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Options for Teaching Representations of World War One

"From Brel to Black Metal: The First World War in Popular Music and Music Videos"

Most people's idea of a First World War song is probably 'Pack Up Your Troubles' or 'Over There' but since the late 1950s there have been around 500 newly composed songs featuring the War in one form or another. They emanate largely from the main belligerent nations, with the majority coming from the winners – 70% are French, British or American - but there are also examples from as far afield as Latvia, Greece, Brazil, Colombia and Malaysia. They cover virtually every popular music genre so that one can find a song to match nearly every student's musical taste. With easy access to live performances or official videos online the task is made far simpler.

In the classroom modern popular songs can be utilized as a teaching aid or an arresting way of introducing a topic, and many of the people and events of the War have their songs or videos. One can turn to the video of Paul McCartney's 'Pipes of Peace' as a way 'into' the topic of the 1914 Christmas Truce; June Tabor's haunting 'Aqaba' prior to discussing the role of T.E. Lawrence or one of the angry songs of System of a Down ('P.L.U.C.K.' or 'Holy Mountains') in relation to the Armenian massacres. There are a host of French songs about Verdun from Azziard's death metal concept album '1916' through Collection d'Arnell-Andrea's darkwave to the more traditional approach of Bernard Joyet, both entitled simply 'Verdun'. There are as many British ones about the Somme including Saxon's 'Broken Heroes', Motorhead's '1916' and the more recent 'High Wood Suite' by progressive rock singer Fish. There's even a song about the Schliffen Plan, God Dethroned's 'Under the Sign of the Iron Cross'.

But there are more sophisticated ways in which these songs can be deployed, especially when considering the popular memory or cultural representations of the War. One question to ask is whether a song is mirroring or questioning any dominant national 'myth' of the War. In many countries the First World War is simply a part of history with more recent conflicts having greater prominence. The majority of German and Polish examples that reference the War are in the relatively recent genre of martial industrial music which often utilizes historical recordings of speeches or battle effects set against a somber musical background of electronic sounds and marching tunes. The genre has been controversial for its adoption of neo-Fascist imagery and debate can include to what extent music can have ideological implications. In most English-speaking countries the War is strongly identified with futility, military incompetence and 'lost innocence'. There are many examples that underscore this approach. Scottish-Australian folk singer Eric Bogle's two songs 'And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda' and 'No Man's Land' (also known as 'The Green Fields of France' or 'Willie McBride'), both of which appear in numerous cover versions, are particularly notable. The Pogues version of the former, about a disabled Gallipoli veteran, is one outstanding performance whereas the latter has been covered by artists of all political shades from the Fureys and the Angelic Upstarts on one side to Skrewdriver and Prussian Blue on the other, giving another point of departure for a discussion on the political nature of popular song. Mike Harding's 'Accrington Pals' (another song about the Somme) is notable for its detailed description of the protagonists' progress from volunteers to 'victims' and its use of many well-known images (birdsong, walking towards the guns, mud) raises questions about how these myths relate to the events they depict.

However the futility myth is not all pervasive in the Anglo-Saxon world. In Canada the view of the War is more positive and one can contrast Matthew de Zoete's 'Remembrance Day' referencing 'the holy ground of Vimy [Ridge]' or Bryan Adams's anthemic song of the same title, in which most of the soldiers return victorious from the conflict, with more pessimistic approaches. One reason that 'futility' developed was its usefulness in the 1960s as a metaphor for contemporary events, most notably opposition to the war in Vietnam. Eric Bogle has said that when he wrote 'And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda' in 1971 he had Vietnam as much as Gallipoli in mind and Bob Dylan's 'With God on Our Side' and Don McLean's 'The Grave' are other examples.[1] In France the war in Algeria played a similar role and Georges Brassens satirical 'La Guerre de 14-18' (from 1961) references that conflict. When Michael Flanders translated the song three years later he replaced Algeria with perhaps the first reference to Vietnam in song. The French chanson has a long tradition of commenting on political and historical events and the first modern popular songs about the First World War came from that genre in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Performers from that era such as Barbara, Leo Ferré and Jaques Brel have since been joined by many others. Of these Brel is the best known in the English speaking world and his 'La colombe' ('The Dove') was utilized in an anti-Vietnam context by both Judy Collins and Joan Baez.

Remembrance and memory are frequent topics examined in popular songs. The writer can approach the theme from the point of view of participants looking back (veterans or widows) which includes 'And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda', Richard Thompson's 'The Woods of Darney' or 'Dancing at Witsun' covered by English folk singers from Shirley Collins to Maddy Prior and Tim Hart. It can be a modern retrospective as in 'The Green

Fields of France', P.J. Harvey's 'On Battleship Hill' or Radiohead's 'Harry Patch (in Memory of)' or it can incorporate the iconography of November 11th itself. Examples of the latter range from death metal pioneers Bolt Thrower's 'Cenotaph' and 'Remembrance' through contrasting punk bands Disorder and Guv'Nor to Leon Rosselson's humorous anti-establishment approach (the last three all titled 'Remembrance Day'). Gary Miller's 2010 album *Reflections on War* also comprises a suite of six songs that look back at the War which stemmed from his involvement in a community arts project in York, England. Working with the participants Miller wrote a set of songs based on their ideas and memories. A different approach to memory is taken in Barclay James Harvest's 'The Ballad of Denshaw Mill' which invokes the Christian story of Christmas and the thoughts for loved ones at the front using Christmas as a universal image of hope. It uses 'mythical' imagery but instead of saying what happened to people or describing events it concentrates on what they thought and how the persistence of memory has resonance today.

