical theorizations coming from a semiotic standpoint) as dynamic and capable of dealing with the diachronicity of musical genres, rather than static grids focused on the synchronic dimension only (as the “conventions accepted by a community”—i.e., the aforementioned “socially accepted rules”—that determine them and the prototypes chosen to epitomize them are historically motivated).

For Holt (2003, 2007; cf. Marx, 2008), a musical genre is a “set of symbolic codes that are organized and constituted [‘codified’] in a social network at particular moments in history, whose boundaries are negotiated in multilayered ontologies between different interpretative contexts [within which a genre is ‘re-codified’]” (2003, pp. 92-93). Holt distinguishes between (i) *historical genres* and *abstract genres* of a higher taxonomic order (e.g., “vocal”, “sacred” music etc.); between (ii) “marketing categories and labels” (e.g., “chill out”) and proper genres; between (iii) “core-boundary genres” (e.g., country and jazz vs. rock; i.e., genres that define themselves in opposition to other genres) and “in-between genres” or “decentered models” (e.g., “Latin-pop”, “zydeco”, “Mexican American popular music”; i.e., syncretic genres). It has been noticed that the latter type, and the notion of in-betweenness in particular, might be an unclear, controversial category; as contamination should be rather considered a structural component of the genre constitution itself (Marx, *op. cit.*).

Lena (2012) identifies four dominant forms (“Avant-garde”, “Scene-based”, “Industry-based” and “Traditionalist”) and two main flow trajectories from one form to the others (AgSIT vs. IST; namely, from Avant-garde, to Scene-based, to Industry-Based, to Traditionalist, and from Industry-based, to Scene-based, to Traditionalist), in order to describe how American pop





music develops, “how genres cohere”; that is, “how styles, conventions and goals are crystallized so as to define musical communities” (p. 23). Outside the USA, Lena finds also a fifth form: the “Government-purposed genre” (e.g., in China, Serbia, Nigeria, Chile). Lena lists 12 dimensions through which the four dominant forms are articulated; they include organizational, economic, interpersonal and aesthetic features. She lastly suggests that three causes can block the emergence of genre forms: “(1) the absorption of particular musical styles into proximal styles and streams, (2) aesthetic and social factors that prevent the expansion of the musical scene to new audiences and performers, and (3) racist exclusion” (p. 109).

Negus (1999) and Brackett (2002) stress the marketing and commercial value of musical genres (cf. also Holt, 2007, pp. 3, 18). For Negus, besides, genres become more than a mirror of society and a model for society itself. As an example, he reports that departments within major record companies have shaped their structure and functioning on the model of the socio-cultural system implied by the musical genre they deal with and try to sell (e.g., hip hop).

4. Genre and style as two forms

Great is the confusion under the sky of terminology, as Berruto (2011) points out. That of “genre vs. style”, the latter being the other big umbrella term for musical categorizations, is quite an issue, and perhaps a Gordian knot or an *aporia*. While musicologists rather prefer *style*, and socio-cultural scholars prefer *genre*, in common use the two terms are employed indiscriminately, as synonyms of *type* or *kind* of music.

In the terms of a possible subordination of one to the other, the *querelle* between F. Fabbri and Tagg, in one corner (backing the pre-eminence of genre), and Moore, in the other (backing that of style), is really interesting and meaningful (cf. Moore, 2001). Berruto (2011) seems to back a similar position to Fabbri and Tagg’s; for him, genre is something defined in “cultural, social, ethnographic and multimodal terms” (p. 30; my trans.), it is a hypernym of *register*, and the latter is a close notion to *style*. While genre has a functional value, style has an aesthetic one.

We can try to sum up by starting back with Dahlhaus. “Before the nineteenth century, Dahlhaus contends, genres were born from the blending of social function (e.g., the liturgy, a festival, or a dance) and compositional norm, of extramusical purpose and the musical means available to fulfill [*sic*] it” (Kallberg, 1988, p. 239). We might add that those means are available





because they were specifically designed and/or chosen—in the set of the possible ones—and conventionally employed for that purpose. Therefore, from this perspective, a musical genre can be defined as a socio-culturally connoted and a functionally justified musical style (the “compositional norm”). Obviously, we have to suppose the entire musical spectrum as condensed in the word “style” (meaning a “recognizable musical form”) in order to make this definition work.

