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Is There an Aesthetics of Political Song?

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Abstract

Some think politics and art should not mix. The problem with this view is that politics and art were *always* entwined. Human experience is structured politically, even if much of it is not. Here, I illustrate this with a series of artistic examples that take us from work songs in a Mississippi 1940s forced labour camp to a desolate dead forest landscape in a former Krasnoyarsk gulag, evocative of a Paul Nash World War I painting. Powerful artworks help us to come to grips with human experience, more than merely "expressing emotion". I treat songs as representations, looking for a way their political significance is part of their aesthetic value. To do this, I defend James Young's (2001) concept of "illustrative representation" as bridging the gap between formalism and contextualism. But instead of Young's "Wollheimian" (resemblance between experiences) approach to how such representation works I draw on Kulvicki's (2020) notion of "syntactic parts", combining it with Carroll's (2016) concept of form as the "ensemble of artistic choices", and Black's (1954-55) frame-and-focus model of meaning in metaphor. Hopefully, in the end I will have clarified the ways in which (some) songs are both politically and aesthetically meaningful.

Keywords

aesthetic form, cognitive value, formalism, political song, representation.

1 Introduction

In the late 1940s, Alan Lomax, "the song hunter", while traveling the American South as assistant to his father, John A. Lomax, conducted a series of recordings in the forced labour fields of Parchman Farm Prison, Mississippi, which were published as *Negro Prison Songs*, by

the label Tradition Records and re-issued in 1997, in two volumes, as part of the extensive *Alan Lomax Collection*, by Rounder Records.[1]

A common feature of the songs recorded by the Lomaxes at Parchman Farm is the presence of the sounds made by the prisoners' tools while working "under whip and gun". One particularly impressive example of this for me is the song "Rosie", in the responsorial style of liturgical chant, although the song is all about "profane love" or the promise of its endurance, with a soloist, identified as "C. B. Cook", raising his voice in a powerful, hypnotic, almost supernatural tone, and being answered by a chorus of ten fellow prisoners. We hear sounds of handaxes rhythmically punctuating each phrase, making the music all the more piercing and poignant. Obviously, one *could* adopt a sort of "disinterested" stance and hear the axes as just any other percussion instrument, and the sung verses as abstracted from their context, as if they were being produced in a concert hall, rather than by people deprived of their freedom, undergoing the plight of forced labour. The music would undoubtedly still sound beautiful, but would we not be ignoring a layer of meaning, with aesthetically relevant consequences? In this paper, I want to answer this question in the positive.

People divided over this question disagree fundamentally over what counts as *aesthetic*. There are many aspects to their disagreement, but this is the basic point from which all else flows: a certain conception of "the aesthetic" will be packed with other notions, such as that of a *proper way of attending* to works of the arts (and thus, songs) and even to a conception of what "art" is. Aesthetic formalism, the doctrine with which I am here disagreeing, may include one, two or all the following three things: a) a metaphysical theory of the nature and value of art, b) an epistemology of art, and c) a theory of art "appreciation". A formalist on all three counts will espouse the following views: i) the purpose of art making is the enjoyment of aesthetic qualities, ii) the core aesthetic qualities are formal, i.e., *perceptual*, iii) enjoying aesthetic qualities is intrinsically valuable, iv) representational properties and "cognitive content" may be "interesting", for all sorts of reasons, but they are not *aesthetically* relevant.

Things get even more complicated, though, as both parties in this dispute—formalists and contextualists—may *uncritically agree* on some or other point, e.g., on what counts as a "formal property", which may originate in the fact that some fundamental question was either not properly formulated or not posed at all, with the consequence that people end up

[1] Prison Songs: Historical Recordings from Parchman Farm 1947–8.

talking past each other, each appearing to be absolutely right…within the strict confines of the way each is laying out the problem.

There are more aspects to this debate than can be covered in a single article. Here I want to focus on songs as representational devices, as forms of representation. It is as such that songs connect to human experience in general, namely, by *illustrating* aspects of that experience in a "medium-opaque" manner, and by way of such representation they acquire (when they do) a political dimension. What I hope to do here is to clarify this sense of "representation" and how it is aesthetically relevant.

2 Ways a song is political

Something in the way I have started is bound to seem suspicious. My subject is political song, and the example I just adduced is that of work songs. But are work songs political songs? It is not an easy question. First, *what* is a political song? What makes a song *political*? Is the political character of a song relevant for its *aesthetic* character? In what ways?

Here is a reason to be sceptical of such relevance: whether a song is "politically motivated" cannot have a bearing on whether it is good or bad in artistic terms. Songs can be good or bad regardless of whether their words proclaim, suggest, or allude to political motifs. Also, it potentially perverts aesthetic judgement by making it "interested", in that people may consider a song better than it actually is because they feel in tune with the political "message". So, there is this assumption that a political song works like a "message bottle", such that the political aspect resides entirely in a "message" which is conceptually distinct from the "aesthetic container".

Our paradigm examples of political songs are *protest* songs. This is because *protest* is a paradigmatic form of political action: to protest is to represent a certain situation as condemnable and, at the same time, to bring about awareness of such condemnability together with an emotional response to it that potentially leads to action. The emotional element is important because empathy presupposes emotional response and is often itself a precondition to active engagement (Wolterstorff 2015: 203). While some protest songs are also songs *about* work, *work songs* often are not about the work they accompany, or at least not explicitly so, and seldom do they represent things in the way political protest does. However, I want to argue that there is a political dimension to work songs which is also fundamental to an understanding of political song in general.

Any human gesture can carry political meaning depending on the *context* in which it is performed and the intentions with which it is performed. However, intentions are not the

full story either. The meaning of gestures is ruled by conventions, of which one may or may not be aware of as conventional while performing the gestures or retrieving their meaning; the relevant intentions (those that are publicly recognizable and retrievable in a context by an appropriate audience) are constrained by conventions, which, in Stephen Davies' phrase, "have a tendency to take on a life of their own" (Davies 1991: 31). Partly in virtue of shared conventions, a gesture may convey more than its performer consciously intended to convey, which means that artists who create a work or adapt a previously existing work are not in full control of its artistic (public) meaning. This is merely to warn the reader that despite my talk of "intentions", my position is not "intentionalistic". In my jargon, "intentions" is shorthand for "conventionally constrained intentions of artists or performers, which are publicly recognizable and retrievable by an appropriately primed audience". Also, a proper conventional background is precisely the mechanism through which the relevant intentions will become visible or recognizable.[2] Conventions are the main constituent of the contexts in which any human gesture, and not just artworks, acquire their meaning. Intentions do not magically produce meaning apart from a social context, which is structured by conventions.

Let us take an example: to stand up and leave the room, for instance, can be a perfectly trivial action, or it can bear a special significance, depending on contextual factors. Such a gesture could *represent* the refusal to take part in something, it can amount to an act of dissidence and *express* opposition to what is taking place, as well as the stance that true dialogue has become impossible. When this is the case, such gestures are open to assessment in terms of how well-adjusted they are to the ends manifested in their performance. The criteria for such assessments will be of various sorts; sometimes (perhaps quite often) such criteria will include *aesthetic* ones. Imagine someone performing this same gesture in the context of a class where a lecturer is downplaying or rationalizing political persecution and oppression under a certain regime she sympathises with. Shouting in that situation would also express dissent, but it would also mirror the silencing (of victims) which is the object of the dissenter's protest; it would carry an inconsistency that may count as an aesthetic fault. Leaving the room is more *elegant* and perhaps more *eloquent* than shouting.

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[2] For instance, I can recognize a person's intention of hitchhiking by the fact that sticking out one's thumb by the side of the road has, precisely, a recognizable conventional meaning. The intention would not be visible, or only hardly so otherwise. And because the convention is in place, it can be "hijacked", in suitable contexts, to perform gestures with some further meaning. Artistic contexts are characterised by a particularly intense level of such "hijacking"; but this is only possible if conventions are in place to be "hijacked".