Song lyrics are not poetry, they are designed to perform different functions and this holds true even for songs whose words can 'stand by themselves', for once music is added new meanings are produced.[2] Nevertheless there are many links between the approach of the war poets and those of popular musicians. 'The war poets, Wilfred Owen and Sassoon, they have inspired me' confirms Bolt Thrower's singer / lyricist Karl Willetts, 'even if it's not the words it's the rhyming structure, it helps me formulate a plan and a pattern.'[3] Simple musical settings of war poetry include Joe McDonald's album of Robert Service poems *War, War, War* and French-American Sergerémy Sacré's *War Poems - Siegfried Sassoon.* 'In Flanders Fields' with its twin themes of remembrance of the dead and defiant belligerence composed by Lieutenant-Colonel John McCrae a Canadian medical officer, has been set to

music many times. There are choral versions by Alexander Tilley and Barry Taylor, Matthew Ackroyd and Dennis Khvatov and John Jacobson and Roger Emerson as well as a bagpipe / choral version by the Bonfire Ensemble and a pop version by Anthony Hutchcroft which is available on the internet together with an associated ballet. With the exception of Jacobson and Emerson, who are American, all are Canadians. There is a rock version by Russian band Romislokus, incorporating a modern response to McCrae's original poem written by Canadian radio DJ Stan Hilborn, and another from French doom metal band Mourning Dawn. The poetry of Wilfred Owen has been an influential source for both popular and 'classical' musicians. Some take the form of direct translations such as 'Anthem for Doomed Youth', by 10,000 Maniacs, and 'Futility', by Virginia Astley in her guise as The Ravishing Beauties. Others take Owen as an inspiration for new interpretations. There are distinct similarities between Eric Bogle's 'The Band Played Waltzing Matilda' and Owen's 'Disabled', about a legless young veteran and between 'It Was a Navy Boy' and The Decemberists 'The Soldiering Life'. The latter is a self-declared 'homoerotic' song that suggests that the War was not all 'mud and blood'. Its protagonist finds love and companionship in the trenches and Colin Meloy's words are both subtle and subversive.

Halfway between poetry and political tract lies Diamanda Galás's 'Orders from the Dead' an 11-minute 'sound-poem' of war, murder and anger about the Armenian genocide. Galás declaims rather than sings the words and she has recorded both a solo version and one with the Greek extreme metal band Rotting Christ, which is the slightly more accessible version. Though also within the genre of extreme metal, Bolt Thrower's songs about the First World War are a much more considered, objective perspective. Lyricist Karl Willetts has reflected that:

> For me 1914-18 was a time of massive change. A real clash between old and new, both ideology and technology. There was the massive waste of life and massive disaster politically. But it was a fascinating time when things were changing and the world moved to modernity.[4]

Their songs reflect this ambiguity, 'we don't say war is a good thing, we don't say war is a bad thing, we don't glorify it, we just say it is.'[5] They use simple, non-euphemistic, language, almost the modern equivalent of trench poetry, to put over their ideas notably in the albums *For Victory* and *Those Once Loyal*. Danish extreme metal band Iniquity's 'Poets of the Trenches' is in two parts. The first is a more straightforward reflection on those who fell, on both sides, in the Battle of the Somme sung in the usual death metal style. The second takes the form of a diary entry or letter written after the battle and spoken in clear English. Its powerful language recalls some of the best wartime novels such as Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu (Under Fire)*, Ernst Junger's *Storm of Steel* or Frederic Manning's *Her Private's We.* All of the above examples indicate that extreme metal is not only a genre well-suited to comment on war but also often intelligently reworks material from other cultural sources.

Going one stage further in its radical reinterpretation of popular culture is P.J. Harvey's album *Let England Shake.* The songs deal with war, both directly and indirectly, through its impact and memory. Throughout the album Harvey interweaves the theme of war with that of what England means for her and how the country's present is inextricably bound to its past. There is also an accompanying DVD with a remarkable set of films by Irish photojournalist Seamus Murphy. Harvey gave Murphy total freedom, her only instruction was 'just avoid the bleeding obvious' and very few changes were made after she had seen the first cut.[6] They are far from conventional pop videos instead being a vision of present

day England through the lens of the past. Taking *Let England Shake* as a starting point for teaching the First World War will certainly open up a vast range of possible directions for debate but can also lead to some perplexity as when Harvey premiered the work on British television in 2010 when fellow guest Prime Minister Gordon Brown looked totally baffled.[7]

[1] Casimir, Jon. 'Secret Life of Matilda', *Sydney Morning Herald,* 19 April 2002.

[2] Frith, Simon. *Performing Rights: Evaluating Popular Music.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. p 182.

[3] Willetts, Karl. Personal interview. 29 May 2014.

[4] Willetts, Karl. Personal interview. 29 May 2014.

[5] Willetts, Karl. Personal interview. 29 May 2014.

[6] PU 'Seamus Murphy meets the audience' at the Reykjavík Film Festival 2011. *Iceland Chronicles*, 25 September 2011, http://icelandchronicles.com/2011/09/riff-2011-day-3-let-england-shake-seamus-murphy-meets-audience/ accessed on 6 July 2014.

[7] The *Andrew Marr Show.* 18 April 2010. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k0M5MFryU3c accessed on 6 July 2014.