After the Baroque epoch, music gradually lost its nature of an exclusively functional practice (up to the late Romantic and Wagnerian conception of “absolute music”); so that, according to Dahlhaus, the social value of musical genres had been fading more and more, increasingly in the 20th century, making room to the individuality of the great composers. In fact, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* assigns two different domains to genre and style: “Genres speak of the men who created them and the people who readily received them, and a personal style speaks of the artist’s view of life” (Pascall, 2001); “Indeed a genre, working for stability, control and finality of meaning, might be said to oppose the idiomatic diversity and evolutionary tendencies characteristic of both form and style” (Samson, 2001). In these terms, genre is the domain of the “collective”, style of the “individual”.

Genre and style are clearly closely related, but their overlap is still partial (we will see how stylistic features, and musical features in general, are just a part of the elements contributing to the definition of a musical genre). Genre includes style (it is a component of genre), but does not overtake it (style is not reducible to a component of genre). Style, indeed, is a cross-generic notion and, more generally, a transversal notion. The style of a single musician can be highly recognizable in spite of the different types of music—i.e., genres—he has been confronting with. Musicians “belonging” to different genres can share similarities that lead us to include them in the same “stylistic area” (e.g., “hardcore” is a transversal stylistic connotation, employed to define genres such as “hardcore techno”, “hardcore punk” and “hardcore hip hop”; and we might also imagine a “hardcore reggae” or a “hardcore folk”). We can make a genre out of a style (it is what happened to most of the sedimented musical forms we can now call genre within popular music) and make a style out of a genre (doing the opposite operation). The latter case happens when we say, for instance, a piece of music is in a “hardcore” (as we have just seen), “black metal”, “punk” or “funk” style; in such cases, we are referring only to certain formal features. It happens the same when we turn a genre into an adjective; stating music is a “funky jazz” does not mean we are placing it within that genre (“funk”) or, in other words, *culture*, but that it employs, incorporates or imitates certain stylistic features (for a socio-culturally connoted notion





of “style”, cf. Hebdige, 1979; cf. also the notion of *habitus*—though, with differences—in the works of Charles Sanders Peirce and Pierre Bourdieu). It happens the same, also, when we turn an author into an adjective; when we say, for instance, a piece of music is “zappesque”, “zappian” or “Zappa-like” (from Frank Zappa).

While both imply—or rather, consist of—rules, style is something that has to do with music, with its forms, its codes (from the Latin *stilus*, the stylus stick used by Romans to write upon wax tablets). Genre is something musical that involves the “outside world,” that makes reference to social and cultural forms and codes (from the Greek *γένος*, “descent”, “race”).

In conclusion, a—simplifying indeed, though operative—“atomic definition” of musical genre is here proposed, linking together the two different forms and the two different levels of signification we have been dealing with (i.e., “genre” and “style”). A “musical genre” is a linguistic label (a name) assigned to a set of recognizable musical features (a musical form; or, in other words, a “musical style”, reflecting and proposing a musical aesthetics), carrying socio-cultural connotations (a “socio-cultural style”, reflecting and proposing a system of values).

5. Corollaria and further remarks

The idea of genre and style as two normative forms, two structures, respectively dealing with the musical matter and the socio-cultural value assigned to it, cannot fail to think of Hjelmslev’s *strata of sign*; therefore, genre can be described as the “form of content”, and style as the “form of expression”.⁶ It has to be observed that statements such as these are obviously simplifying the issue; style cannot be meant as a “pure musical form”, external to any socio-cultural connotation. A “primary level” of meaning (and subsequent socio-cultural connotations), concerning the musical matter, comes from its very syntactic structure (Middleton, 2001, pp. 301-310); cf. also the “doctrine of the affections” that, from Ancient Greece up to the Baroque era, linked certain musical figures to certain emotions.