But now imagine the lecturer is objecting to the downplaying or rationalizing of political persecution and oppression in a certain regime and the dissenter is leaving because, as a sympathiser, she does not want to have her picture of the world tainted by uncomfortable facts—this is easy to imagine if the topic is, for instance, the *Gulag*. Now the significance of the gesture has changed in many ways. The situation for me is reminiscent of Danto's (1981: 1–2) thought experiments with "indiscernible duplicates": the "structurally identical" gestures are merely parts of ontologically more complex wholes, whose essential properties differ, despite these structural similarities. I would add, since I speak from a contextualist point of view, that their *aesthetic* properties may differ. If we take experience to be more than its perceptual components, then it is perfectly consistent to say that the experiences afforded by both things differ, even if in strictly perceptual terms the "mere real things" that function as "vehicles of embodied meaning" (in Danto's language) afford the same *perceptual* content: in both cases what we *see* is a person standing up and leaving the room, but what we *experience* are two quite different situations, involving distinct *gestures* (people *perform different actions* by enacting "structurally similar" physical movements). Also, two different gestures with similar *political motivation* can be quite different in their meaning and, plausibly, their aesthetic properties. By itself, the Irish song "Rocky Road to Dublin" may not sound "political" at all, but listen just to its tune performed as a medley right after "The Recruiting Sergeant" (which is about World War I), as The Pogues did in their 1988 album *If I Should Fall from Grace with God*, and it appears brimming with political significance.

Motivation and meaning are not to be confused here. But the most important consequence of this examination of gestures is that they acquire political significance by becoming, in some way, *representational*. A "raw", decontextualized gesture, seen merely as a sequence of physical movements endowed with certain "appearance properties" on the exclusive basis of which some "aesthetic properties" will supervene, cannot possibly have political significance.

So, if we take songs to be a form of contextualized human action, there will be much more to the appreciation of a political song than mere awareness of the political motivation with which it was putatively made. In each case, one is confronted with the assessment of how the means employed in making the song are adjusted to the ends, within a certain context. The ways in which a song may be "political" will mirror the profusion of ways in which any concrete human gesture can acquire political significance: it depends on how a particular gesture engages with the conventions in place in a given context. I now give three more examples of "political song", some more obviously so than the others. The different

ways in which they may be said to be "political" will become clearer as the article progresses.

A song like Ewan MacColl's "Dirty Old Town" (which many will know through a Pogues cover), for instance, provides one with a sensuous glimpse into *what it is like* to experience the world from the standpoint of someone growing up in an industrial town (the song emerged from MacColl's own relationship with his native town of Salford, in Greater Manchester). It is a morally tinged view of the world (especially in the final stanza) and yet it gives us no moral principles or rules, no moral arguments, no slogans, it does not *preach*. Its "content" is simply the piece of human experience it *shows* us, precisely in the *form* that it shows it. By the imaginative engagement with a song of this kind, one may become able to recognize aspects of human experience and even motivations for action where previously one saw or noticed nothing—*even* if one actually went through the experience of growing up in an industrial town.

Here is another example. Ewan MacColl wrote the song "Shoals of Herring" for the third episode in the BBC *Radio Ballads, Singing the Fishing*, aired in 1960 and devoted to the everyday life and problems of fishing communities of East Anglia and Northeast Scotland, based on 250 tapes of interviews, conversations with fishermen and their families. The song has known many covers and even became part of the lore in the "traveller" communities in Britain, with people sincerely believing they had heard that song all their lives, passed on from their elders (Moore & Vacca 2014: 33, 63). According to Liam Clancy,[3] MacColl "assembled" the words of the song from things actually said by the fishermen in those hundreds of tapes recorded for the radio documentary. So, when the song emerges amidst their voices in the documentary, it is still their voice, singing through this Scottish iron moulder's son from Salford. Upon learning this piece of information, the song seems to change. It even casts an interesting new light on the fact that it was assimilated as a genuine traditional song by those people who were in fact keeping genuine folk songs alive. And yet it is the same words, sung over the same pattern of chords.

The German song from the 1820s, "Ich hatt' einen Kameraden", based on an old Swiss folk tune, was used in many different historical contexts with the common feature of expressing lament for the death of a fellow soldier. It has since become part of the staple repertoire in German military music (especially as funeral music), having even been adopted in other countries for the same purpose. Given that we can hear this tune playing in Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 infamous propaganda-documentary film, *Triumph of the Will*, it could

[3] Talking to the audience right before his live rendition of the song at the Olympia Theatre, Dublin, 1992.

then come as a surprise to some that it was also a popular tune in the German Democratic Republic, but coupled with a different, longer text (though preserving crucial similarities)[4] and known as the "Hans Beimler Lied". This was about a German commissar who fought in the International Brigades for the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War and was killed during the Battle for Madrid, in 1936. The new text was written by Ernst Busch, a German actor and singer who fled Nazi Germany and eventually also joined the International Brigades in Spain. Busch recorded this song, among many other civil war songs, and his voice was broadcast in Republican Spain's radio stations during the war. After World War II, Busch became a revered figure in the GDR. The new version does not simply impose a new, alien meaning on previously existing material (which happens to be "at hand") by way of some "message" codified in the remade text. What we have here is something that builds on all those previous layers of meaning, shaping them to form a musical illustration of *what it is like* to see the world from a certain *perspective*. The song then gives us an insight into the kind of thoughts and feelings someone seeing the world through the lenses of a set of beliefs might find him or herself experiencing in such a circumstance—the perspective of many among those who joined the International Brigades, leaving their homes to risk their lives in a foreign civil war, and, in the specific case of the German volunteers, people who had already lost their own country and homes to fascism. Again, one does not need to share in any political doctrine to appreciate the unique insight provided by such songs.

3 Art and "perspectives": saying versus showing

This sort of insight is not theoretical or propositional, but *experiential*. One does not need to share in the beliefs to appreciate the insight, no more than one needs a set of religious beliefs in order to understand a remark given by Tom Waits in an interview, answering a question about his song "God's Away on Business": "It is just one of those things that you say in order to explain the way that you feel in metaphor, I guess. It feels sometimes, in the world, that God's away on business, and he's not coming back."[5] This is not about understanding a proposition and assessing it in terms of "truth conditions". It is knowledge

[4] Such as "Eine Kugel kam geflogen" ("a bullet came flying") in the second stanza, and the twist, on the final stanza, from the idea of eternal life to the idea that the fallen one lives on in the memory and efforts of those who sing the song.

[5] *We're all mad here: a conversation with Tom Waits*. June 13, 2002, Ambassador Hotel, Los Angeles.

of a different kind, more akin to *acquaintance*, as in the sentence "I have known destitution." or "She knows something about loss." If it was about propositional knowledge, then songs and artworks would be redundant, for such knowledge can be paraphrased indefinitely without loss of meaning. So, what I am calling "perspectives" coincides with what John Berger refers to as "ways of seeing" (Berger 1972). Paintings do not say things; they *show* us things. But in showing us things, they also impart a way of seeing them, of which we may be aware or not. This is particularly evident in film: consider the very same object or scene, filmed in either of the following ways: a) ascending crane shot, b) descending crane shot, c) dolly shot, d) high angle shot, e) low angle shot (to use just five examples). Depending on further contextual elements, each of these ways of showing the same scene or object will convey *something else* about what it shows. The object/scene will be shown as having different properties.[6] Form is meaningful by itself; form constrains representation.

Consider painting again. When we look at Peter Lely's portrait of Nell Gwyn, Charles Stewart II's lover, under the title *Venus and Cupid*, what it shows us is not simply a naked female body or even its beauty. It *embodies* a certain type of "gaze", a way of looking at the female body which determines it as "nude" (as opposed to "naked"), as an expression not of *her* desires and sexuality but of the *viewer's* desires and sexuality. It invites the viewer to "imaginatively identify" with a certain "evaluative outlook", to use Hilary Putnam's (2004: 69) phrase, a normative stance according to which men do the seeing, women are seen, and constantly envisaging themselves being seen by men (those men who would envy Charles upon seeing the painting). The picture does more than just presenting an object

[6] This is not meant in the merely prosaic sense of the object or scene's visual properties as seen from different angles. The organization of space in film is a *rhetorical* device. How objects are framed conveys something about them; physical distance and magnitude will denote or allude to quite distinct, though correlated, properties. For instance, in Victor Fleming's 1939 film *Gone with the Wind*, the ascending crane shot when Scarlett O'Hara leaves the Atlanta depot where she went in search of Dr. Meade, revealing the hundreds of wounded soldiers around her. This shot directly represents Scarlett's sudden awareness of the microscopic dimension of her personal and familiar problems amidst the drama unfolding around her. What we see on the screen is not just a bunch of objects and people in certain spatial relations to each other; what we see are representations of mental states unfolding. For a much more recent example: in Kirill Serebrennikov's 2018 *Leto*—which is a biographical sketch of 1980s rock/pop soviet singers Viktor Tsoi and Mike Naumenko, but also about the daily struggles and frustrations of soviet youth in the final moments of the Brezhnev era—there is an early shot of Mike, his girlfriend Natalia, and Viktor, at the beach, when they first meet. The way the shot is framed, with the characters forming a triangle, and Tsoi at a certain distance, the empty vastness of the sea as background, already conveys part of the upcoming tensions of the story. Examples like these could be adduced by the thousands, for they are *constitutive* of the medium of film.

to our gaze; it also *naturalizes* (and this is a political notion) the point of view from which the object is seen (namely, the *male gaze*, which is not simply the "natural" way of men seeing women, but a socially constructed evaluative stance, that requires "naturalization" or "second-nature-alization"), in a way that is not essentially different from how a socialist realist novel attempts to naturalize a certain view of society. Those typical examples of the nude in the tradition of oil painting are contrasted with "exceptional" works that undermine such a point of view, as is the case of Rembrandt's *Bathsheba*,[7] or Manet's *Olympia*.[8] So there is a *political* relation between these different artworks: in a world saturated with Lely-pictures, without subversive exceptions, not only the "male gaze" may go on, fully "naturalized" and unnoticed, but also the possibility of any other form of gaze might be obscured. Most importantly: it is *implausible* that the implied *contrast* between the ways of seeing embodied in such exceptional works and the ways of seeing embodied in works of the tradition more generally plays no role whatsoever in ascertaining the aesthetic value of such "exceptions". The exceptionality in these exceptions is foregrounded and amplified by the contrast; it is part of why we see them as exceptionally good.

The artworks do not *say* these things, they *show* us them, and by showing them to us, they take or fail to take over our imagination. By taking over our imagination, they play a crucial role in shaping the boundaries of our experience, determining what is or is not *visible* to us. Something like this idea is what underlies Oscar Wilde's provocative and counter-intuitive claim that it is to the impressionists that we owe "those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows" (Wilde 1905: 41), which prefigures Picasso's likewise provocative claim that, with time, Gertrude Stein would come to resemble his portrait of her.[9] This very same idea can be formulated in the terms of Putnam's case against the "fact-value dichotomy": take his argument that factual judgements depend on epistemic virtues and add the idea that at least some of those virtues are *also* aesthetic ones,[10] and there is your perfect footnote to Wilde and Picasso. Max Black's argument against substitution and simile theories of metaphor, to the effect that resemblances may be *created* by a metaphor, is also in the vicinity of these ideas. I shall go into that topic further ahead. It is precisely because

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[7] Louvre: MI 957.

[8] Musée d'Orsay: RF 644.

[9] Narrated in Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (Stein 1933: 14).

[10] Which Putnam himself did (2004: 68).

"life imitating art" is a *real* phenomenon that there is an important political dimension to art: artworks (can) *change* the way things *are* by making us *see* them in a different way. Representing the world, interpreting the world, changes it in many ways. In James Young's words: "When artists develop new modes of expression they make possible the thinking of new thoughts." (Young 2011: 133). But artists do not develop new modes of expression by intentional *fiat*; they are not necessarily fully or immediately *aware* of the impact their work may have on our "cognitive makeup".

Though songs have texts and text seems an appropriate medium to *say* things, I think the most interesting way a song may be said to be political is not in terms of what it *says* or tries to say to us, but in terms of what it *shows* us. Just as in paintings there might be a considerable difference between what is directly *depicted* and what is actually *shown*, so with songs there may be a considerable difference between what we imagine is the "message" codified in its text, and what the interactions of verbal and non-verbal sounds are actually *showing* us. In the words of Jeanette Bicknell (2014: 22-23), "Songwriting is a form of music writing, and the words of the song are part of its music." This is not to say that the text is not conceptually detachable from the rest of the song's components. It obviously is, since we can also detach non-pitched percussion sounds from the other "syntactic parts" of a song. That such sounds are part of the music does not mean they are not conceptually distinguishable from it. We can speak, for instance, of *the text of* a song, say, "Paddy on the Railway",[11] as just a sequence of words: "I was wearin' corduroy breeches, digging ditches, pulling switches, dodging hitches, I was working on the railway"; and we can think of the melody by itself: the repeated pattern of three Gs, E, D and back (assuming we are in G major). Yet something else is brought about *musically* when *those words* are coupled with the melody, or, better saying, when the melody is allowed to *emerge from* the words. By themselves, the notes are nothing much; hardly a melody even. In fact, part of the song's power lies in the contrast between these "joulting" patterns of the chorus with the more "lyrical", contemplative lines of the stanzas. But emerging from those words' inherent musical qualities you feel the

[11] "Paddy" is a vernacular form of referring to an Irishman. The song, like many of its genre, also alludes to emigration from Ireland to Britain and other parts of the world. A paradigmatic song of this kind is "The Tunnel Tigers", by Ewan MacColl, where each stanza refers to a county of Ireland (Wicklow, Longford, Galway (Connemara), Mayo, Carlow) and some specific beauty of it, then adding that the men from that county are away, "driving a tunnel through the London clay", and the chorus sets the same experience of measured time for all of them: "up with the shields and jack it! Ram it! Drive a tunnel through the London clay".

rhythms of…well, the railway; through imparting a certain experience of time measured by the kind of actions repeatedly evoked in the chorus. When performing this song with The Dubliners at the Gaiety Theatre, Dublin, in 1980, Luke Kelly arrives at the final stanza, "In 1847, poor Paddy was thinking of going to heaven (repeat); to work upon the railway…" and instead of repeating "the railway" suddenly changes the verse ending to "the Milky Way", the effect is such that it could not be achieved merely with the word sequence: the "cosmic reach" of the "I am weary of the railway" that follows. Only sung words, musical words could achieve that effect. Words having musical qualities is part of what it means to say they *show* more than they *say*.

To clarify all of this, I shall resort to a few concepts introduced by philosophers of art, combining them to suit my purposes. For instance, James Young (2001: 26) contrasts "semantic representation" (encoding propositions or "conveying thoughts") with "illustrative representation" (making us see things under a certain perspective). Like Young, I associate these two forms of representation, respectively, with the contrasting notions of "saying things" and "showing things". Here a caveat is required: sometimes philosophers will speak of artworks as "saying something" (or even as "statements") in a less strict sense than I am using that term here. In this looser sense, saying and showing are not clearly distinct. Such is the case, I believe, with Levinson's essay about "messages" in art (1995: 186–7). There is nothing wrong with doing so, as long as we keep the finer distinctions in mind. It is much less confusing to speak of "saying" versus "showing" than to speak of different forms of "saying".