There is a strong connection, and maybe an almost complete overlap, between the notion of genre, considered as an architextual basin (Genette, 1982), and the notion of “imaginary”; namely, the set of actual and virtual musical circumstances that circulate in social discourses and let listeners put a single piece of music in a coherent whole. As for imaginary, genre precedes and follows the individual texts: “Each text proposes a sense and, at the same time, proposes the rules by which it is built and it should be experienced. Genre,





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in short, is constructed as something given, it is the final datum that is set as the initial one, it is the effect of its continuous regeneration” (Marrone, 2001, p. 83; my trans.). At first, a genre “coheres”, is codified, by induction. Then, it works by deduction—and works as a binding, normative and even racist (Sorce Keller, 2012a; Lena, 2012, pp. 98-109) Destinant: “It is a fundamental structuring force in musical life. It has implications for how, where and with whom people make and experience music” (Holt, 2007, p. 2). The dialectics between the imaginary and the functioning of musical genres is interesting and needs further investigation.

Toynbee (2000, pp. 102-129) points out that even the so-called “free improvisation”, a type of radical, “nonidiomatic” (namely, that does not want to refer to any musical idiom) musical form, developed by musicians such as Derek Bailey since the 1950s, had to bend its ideological principles to the logic of the musical genre, in order to survive; becoming, *de facto*, a genre like the others, with its own formal, technical, semiotic, behavioral, social and economical rules. Genre is such a strong entity that even when we try to imagine or daydream music, we cannot get out of its domain. As an extreme example, it is possible to refer to the reviews of imaginary records in rock journalism (Marino, 2011). The reviewed records are imaginary, indeed they do not physically exist, while the described music cannot be nothing but a combinatory of actually existing music and musical genres; to describe Frankenstein-like patchworks such as these, Agostini (2002) used the image of “chimera music”.

All these remarks lead us to the notion of a “generic contract” between “the musical genre” and the listener (Kallber, 1988). And to the notion of a *model listener* (cf. Eco’s *model reader*, 1990), as it is designed by the musical text itself, equipped with a set of given competences (Stefani, 1982) and experiencing the musical text through a set of given expectations (Barbieri, 2004).

6. Genre names and labels

It seems Adorno had formed his idea of “jazz” music mostly by listening to German “jazz” orchestras which music was a mere imitation of the great American jazz of the time (from Duke Ellington to Miles Davis; whom Adorno probably was not aware of). He believed that music was “jazz” and built his famous—negative and influential—speculations upon “jazz” on the basis of that (Robinson, 1993, qtd. in F. Fabbri, 1997, p. 4). Labels are important, and effective.





Names are important, and ambiguous. They are boxes that need to be filled with something, and if there is no agreement about this “something”, they may become *mysterious boxes*. Going back to the competences of the listener, musical genre names are written in quite an esoteric language; they incorporate existing slangs (nowadays, particularly from youth, urban and Internet cultures), but they also create a new slang of their own. They are always elliptical, they always leave something hidden, implied, yet crucial in order to de-codify what they are referring to; something the listener has to know and has to add to the genre name, which actually works like a *key word*. There is a gap between the meaning of the genre as a word belonging to the common lexicon and what it is actually pointing to and out, as a mechanism of musical signification.

This is particularly clear in what might be called “nontransparent labels”, such as “trap” music. The literal meaning of “trap” is obviously “a contrivance used for catching game or other animals, as a mechanical device that springs shut suddenly”; while its musical meaning refers to “a music genre that originated in the early 2000s from Southern hip hop and crunk in the Southern United States. It is typified by its lyrical content and trademark sound, which incorporates 808 sub-bass kick drums, sped-up hi-hats, layered synthesizers, and “cinematic” strings. ... The term “trap” was literally used to refer to the place where drug deals are made. Fans and critics started to refer to rappers whose primary lyrical topic was drug dealing, as ‘trap rappers’.”⁷

A lot of musical genre names are nontransparent labels just like “trap” and have actually nothing to do with music; the elements which participate in the naming of the genre say nothing about the musical features, but maybe say *everything* about the pragmatics of the music.

A bibliographic review of the genre theory literature provided just two genre typologies with a focus on genre names and their meaning. The one are the “film roundups” proposed by Bordwell (1989) and Stam (2000), quoted in Chandler (2000, p. 1). The other is the attempt at a musical translation of Borges’ parody of the “animal genres” (already referenced in Hamm, 1994) proposed by Dawes (2006). Dawes’—half-joking—proposal is interesting, but it displays two key issues (leaving out the fact that he calls Borges “Borge”, putting the missing “s” only in the Saxon genitive): (i) he is not systematic in his taxonomy and (ii) his remarks are affected by highly arguable opinions (e.g., “slide”, “house” and “math (rock)” are considered “arbitrary titles”; “skiffle” and “hip-hop” “nonsensical names”).