If songs represent, in an *artistically interesting way*, then they represent illustratively, even if they are also made of words and these words also happen to "say things". The other concept I want to enlist here is that of *medium-opacity* as opposed to *medium-transparency*, deployed by Jerrold Levinson (2005) with the quite different aim of setting forth a distinction between erotic art and pornographic images. For my purposes, it does not matter whether or not his defence of such a distinction can be successfully drawn on the basis of medium opacity. Whatever the case, medium opacity is a salient characteristic (though not defining) of those illustrative representations which are also *artistic*.[12] Representations *always* occur in some medium. If a representation is medium-transparent, then the aim is to focus as least

[12] A token of medium-transparent illustrative representation would be Young's own example of the drawing of a wombat in an encyclopaedia article (2001: 36). While some botanical or zoological illustrations are artistically interesting (e.g. John James Audubon's *Birds of America*), the typical purpose of such illustrations is to make us think about their *denotata*, not about draughtperson's choices regarding the medium.

attention as possible on the medium itself, or better yet, on how *meaning* is articulated through that specific medium. Semantic representation aims at medium-transparency: what matters is that you get the proposition, the thought being communicated. But the purpose of, say, Paul Nash's 1918 painting *We Are Making a New World*,[13] is not to convey a thought in this way; a thought that might be variously paraphrased without loss. Nash's painting is trying to make you see the world a certain way, and, in the process, make you notice something you might otherwise miss. No doubt it has something to do with the desolation brought about by the World War of 1914–18, but its purpose is surely not to have you form the proposition "war is a nasty business", paraphrasable by "war is terrible", and so on. To make a painting or a song for that end would be to employ excessive means considering the aims. This is what makes Nash's representation "artistically interesting", while the mere assertion that "war is a nasty business" is not. Of course, sometimes art is made with such purposes in mind, to convey "messages" in that way. But that is precisely the art we tend to see as preachy, boring, "didactic", flat. Typically, *propaganda art* is that way, though it is not *necessarily* so. Propaganda can be more or less sophisticated, more or less successful in *concealing* its nature as propaganda. Often the meaning of a painting or song will not even be entirely clear to the person making it; the audience may become aware of meaningful features of the work to which the author remained oblivious. This sort of meaning requires a developing, long-term experience of the work, for both audience *and* maker. This is what it means to say that "embodied meaning" must be understood *experientially*.

All this allows us to see that there is a specific kind of representation in which "content" is the *same* as the articulation of the medium, that is, in which "form" and "content" coincide (which in turn *explains* medium-opacity: form is *also* content; form *shapes* meaning and is always given in *some* medium), but *not* by bracketing off connections with the world or the rest of human experience, as formalists typically conceive formal value in art. This kind of representation shows us things under a certain perspective or puts us in the position of noticing aspects of the world or human experience we might otherwise fail to take notice of. It is the kind of representation Young sees at the heart of art practice, and even if we cannot use it to concoct a definition of art (as Young does not), it is surely a powerful notion to explain the kind of value most art bears for us, and also a powerful model to understand the appeal of songs as representational forms. Connecting all these concepts as we did, affords us an integrated picture of the value of representation in the arts: formal aesthetic

[13] Imperial War Museum, Catalogue number: Art.IWM ART 1146.

properties are a *part* of "embodied meaning": an alliterative word sequence with a percussive effect (see my previous remarks on the song "Paddy on the Railway") may "show" something quite different than the same word sequence uttered in a mild, toned-down effect. But what exactly are "formal aesthetic properties"? If one parses through virtually any piece of recent writing in aesthetics, one will find a *tacit* agreement that such formal properties coincide with "appearance properties". This is a point that even many contextualists will share with many a formalist. However, I think, contextualists should examine this tacit assumption, and the one true exception that I know of in this regard is Noël Carroll (2016), in his conception of appreciation as a "sizing up" between means and purposes, which underlies his own notion of what counts as "formal" in art. Carroll's revolutionary proposal is that we consider the "form" of an artwork as "its ensemble of artistic choices" (2016: 14). If this proposal is solid, its implications are profound, and it would be the first conception of "form" that I know of to do justice to George Dickie's (1964) powerful criticisms of "aesthetic attitude" theories, in the sense that it gives us a "heuristic" for art appreciation that effectively abolishes the "phantom" notion of a specifically "aesthetic" mode of engagement with a special class of artifacts unified by this other "phantom" which is "the concept of art". In other words, it abolishes the idea that "aesthetic appreciation" pertains exclusively to a special class of artifacts that are "functionally queer", in being autonomous or *autotelic*. Rather, we appreciate aesthetically any product of human "skilful practice" (*techne*, *ars*), applying different criteria, adjusted to the nature of the practice, to the aims and choices involved in bringing about a certain outcome. Indeed, Carroll is the first contextualist in contemporary aesthetics (that I know of) to seriously (or at least *explicitly*) question the most crucial idea which both formalists and contextualists, despite all their quarrels, commonly share in a tacit manner: the idea of "formal property" as "surface appearance". Here is Carroll drawing a corollary of all his reflection:

> For most of history, across cultures, what we call "art" has been given its marching orders—its points and purposes—from precincts other than insular art worlds. Thus, it seems natural to appreciate artworks on their own terms, terms that, in the vast majority of cases, are heteronomous. Furthermore, inasmuch as—and to the degree that—art is heteronomous, art is on a continuum with our common life and does not call some allegedly altogether special form of appreciation, such as the affordance of experiences valued in some putative intrinsically unique way. (2016: 11)

One important consequence follows for our topic: MacColl's choice of using words uttered by the fishermen in the tapes for the radio documentary is part of the ensemble of

artistic choices that make up the *form* of the song; it is a *bona fide* formal property of it, to be assessed in terms of how well it serves its *aim*, which concerns the meaning "embodied" in the song, no *less* than configurations of lines and colours are constituents of "significant form", in the vocabulary of Clive Bell (1914). Furthermore, we can talk of such configurations of representational/non-perceptual components using the same vocabulary that Sibley (1959) specified has "aesthetic"—those concepts in the language we employ aesthetically (in a "negatively condition-governed" way that requires "taste"). In fact, the difference between "significant form" and "embodied meaning" is merely the formalist bar on representational/non-perceptual properties as genuinely formal and *thus* aesthetic. But this bar stands on unstable ground. And guess what: this particular artistic choice of MacColl's, of putting the fishermen's voices directly in the song, is *political* through and through.

The contextualist, on the other hand, has no problem with the idea that formal properties *in the formalist's strict sense* play a role in "meaning"—that is precisely why such meaning is "embodied" meaning, in plain contrast with the idea of an "encoded proposition" (the "bottled message"). For Clive Bell too there is, in rigour, no contrast between a "form" and a "content" in art: "significant form" is the sum of those interrelations of "syntactic components"[14] (lines, colours, masses, volumes, etc.), i.e., the *whole object* is "significant form", or rather, "significant form" is a subset of the object's properties in precisely the sense in which any set is a subset of itself. The really crucial difference is that someone adopting Carroll's "heuristic" thinks of the experience of art in terms that do not restrict such experience to a supposedly "aesthetic core" which is *perceptual*, i.e., because she considers (to return to one of our early examples) the several instances of a student leaving the room in *experiential* and not simply perceptual terms, she has the resources to take into account the difference between all those situations (in our Dantoesque thought-experiment) in which someone stands up and leaves the room. If our *experience* of "Shoals of Herring" is affected by *this* "artistic choice" of MacColl, why should it *matter* that it is not strictly perceptual? Neither are the differences between all the instances of someone leaving the room. And how different they are! Of course, a consequence of this is that the aesthetic appreciation of a song will not differ *essentially* from the aesthetic appreciation of the student's gesture. But anyone who is comfortable with Dickie's criticisms of aesthetic attitude theories should not

[14] "Syntactic components" is not Bell's term but mine, after Kulvicki. This will be fleshed out further ahead in the article.

be disturbed by this. Art is *continuous* with life. So what? This is how revolutionary Carroll's "heuristic" is: it cuts deep both metaphysically and epistemologically. The whole of human experience has "aesthetic" components. There is no separate special realm of "the aesthetic" made up of a special subset of "surface appearance properties" onto which we direct a special "aesthetic mode" of attention. This is no more strange than the fact that in doing philosophy we employ *the very same* cognitive resources we employ to solve everyday problems, without the intervention of an especially philosophical, out-of-the-ordinary *intuitus mentis*.