An interesting—and systematic, indeed—example of name classification is provided by the *Grand taxonomy of rap names*, an infographics realized by “Pop Chart Lab” in 2010. As is clear, it does not deal with musical genres, but with rappers’ names, displaying “266 sobriquets from the world of rap music, arranged according to semantics”.⁸ The rappers’ names included are organized in six macro-classes: (i) Physical or metaphysical attributes; (ii) Animal, vegetable, mineral; (iii) Wordplay; (iv) Alphanumeric; (v) Crime; (vi) Titles and honorifics.

In this respect, two fertile and growing fields are the study of “folksonomies” (“folk taxonomies”; Vander Wal, 2007) and the “music ontology”. Analytical findings in researches addressing the social tagging of musical genres get close to the ones here proposed (cf. the “Tag Type” in Lamere, 2008, p. 103, Table 2; the *semantic facets* identified in Sordo et al., 2013, p. 349, Table 1; p. 352, Table 2; p. 354, Table 5); our classification is more reductionist, as the classes are fewer in number and more inclusive in capacity.

In the following section, the result of an explorative analysis of genre names is proposed; namely, a typology of homogeneous classes regarding “what element may become a genre name”. Not every one of the following is a proper musical genre, although they are all used as genre labels. Some of them may rather be called, more generically, *music definers* or *music categories*; that means they are words we do use to describe and classify music, which is a wider and—at the same time—an Ur-categorization in comparison with the notion of genre. Focusing on the notion of musical genre, we can therefore imagine a scale of hypernymity-hyponymity, from the broader “definer” to the narrower “genre” and then “style” (as we said, style is an internal component of genre; and, as we will see, style represents just one of the possible sources of a genre name).

The classification, far from being definitive and complete, cannot take into consideration all the classes’ overlaps, which are organic, for it is not possible to make clear and unique distinctions and assignments; e.g., “riot grrrl” is, at the same time, (i) an onomatopoeia; (ii) a connotation, implying a judgement, suggesting how to classify a person; and (iii) it refers to an attitude or a behavior. It is not important that one agrees with every single choice (i.e., in which class each individual genre or label is actually put); the typology to be able to enlighten an interesting topic and suggest a method for further research would be preferred. In these terms, hopefully, the present paper would meet the type of Internet corpora-based studies upon musical genre (like the ones upon folksonomies and Carson & Zimmer, 2012a and 2012b) suggested and wished for by F. Fabbri (2012, pp. 188-190).





Due to space restrictions, it is possible here to engage neither in a genre by genre analysis, nor in a class by class explanation. The second step of the analysis is directly displayed; i.e., the “genre definers” classes, exemplified by some significant cases. The corpus of the reviewed genre names (approximately 200) consists of (i) the main historical genre names (with particular regard to popular music), (ii) the genre tags list the author had defined for the new database of the Italian music magazine *sentireascoltare.com* (2012) and (iii) the genre neologisms analyzed by Carson and Zimmer (2012a, 2012b).

7. What genre names are about: genre definers’ classes

So, *what kind of genres* can we find circulating in the social discourse? What can genre names refer to, showing the very different elements which may become candidates for a genre name? Six macro-classes and as many corresponding value dimensions (or, in other words, *functions*) are found: (i) Music (descriptive), (ii) Aim (prescriptive), (iii) Lyrics (thematic), (iv) Culture (aggregative), (v) Geography (locative), (vi) Totem (i.e., object; symbolic). Each class is articulated into sub-classes, identifying a continuum of musical/nonmusical elements and features.