4 Representations, dense and replete

The political character of a song depends on its representational properties, precisely in the same way that the protesting gesture of the student does. The way we usually think about this is in terms of *semantic* representation: the political song will convey a *message*, which is independent of its aesthetic qualities as a song—e.g., any two songs praising or rebuking a political regime or doctrine will coincide politically, however they differ aesthetically. This probably explains why the connection with politics tends to be ignored in the bulk of analytical literature: because semantic representation is taken as the *paradigm* of representation for the arts. But if we take Youngian *illustrative* representation as a model instead, the picture changes dramatically, for a salient characteristic of such representations is that *form changes content* and so different things might be shown, in different ways, even if what we take to be the "message", in propositional terms, is unchanged. A song may be political for the particular *way* in which it *shows* us some aspect of human experience which is also political in nature, quite independently from the truth or falseness of the beliefs making up a particular worldview.

It has become common wisdom in the philosophy of music to distinguish representation from *expression*. So, a piece of music could be *expressive* of some emotion, say, longing, sadness, and tenderness—e.g., Goran Bregović's "Lullaby" for the film soundtrack of Patrice Chéreau's *La Reine Margot*—, without representing such emotional states. I see this distinction between representation and expression as another consequence of taking semantic representation as a model for all representation. I concur with Young, that "talk of representation in music is a more precise way of capturing what people mean when they say that music is expressive. That is, to say that a composition expresses an emotion is an unsatisfactory way of saying that it represents an emotion." (Young 2001: 53) It seems to me that the main motivation to pull apart representation and "expressiveness" in music are qualms about the "indefinite" character of the purported "musical representation", which is then opposed to the model of

representation most philosophers of art have great difficulty in shaking off their shoulders, namely, the model of "semantic representation" in language: you cannot "encode" thoughts in musical phrases, the way it *seems* a picture can "encode thoughts" about its subject ("Here is a woman, she has a nose, an enigmatic smile, she looks straight at the viewer, etc."). But we need only delve timidly into the philosophy of depiction to see this seemingly intuitive objection is groundless. For instance, John Kulvicki argues that all pictures have "bare bones content" which is then cashed out or determined, in a context, as a specific *pictorial content*; but "in itself" bare bones content is compatible with a range of quite diverse pictorial contents.

> A bare bones content might specify a trapezoid-shaped region, from a certain vantage point, but not specify that there's a square thing there, at an oblique angle, or a trapezoid, seen head-on. It might specify a region of streaked light and dark, but not specify whether it is a uniformly colored thing illuminated streakily or a streaky thing illuminated uniformly. (Kulvicki 2020: 27)

Pictorial content is *always* determined contextually, just like the meaning of indexical terms in language. This mechanism is further iterated in phenomena such as "pictorial metaphor". Kulvicki argues that a similar mechanism to what Kaplan describes for demonstratives in the case of language is at work across the board when it comes to generating pictorial meaning. I cannot go into it here, but it suffices to say that unless views such as Kulvicki's are obviously flawed (which is not obvious at all), arguments from "indefiniteness" against musical representation cannot invoke pictorial representation as a defeating example—as, for instance, Scruton (1997: 122–3) does, when contrasting painting with music.

Kulvicki also sets out his argument with a Dantoesque thought experiment (2020: 22–5): imagine three indiscernible photographs which you would, in the absence of titles or captions, identify as pictures of the same chair. Now, one of them is a photograph of a chair, the other is a photograph of the first photograph, and the third is a photograph of a *papier-mâché* mess arranged to look exactly like a chair, as in an Ames illusion.[15] We have three completely different pictorial contents and the same "bare bones content". Only contextually can a full-blown pictorial content be determined. In most everyday contexts, all those photographs are taken to have the same pictorial content, but different contexts can make other pictorial contents more salient. In art books, we know we are dealing with

[15] After Adelbert Ames (1880–1955) and his experiments on visual perception and illusions.

photographs of paintings, not with paintings, and we do not need to be told this. What distinguishes art contexts, for Kulvicki, is that "art contexts demand full deployment of one's interpretive faculties, and so uncommon openness to alternatives." (2020: 24) This is another and perhaps even clearer way of explaining medium opacity.

To see this, let us now turn to a pervasive phenomenon in language which is wider than the domain of art, but provides us with a useful model to think about illustrative representation and, consequently, artistic representation: metaphor. I am not implying that all songs are in some sense metaphors or that all artworks are metaphorical, though. I am saying that metaphors are a good model to think about the kind of representation involved in the arts. Metaphors say things, but what they show us is not reducible to what they say: often what they say is either false or trivially true ("Man is a wolf"; "No man is an island"; etc). We learn things from (good) metaphors, or we gain understanding from them, and so they *must* be representations of some sort. If we were to take seriously the claim that metaphors have no "cognitive content", then we would also have to accept that "metaphors have no cognitive content" has no cognitive content, since "cognitive content" is a metaphorical expression (thoughts and sentences are not *literally* containers). In this sense, metaphors, as representations, share interesting properties with pictures. Namely, to use Goodman's (1976: 136, 153, 230) terminology, they are *dense* and *replete*.

As applied to pictures, density and repleteness mean that pictures: a) have an indefinite number of syntactic parts, i.e., between any two there can be a third (syntactic density), b) each of which corresponds to an indefinite number of "compliants" or *denotata* (semantic density), and c) any slight variation in a picture's properties (thickness of line, colour hue, etc) is relevant for its interpretation (relative repleteness). How does this apply to metaphors and illustrative representations in general? A typical verbal representation is syntactically articulate and semantically dense (it lies midway between notational and pictorial systems): although between any two words there is no further one (words are *discrete* elements), any word may have different meanings (polysemy and ambiguity). But if illustrative representations are dense and replete, and illustrations can be made with any elements, including verbal ones, as in metaphor, how are we to make sense of it in a way that preserves the distinction between semantic and illustrative representation? To do this, we shall have to make use of Kulvicki's notion of *syntactic parts* and resort to a few concepts from the debate about meaning in metaphors. Doing so will allow us to see that the properties Goodman ascribed specifically to pictorial systems (density and repleteness) actually delineate a more general form of representation: illustrations in Young's sense; and these include pictures, three-dimensional plastic compositions, music, literary fiction and

poetry.

One should note here that in the sixth chapter of his book, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, namely, "Works of art and mere representations", Danto remarks on Goodman's use of "repleteness". He argues that no distinction between a representational artwork and a representation which is not an artwork can be made in terms of repleteness and attenuation (Danto 1981: 141), by invoking Lichtenstein's 1962 *Portrait of Madame Cézanne*, which famously appropriated a diagram of Cézanne's painting of his wife, made by Erle Loran for his 1943 book, *Cézanne's Composition: Analysis of His Form with Diagrams and Photographs of His Motifs*. Danto's point is that the two representations are not distinguished by diagrams' lack of "repleteness", since both objects share the same structure (despite irrelevant physical differences that could well be reversed: Lichtenstein's work is painted on canvas whereas Loran's diagram is printed on paper and is much smaller, etc.). The crucial difference, for Danto, is that "the artwork uses the way the non-artwork presents its content to make a point about how that content is presented." (Danto 1981: 146) The "diagrammatic" way of presenting content is a *rhetorical device* in the case of the artistic representation appropriating a diagram, but *not* in the case of the diagram itself. The diagram is about that specific painting of Cézanne; Lichtenstein's work is "about the way Cézanne painted his wife: it is *about* the wife, as seen by Cézanne." (Danto 1981: 142) So, while the diagram could get wrong all the painting's features in terms of variations in direction and proportion without affecting the *point* of Lichtenstein's work, the same would not be so for Loran's purposes: "Loran does not use the idiom of diagrams; he simply uses diagrams (which happen, since they are diagrams, to be in that idiom). Whatever Lichtenstein is doing, he is not diagramming." (Danto 1981: 147) Danto adds that, as a part of Lichtenstein's work, the diagram becomes a *metaphor* for whatever it shows, in virtue of "the connotations diagrams themselves have in our culture." (Danto 1981: 148) That is, the Lichtenstein is not actually a diagram; the diagram "diagrams" (it is what it does, it presents things diagrammatically), while *Portrait of Madame Cézanne* does not. The diagram is not about the "diagrammatic way of seeing"; the painting (among other things) is. Another way of putting this, in Danto's terms, is that the painting has a diagrammatical *style*, while the diagram has no style at all.

What can we say here? Well, for one, that density and repleteness may be characteristic of illustrative representations without distinguishing them as *artistic*. After all, not even Young uses the concept of illustrative representation to define art. Artistic illustrations will be characteristically *medium-opaque* in a way that is precisely congenial to Danto's analysis: to understand the Lichtenstein, we must focus our attention on how the "diagrammatic

way of seeing" is made part of a further *perspective* evinced in the painting contextually. The diagram is, in this sense, as *transparent* as Leonardo's glass pane; it requires no such thing from us. So, is the Lichtenstein just as "replete" as the Loran, as Danto seems to suggest? The "swordsweep" brushstrokes of Hiroshige (in Goodman's example) are only more "relatively replete" than the lines in the electrocardiogram because of what it *matters* in that specific context, which is partly constituted by the "artistic categories" (Walton: 1970) under which we perceive the brushstrokes as brushstrokes. In other contexts, (non-artistic) categories determine whether a paint chip is a *sample* in a colour chart or just rubbish peeled off a wall. In the end it is a matter of syntax: identical inscriptions play different syntactic roles in different contexts, so, in a sense, the Lichtenstein *is* syntactically more complex than the Loran, and this suggests that thinking in terms of syntax (how Goodmanian!) is an adequate way of conceptually clarifying illustrative representation, *pace* Danto's difficulties with the notion. Everything Danto says about *style* and *expressing a point of view* is correct (all that I have been saying from the start points in that direction), but I would say that the Lichtenstein and the Loran differ in terms of *content*, precisely because of the role played by *form*; and by "form" I have been referring to an ensemble of parts-to-whole relations whose structure I am calling "syntactic".

In Kulvicki's terms, a picture's syntactic parts differ from the syntactic parts of language in not being separable and not having any assigned roles determined by a convention, independently of context (Kulvicki 2020: 17). Depending on the context, a set of a picture's components may perform the role of "subject", while in a different context, the same components play a different role. This is "syntax with no grammar" (Kulvicki 2020: 39). What makes a part of a picture "syntactic" is that it plays a role in constituting what a picture, as a whole, means, what it represents. There is no predetermined way of dividing a picture into its syntactic parts, and no particular way of doing so is exhaustive. This is another way of formulating syntactic density. In using Kulvicki's notion of syntactic parts to think about illustrative representation, I deviate from Young's way of explaining it, which is more akin to Wollheim's notion of *seeing-in*: illustrative representations depend on *resemblances between our experiences* of the representation and of the things represented (Young 2001: 28). But the two ways of framing the issue are not mutually exclusive.

It is interesting that Danto sees the Lichtenstein as a *metaphor* for whatever it shows, since I consider metaphor as a "paradigm case" of illustrative representation, in the next section. Part of this section's aim is precisely to show how thinking in terms of "syntax" helps us to dispel some of the mist around the notion of metaphor, a mist which is no thinner than the one Danto claims to encircle the notion of repleteness.

5 An interactive model

The suggestion I am about to make may seem strange. It may not work as a mechanism to explain illustrative representation across the board, but I think it stands a chance of throwing some light on the subject, and, at the very least, it can be a useful suggestion of the *kind* of model we need to unify all the different insights in this paper. What I want to do is: a) to take linguistic metaphors as a paradigm case of illustrative representation using words,[16] b) to take Max Black's "interactive theory" of metaphor, and pull out its mechanism of "frame" and "focus", freeing it from a strict association with *words*, c) to combine that mechanism with the idea of "syntactic parts" just sketched and apply it to illustrative representation in general, not entirely unlike what Kulvicki does with *dthat* and pictures.

Some will perhaps remember the old-time debate on whether or not there is a "metaphorical meaning" alongside the literal meaning of the words in a metaphor. According to Black (1954–5: 275), not all words in a metaphor are used metaphorically. There is a structure in metaphor: in "life is a journey", the word "life" is being used literally while "journey" is not. The utterer does not mean that living and taking a trip to the Balkans are the same sort of thing. The literal part of the sentence forms the "frame" of the metaphor, while "journey" is the metaphorical "focus". The *meaning* of the metaphor is then given by the "interaction" of frame and focus, or, more precisely, by the interaction between the "systems of associated commonplaces" of both frame and focus. Black described how a metaphor works in the following, delightfully metaphorical manner:

> Suppose I look at the night sky through a piece of heavily smoked glass on which certain lines have been left clear. Then I shall see only the stars that can be made to lie on the lines previously prepared upon the screen, and the stars I do see will be seen as organised by the screen's structure. We can think of a metaphor as such a screen, and the system of 'associated commonplaces' of the focal word as the network of lines upon the screen. (Black 1954–5: 288)

What this suggests is that in a metaphor (or at least in a good metaphor), our understanding

[16] Kulvicki (2020: 99-117) argues for the existence of pictorial metaphors. I am favorable to his view, as well as to Peacocke's (2009: 257-260) contention that not only metaphor is not restricted to language, it also enters perception; but I will not be discussing that topic here.

of the world is *organized* in a certain way, we are given a *perspective* on things. Metaphors shape our understanding, by making us see a certain thing through the "system of associated commonplaces" we share for some other thing (the set of properties we know or *believe* that thing to have). As it happens, the system of associated commonplaces is open-ended, and so there is no predetermined limit on how a metaphor may illuminate or assist us in understanding something. That is why no paraphrase of a metaphor can exhaust what the metaphor *shows* us, what it *makes us see* or notice. For instance, when we say that "life is a journey", we are using a set of properties we associate with the things denoted by the "focal word" ("journey") so as to bring out, to evince properties of things denoted by the "frame" ("life"). In this view, metaphor is not simply an elliptical formulation for a literal statement of similarity between objects in the domain of the "focus" and objects in the domain of the "frame". Sometimes, as Black admits (284–5), similarities may be *created* by a metaphor, in much the same way, I venture, Wilde claimed fogs in London to have been created by the impressionists: nobody would notice the resemblance if not for the change of perspective worked by the metaphor. This is what Black sees as a new meaning being created by the *interaction* of different thoughts within the metaphor: thoughts about the focus and thoughts about the frame (285–6). I find it interesting that Davidson (1978: 33, 46), a philosopher who rejects the notion of "metaphorical meaning", finds no objection to adopting this way of describing what goes on when a metaphor makes us notice something (just do not call it "meaning"), i.e., no objection to the "interaction" of thoughts in explaining the *effects* of metaphor. Perhaps the whole dispute about the appropriateness of "meaning" here is yet another consequence of taking semantic representation as the paradigm. Because Davidson has his eyes fixed on *semantic* meaning, while ignoring or dismissing the phenomenon of *illustrative* meaning, he prefers to talk about "bumps on the head" to describe how metaphors work. But the most important, the mechanism of conceptual interaction involved, is shared by both theorists of metaphor.