7.1 Music. Descriptive

(i) *Onomatopoeia / plastic rhyme / scat*: skweee, riot grrrl, swing, reggae, ska, bebop, hip hop. (ii) *Sound / mimicry / synaesthesia*: bassline, bass (music), drone, noise, hard (rock), heavy (metal), thrash (metal), black (metal), soft (metal), sludge, grind, industrial, filthstep, acid (techno), acid (jazz), hot (jazz), cool (jazz), jungle, chillwave. (iii) *Synaesthesia / metaphor / connotation*: blues, reggae, punk, doom (metal), Paisley Underground. (iv) *Connotation / atmosphere / ambience / setting*: “canzone d’autore” (auteur song), progressive (rock), progressive (house), Madchester, riot grrrl, intelligent (techno), intelligent dance music (IDM), hipster (house), free (jazz), free (improvisation), Grebo, folk, popular (music), classical (music), art (music), serious (music), soul, hardcore, emo, dark, gothic, industrial, desert (rock), country, urban, epic/power/folk/medieval (metal), technical (death metal), brutal (death metal), space (music), exotica. (v) *Technical / stylistic / compositional elements*: crooning, rap, screamo, glitch, chiptune, minimalism, minimal (techno), microhouse, isolationism, electronic (music), techno, fusion, drum and bass. (v, bis) *Rhythm*: jungle, downtempo, big beat, wonky, 2-step, math (rock), halfstep, slowcore. (vi) *Performance features*: glam, shoegaze, crab core.





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7.2 Aim. Prescriptive

(i) *Function / purpose*: ambient, chill out, easy listening. (ii) *Situation / ideal setting for listening*: disco, lounge, cocktail, country, college (pop), pub (rock), exotica. (iii) *Market category*: alternative, indie, mainstream, Muzak, pop, adult oriented rock (AOR), FM (rock). (iv) *Phenomenology / affects-effects / agogicity*: dance, hip hop, trip hop, 2-step, footwork, rock and roll, psychedelic (rock), crunk, rave, trance, hypnagogic, isolationism, improvisation, swing, dream (pop), funk, jazz.

7.3 Lyrics. Thematic

Love song, Christmas carol, porn (metal), pornogrind, Christian (rock), Christian / death / black / epic / folk / medieval (metal).

7.4 Culture. Aggregative

(i) *Attitude / behavior*: riot grrrl, gangsta (rap), crunk, brostep. (ii) *Socio-cultural connotation / (sub)culture*: New Age, punk, Grebo, emo, dark, rave. (iii) *Antonomasia / producer or originator / pioneering artist, album or song*: singer-songwriter (*cantautore* in Italian), Tin Pan Alley, Muzak, garage (rock), black (metal), death (metal), crust, bluegrass. (iv) *Time / diachronic variable*: Space Age pop, Eighties, new-, neo-, nu-, post-.

7.5 Geography. Locative

(i) *Place*: Charleston, house, garage (house), Goa, Madchester. (ii) *Country*: Brit pop, j-pop, k-pop, “canzone napoletana” (“Neapolitan song”), UK garage. (iii) *Ethnicity*: Latin pop, Latin hip hop, Latin jazz.

7.6 Totem. Symbolic

Funk, jazz, baggy, crunk, Paisley Underground, hair (metal), trap, PBR&B.

8. Sur-categorizations and derivative forms

As we said, we have to reckon the existence of broader music definers and classifiers, identifying neither proper genres, nor styles, but, more generally, “types” or “areas” of music. Shuker (2005, pp. 120-123) calls them “metagenres” (e.g., “Christian rock”, “world music”, “alternative rock”); Holt (2007), as we





have seen, calls them “abstract genres” (e.g., “vocal” or “sacred music”; to which we might add “avant-garde”, “experimental”, “abstract”, “improvization” etc.); F. Fabbri (2012, p. 180, note 4) calls them “superordinate categories” (e.g., “popular music”).

On the other hand, we face the “genrefication”; namely, the overgrowth of genre labels neologisms, due to which “there are so many subgenres and factions” (Bruce Springsteen, quoted in Carson & Zimmer, 2012a, p. 190) segmenting and narrowing the musical matter more and more, especially within popular music. Zwicky (2010) coined the term “libfix” to define those word parts that become highly productive free combining forms in the field of neologisms; examples of musical libfixes are “core”, “tronica”, “step”, “fi”, “ton”, “hop”, “tech”, “psych”. Along with other affixes and suffixes (e.g., “pop”, “rock”, “jazz”, “metal”, “electro”, “synth”, “house”, “techno”, “beat”, “post”, “new”, “neo”, or “nu”), these combining forms are employed to make sub-genre distinctions or, in other words, to create derivative or compound genres (Bakhtin had already proposed the distinction between primary and secondary—i.e., compound—literary genres [cf. Bakhtin, 1986]). The result of the combinations spread by these musical “-fixes” are second generation terms such as these (some of them are portmanteau words): electro-pop, synthpop, garage-rock, psych blues, post-rock, post-metal, metalcore, nu-rave, nu-soul, ragga-core, Nintendo-core, jazzcore, Moombahton, folk-tronica, live-tronica, brostep, halfstep, tech-house, tech-step, clown-step, lo-fi, glo-fi etc.