I think the same sort of deadlock prevents the musical formalist from accepting the aesthetic relevance of the fact that the percussive sounds in the work songs recorded by Lomax are produced by tools in conditions of forced labour. The same thing promotes the view of songs as hybrids of text and music, instead of seeing the words as an *integral part of the music*, that is, as "syntactic elements" of a single whole, which is an illustrative representation involving verbal and non-verbal components. The concept of illustrative representation allows us to see both representational and contextual components as rightful elements of "aesthetic form": there is no "content" which is separable from "form" in illustrations. Form is meaningful, significant, but not to the exclusion of representational "content". To

organize *meaningful units* in a certain fashion to generate *further* meaning is not essentially different from organizing lines and colours in a certain fashion. The ways in which any elements, perceptual or contextual, are organized toward a set of aims in a work are the true formal aspects of that work, following Carroll.

The "interactive" mechanism described by Black applies to words and their conventional meanings. What I have suggested here is that metaphors provide us with a model of how illustrative representations, which are dense and replete throughout, can be made with words, not just with pictures. Such representations with words are dense and replete: the words in the sentence do not exhaust the metaphor's "syntactic parts". Between any two "associated commonplaces" relevant to the metaphor's interpretation there can always be a third, and how we choose to divide them is a matter of "abstracting over detail", just as it happens with Kulvicki on the syntactic parts of images. There are no rules to make some associations drop and others stick; we must decide based on context, in a "creative" manner. Furthermore, a metaphor used in certain forms of representation may also be affected by formal aspects of typography—which also makes them replete. As Black points out: "recognition and interpretation of a metaphor may require attention to the particular circumstances of its utterance." (1954–5: 277)—as with his example of Churchill's "utensil" metaphor for Mussolini (*ibid*). As Davidson says (1987: 31): "a metaphor implies a kind and degree of artistic success" and "understanding a metaphor is as much a creative endeavour as making a metaphor, and as little guided by rules."

Words too can function pictorially, or partly so. Whereas writing "Vallecas is a neighbourhood of Madrid" in Helvetica rather than in any other typeface makes no difference for what it says, the same thing is not true if the words occur in a calligram, a collage, a concrete poem, or even a painting. As a part of such representations, words are still words (the "atomic elements" of semantic representation) but they are also more, and they *do* more than just referring to objects or expressing propositions. In those contexts, the words are *pictorial elements* and their formal properties (like typeface) matter, for they contribute to the overall meaning, just like the way a word is uttered may determine that the speaker is being ironic: she says something, but she means something else; she is showing more than what she says. The same kind of formal properties make it possible that even *instrumental*

music can be ironic, as is the case, for instance, with Mozart's *Musikalischer Spaß* (K. 522).[17] One recognizes the irony because *the irony is there*, pace the hard-line musical formalist. It is only a "mystery" if we keep looking at semantic representation as the paradigm of all representation. But more importantly: as parts of a calligram, collage, concrete poem, painting, etc., words are pictorial elements for more than just the typeface in which they are set and its formal properties; their conventional semantic meanings too are part of the picture; they inflect, change, shape the overall pictorial content. They change our experience of the picture. They are *part of the picture* just as words in song are *part of the music* (as Bicknell defends). Or perhaps we should say that they are part of a representation whose elements are more than just pictorial—iconography works precisely like this, even without the use of words.

In fact, Young holds that instrumental music too is capable of illustration: it *directly* represents types of movement and *indirectly* represents other things we associate with those movements. So, all the formal features of sounds in Bregović's *Lullaby* that arouse (but not encode) thoughts of longing, sadness, and tenderness function in a similar manner to the "system of associated commonplaces" in Black's "interactive model"—we do have commonplace associations between musical texture, dynamics, agogic, kinetic impressions, tempo, rhythm, etc. and psychological states and subjective experiences. These are not fixed by convention or rules but acquire relative salience and different roles according to *context*. Those associations will in turn function as a screen through which the types of movement directly represented will be heard. It is not my aim to provide a theory of representation in purely instrumental music, but it is not far-fetched, based on this "model", to imagine how verbal elements in song, or even cues such as titles in instrumental music, may function as the "focus" in relation to a non-verbal "frame". The same sort of devices will be crucial in pictorial representation, if we are to "determine" (in Kulvicki's terms), from a certain "bare bones content", in a context, one of several possible *pictorial* contents. Even if instrumental music cannot represent *directly* more than *types* of movement, that can be shared by a huge variety of things, events and even dynamic aspects of emotional experiences, our use of "syntactic parts" talk sheds light on Young's idea of *indirect* musical representation, for now we can think of the movement represented directly by music precisely in the same way

[17] A piece in which Mozart parodies clumsy and common-place techniques of composition. It is a mockery of bad music, which is quite different from the direct experience of bad music. And we do get Mozart's point without need of a guide or program.

that Kulvicki thinks of bare bones content in pictures. Conversely, the frame-and-focus mechanism can be usefully applied to pictures. Think of a photograph. How a photograph is framed, how elements are included in the picture, define a possible (dense) set of relations between its components. But some elements in the photograph, some of its syntactic parts, will stand out as playing a "special" role. They will organize our experience of the picture as a whole. This can be made with words, sounds, lines and colours, plastic arrangements of any material, *or combinations of all these elements*.

So, applying Black's interactive model to relations between the "syntactic parts" (also in Kulvicki's sense) of a song is not more far-fetched than Kulvicki's own use of Kaplan's machinery for demonstratives to explain pictorial representation. But for now, I want merely to point out the analogies with Black's model: the "associated commonplaces" that play such an important role in the mechanics of metaphor are not part of the conventional (semantic) meaning of words; they are *contextual* features of communication. So, anyone who is not committed to the idea that metaphors do not represent at all should not be especially hostile to the hypothesis that instrumental music is capable of representation, or that the set of non-verbal sounds in music may play a genuinely representational role in virtue of how they relate to verbal components and *their* "systems of associated commonplaces". Going back to our early example with the "Hans Beimler Lied", we shall say that the Ernst Busch text, but also perhaps the changed instrumentals, introduce a new "focus" interacting with a "frame" which comprises all the previous "layers of meaning" that accrue from the song's history. The same may be said about MacColl's choice to use the very words of fishermen in "Shoals of Herring", making that aspect of composition into a "syntactic element" of the representation embodied in the song. We can describe the way it changes our experience of the song by seeing this very aspect as a syntactic component acting as a "focus" in Black's sense. At any rate, a mechanism of interaction between "frame" and "focus", allows for more sophistication in the range of things illustrated than the mere detection of "raw resemblances" between musical movement and, say, emotional behaviour, as is usually appealed to by resemblance theorists of musical "expression".

6 Conclusion

After such a dizzying ride, let us take stock. Returning to the simplest questions with which we began: a) What makes a song political? b) How is this political meaning aesthetically embodied in its form?

Concerning the first question, I tried to show that the class of "political songs" (and

even artworks more generally) is wider than the usual identification of such songs with "activist" ones (ditto for artworks generally), but also more restricted than some would have it—e.g. a song being political just because it is a social product. To show why, I resorted to a discussion of "form" versus "content", against the idea that to identify form and content is an exclusive prerogative of the formalist. Form is contentful, form is meaningful. I appealed to the work of several philosophers on the subject to argue that art, and folk songs in particular, at its most powerful, articulates human experience. Human experience is the medium of folk songs, not simply sounds or words; a folk song represents human experience as organized in a particular, meaningful form. Human experience is structured politically; this is one of the basic dimensions of human experience: the experience of injustice and the craving for a more just world, the experience of being downtrodden, of despairing, being overwhelmed by lack of reason and compassion, of overcoming prejudice, of striving against the homogenization of culture, of acting with the aim of imparting meaningful forms to everyday life, quite beyond the stricter realm of power struggles, *Realpolitik*, and political regimes, though these play a part in the story as well. Formal innovation in the arts draws on human experience: conflict, resistance, suffering, joy, hope, despair, longing, outrage, elation, and so on, are all entwined with the political dimension of human experience. If sensory pleasure was the whole story about "form", formal experimentation would soon become a game of repetition, stale, trite, lifeless. From Beethoven's bursting of the sonata-form[18] to Bomberg's "muscular abstractionism",[19] the "life of forms" in art is the anthropomorphic expression of life itself,[20] or, to pick up a phrase of Steven Davies' (2012: 548), music is "the

[18] Namely, in the development section of the first movement of the *Eroica* symphony, Beethoven introduces an extra theme, which was unheard of. Thanks to Nemesio Puy for pointing out this example in a conversation.