9. Underlying dichotomies

A sur-categorization (which actually attempts to be an Ur-categorization), showing the eight basic dimensions and value dichotomies lying beneath the six genre definers’ macro-classes (and that, by crossing each other, actually build the definers’ classes up) is here proposed: (i) Musical (stylistic features) vs. nonmusical (socio-cultural references); (ii) Denotation (musical description) vs. connotation (socio-cultural implication); (iii) Technique (process) vs. aesthetics (product, result); (iv) Syntax (grammar) vs. semantics (lexicon);⁹ (v) Conceptual-ideological (exclusive) vs. nonideological (inclusive); (vi) Autonomous vs. confronting or synchronic vs. diachronic; (vii) Transparent vs. nontransparent; (viii) Emic (community insider) vs. etic (community outsider).





Due to space restrictions, it is not possible to explain in detail each dichotomy and the relations between the definer classes and the dichotomies; most of all, further study is needed upon this last point.

10. Conclusion

The process of giving music a name, a necessary practice which is actually impossible to get out of (natural language is the chief meta-language, according to Benveniste; it is a “fascist” system, according to Barthes; for the importance of the “semiotic act of naming”, cf. F. Fabbri, 2012, pp. 180, 187), that becomes a true obsession for anyone handling music (musicians, listeners, critics and scholars), implies a specific meta-knowledge (namely, a knowledge focused not on music itself, but on discourses about music), representing a precious key to understanding how communities understand and appropriate music, what they consider meaningful in it. Something (musical or nonmusical, concrete or abstract, real or possible) which is so meaningful that it may become—amongst the others—the unique element capable of synthesizing the identity of that particular music; i.e., the genre name itself.

With the act of naming—never a neutral, always a strongly meaningful and ideological act—we can still believe we have the power to create something new. As Eco reminds us in the *exitus* of *The Name of the Rose* (“*Stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus*”), names seem to stand as the only thing we have left. Yet, never totally mastering them.

Notes

- ¹ The author would like to thank Franco Fabbri and Jacopo Tomatis, from the University of Turin, Italy, for their useful remarks and their kind feedbacks.
- ² *Extra-musicality* is a notion that pertains to the level of the *extroversive analysis* (cf. Monelle, 1992) and is quite an issue (cf. Sorce Keller, 2012b). Hence, Tagg & Clarida (2003, p. 271) propose to employ the term *paramusicality*.
- ³ Cf. tagg.org, bit.ly/1h2NmVG. Web pages last access: April 6, 2015; all the URLs are shortened via “bit.ly”.
- ⁴ Cf. pearltrees.com, bit.ly/1dlK5BP.
- ⁵ For instance, William Basinski’s *The Disintegration Loops* (“2062”, 2002) and Bruce Springsteen’s *The Rising* (“Columbia”, 2002) represent two very different ways of “musically handling” the very same *piece of the world*: the September 11, 2001 attacks. For the word *musification*, cf. Edlung (2004); for *musicalization*, cf. Lesure (1984), Costa (1999, p. 136), Wolf (1999).





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- ⁶ A naïve but effective look at such a proposal can be taken by reading how a popular Internet joke synoptically translates some musical genres into verbal language, in order to show the “Differences between music genres”; cf. *pbs.twimg.com*, bit.ly/1mKkzwg.
- ⁷ Cf. *wikipedia.org*, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trap_\(music_genre\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trap_(music_genre)).
- ⁸ Cf. *popchartlab.com*, bit.ly/1fshrhS.
- ⁹ Frye (1957) seems to back the hypothesis of a syntax-based genre definition.

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