[19] See his 1914 painting, *The Mud Bath*.

[20] See Zemach (1997: 105) on the "anthropomorphic ways of perceiving form" as essential to art.

bodying forth of sound through human action".[21]

However, one might still be wondering how *work songs*, which make up a good deal of the "case studies" I have brought to the fore, are political. I believe the answer to that question also answers our second question above. Work songs are not political simply because they are work songs and "work" is a political topic; not all work songs are equally political. To understand this we must grasp how work songs can become a vehicle of protest in terms of their artistic form; and also how protest can become a form of sung work, in Wolterstorff's phrase. So, I want to finish by returning to our departure point, my very first example: the prisoners' work song recorded by Lomax at Parchman Farm in the late 1940s. I started this article by claiming that a mode of listening which abstracted from the fact that the percussive sounds in Lomax's recording of "Rosie" are produced by the tools of prisoners under forced labour would remove an aesthetically important "layer of meaning". I also claimed that work songs, while differing from our paradigmatic examples of political song, namely, social protest songs, have a political dimension that is important to grasp if we are to understand the variety of ways in which songs may be said to be "political". To explain this, I must quote from Wolterstorff's analysis of work songs:

> Singing while working is a manifestation of human creativity; the gratuitous excess represented by sung work is a creative excess. In situations of labor under duress, this creative excess is the manifestation of a spirit that refuses to be crushed—a spirit that refuses to be reduced to a mere hoer of cotton or splitter of rocks. By singing, the worker manifests an indomitable sense of his or her ineradicable dignity. (…) Speaking of some

[21] Though I am not willing to endorse the sort of unrestricted view that would end up describing the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth as a sonic manifestation of "the throttling murderous rage of a rapist incapable of attaining release" (Susan McClary, quoted in Pieter van den Toorn (1996: 29) - this text was later substantially rephrased and I could not access the original except indirectly). That Beethoven's experience with the political events of his time has something to do with his formal innovations in music is one thing; but from a certain point on I recall the great Leonard Bernstein when, in one of his Young People's Concerts, aired by CBS on January 18, 1958, devoted to the topic "What does music mean?", showed how one could use the dynamic and agogic aspects of Richard Strauss's *Don Quixote* to portray virtually any story one would care to make up, as Bernstein does on the spot, so to say. The script of that episode can be read here: https://leonardbernstein.com/lectures/television-scripts/young-peoples-concerts/what-does-music-mean (last accessed on September 26, 2022). Here I agree with Nick Zangwill (2015: 127) in that not all descriptions of music are to be taken equally seriously: "There is nothing Russian about Russian music *besides* the fact that it is usually made in Russia or by Russian people, or the fact that it sounds like other Russian music." (my italics)

> work songs from the country of Georgia, [Ted] Gioia remarks that their spirit "was not all that different from work songs [from] the American state of Georgia. Both groups of workers managed to capture the strange, paradoxical combination of a wail of misery and an uplifting statement of human dignity as expressed in labor. Such music simultaneously complains and exults, denies and accepts, pushes forward and holds back".[22] One can see why overseers in prisons sometimes refused to allow the laborers to sing. They wanted to crush the spirit of the prisoners. The singing was an indication that they had not yet succeeded. The singing was an act of resistance on the part of the workers to the attempt to crush their spirit. So the overseers forbade singing. They preferred sullen acquiescence. (Wolterstorff 2015: 258–9)

My purpose in this paper has been to find a way in which the political character of a song is not merely a question of the song's text making *political statements*, which underlies the thought that politics and aesthetics have nothing to do with one another. Our foray into the muddled waters of representation in the arts has allowed us to glimpse another way of framing things. The tools we required for this are: i) Young's concept of illustrative representation, ii) medium-opacity as a central feature of artistic forms of illustrative representation, iii) Carroll's concept of form as an ensemble of artistic choices vis-a-vis artistic aims, iv) Kulvicki's notions of bare bones content, pictorial content and syntactic parts, v) Black's frame-and-focus model for the meaning of metaphors applied to the syntactic parts of illustrative representations. Quite a complex machinery for something whose power is felt so intuitively.

Powerful works of art show us something about human experience, something we would not access in other ways. Often it is not easy to spell out in each case what this "something" is, but we know it is there. It is what brings us back, again and again ("Play it again, Sam!"). This is why a simple work song may sometimes grip us more fiercely than a whole symphony…And some exceptional symphonies may grip us with the energy of a hundred sea shanties. More than emotions, it is *human experience* we seek in music. Music is most powerful when it is true to this experience. We may enjoy the work song as an abstract sonic pattern which is pleasant or agreeable. But this does not do justice to the power of music. It is just not *enough*.

Looking at photos of one of the most polluted places on Earth, Norilsk, a city built by gulag prisoners in the 1930s, its desolate landscapes where nickel for armoured tanks was

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[22] Wolterstorf is quoting Ted Gioia's Work Songs (2006: 257–8).

extracted at the cost of unimaginable suffering, one comes across the image of a dead forest. Tree stumps in anthropomorphic agonized positions uncannily bring to mind Paul Nash's painting I mentioned earlier: the same dead trees in the same frozen gestures, metaphors of wrecked bodies, wooden grave slabs. Making a new world…Life imitating art, indeed! The prisoner's handaxes at Parchman Farm hitting the trees at each response from the choir. The final lines of MacColl's "Dirty Old Town", to his smog-ridden Salford: "I'll chop you down like an old dead tree". The prisoners sing another song, "Go Down Old Hannah / Don't you rise no more", addressing the sun like the barge haulers (*burlaki*) of tsarist Russia in their song, "Burlaki on the Volga": "Heave, ho!" …The wretched, wrecked bodies of Repin's painting: "Now we fell the stout birch tree.". Dead stumps. The sound of handaxes. "Once more!"[23] And what an eerie, tragic counterpoint it would be to hear the muffled sound of the accordionist playing the tune of the German song over the scorched landscape: "Kann dir das Wort drauf geben: Vencerá la libertad!"—Bitter irony.

What I just did was a brief exercise of cinematic montage, only with words, and the associations that go with them…without which you have a pattern of words that amount to little more than gibberish. And yet they span a sea of human experience surpassing anything that fits into an individual human life. This is the way individuals *come to grips* with that experience. It *frames* layer upon layer of human aspirations, frustrations, needs, desires, suffering, overcoming, from a forced labor field in Mississippi to a gulag in Krasnoyarsk Krai, and the *focal* point of the whole "movement" (the musical aspect of cinematic montage) are those percussive sounds which, at one time, are the mark of subjugation, exploitation, and also of defiant self-assertion, the refusal to be reduced to the status of thinghood, *unifying* the whole of human experience, showing us a continuity where we might notice only dispersion. Such layers of meaning are the way human experience is *politically* structured; and all that material is, quite literally, the syntax of artistic expression.[24]

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[23] "Ещё разик, ещё да раз!" ("Once more, once again!"), from the chorus of "Эй ухнем" ("Ho, Heave, ho"), the Russian title of the song we know as "Song of the Volga Boatmen"—whose more accurate translation from "бурлаки" would be "Song of the Volga Barge Haulers".

[24] I want to express my gratitude to an anonymous reviewer, who made invaluable remarks to make this paper better at several points.

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