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The Effect of Genre on Environmental Popular Song Lyrics

Håvard Haugland Bamle
University of Agder
havard.haugland.bamle@uia.no

Abstract

This article examines how musical genre affects the expression of environmental sensibilities in contemporary song lyrics. Heavy metal and indie folk are differently attuned towards environmental themes, and artists in each genre pursue different lyric strategies to address issues like global warming and species extinction. This article examines songs by heavy metal band Gojira and indie folk band First Aid Kit to discover how genre conventions impact the environmental meaning potential of lyrics. Gojira's songs reveal that the power aesthetics of heavy metal can accommodate explicitly environmental lyrics. First Aid Kit show that indie folk songs can rely on an associative poetics generating environmental nostalgia even without direct lyrical reference to environmental issues. Attention to how meaning is generated on the level of genre will expand our understanding of the role of song lyrics in promoting environmentalism to music fans.

KEYWORDS: song lyrics, Gojira, extreme metal, First Aid Kit, indie folk

Introduction

Song lyrics express environmental sentiments on three levels: 1) the lyric words themselves, 2) the musical performance, that is, the situation of lyric words in a musical composition, either performed live or recorded, 3) the social and historical context, that is, the framing and reception of song lyrics at the time of initial release or in subsequent iterations during live performances, use of recordings in various media contexts, and recontextualizations across different times and places. As a

source of meaning, lyrics are taken for granted. Yet as a source of music's political force the role of song lyrics is unclear (1). Although lyrics matter to music fans, their interpretation of meaning does not stem from hearing words in isolation. Several scholars have pointed out that words are easily misheard in the context of music (Kramer 2002; Weinstein 2006). Depending on the genre, some people who experience music at a concert will hardly be paying attention to the words at all. The meaning of words in music is often associative rather than direct, and associative meaning may be more reliant on context than on lyric words alone. For song lyrics to be politically viable, they must work on the listener in tandem with the musical performance and the historical moment.

Lyrics become meaningful in the context of expectations established and maintained as genre conventions. Whether the words in a song are clearly political, apparently apolitical, or express ambiguous political content, genre imbues the words with a particular rhetorical force towards certain political topics. It can also deprive the words of such force. Musical accompaniments provide additional meaning that may support (or obstruct) a political reception of lyrical content. Artists, however, seldom choose their genre for political reasons. The communication of messages as such is rarely the goal of the masters of style. Nevertheless, there seems to be a special affinity between environmentalism and certain genres. It has been suggested by scholars such as David Ingram (2010) and Mark Pedelty (2012) that music genres are differently attuned to the sentiments of environmentalism. The analyses in this article support the impression that some genres more easily lend themselves to highlight environmentalist tropes. Conversely, some genres may have a constraining effect on lyrics that make it difficult to produce environmental sentiment.

According to musicologist Alexander Rehding, there are two main ways through which music responds to climate change: apocalypse and nostalgia (Rehding 2011). These are not the only types of environmental response we can find in popular music, but these tropes have a privileged position in environmental discourse (2). Accordingly, it is likely that genres that serve an aesthetic of apocalypse or nostalgia will more readily combine with a lyrical theme of climate change. Heavy metal has a tradition of apocalyptic symbolism, so it may come as no surprise that "environ-metal" has become a thing (Skylar 2012). Climate apocalypse fits the theme of unavoidable collective suffering that is typical of extreme heavy metal (Morris 2014: 556; Lucas 2019: 492). Similarly, indie folk, a genre which cultivates nostalgia, has become one of the most prevalent and evocative genres of environmentalism (Bamle 2024). However, while both genres are equipped to highlight environmental tropes, their aspirations to politics or social change are questionable. Extreme metal is notoriously apolitical because it usually leans so far into suffering and despair so as not to offer any solutions (Phillipov 2012; Lucas 2019). Similarly, indie folk's evocation of nostalgia can serve fantasies of escape into a pastoral past rather than stir confrontation with real issues. Whether commercial music has any effect on environmental politics ultimately depends on its ability to generate affect that can be mobilized towards social change. Therefore, the rhetorical effect of genre on environmental song lyrics should be examined more closely. How do popular music genres differ in terms of environmental lyrical content?

Method

The goal of this article is to examine one specific aspect of the rhetorics of genre: the influence of musical performance on the meaning potential of lyric words (3). To target this aspect, I follow a line of rhetorical inquiry which is circumscribed by the more common approaches of lyric studies and sociomusicology.

Studies of lyrics usually rely on close reading, or "close listening" in the case of performed lyrics (Bernstein 1998). Close listening means being attuned to the ways in which lyrics and performance may support or subvert one another. Aspects of the performing voice and artist-audience interactions are crucial (Novak 2012). In the case of recorded songs, close listening should also consider aspects of mediality, composition and musical texture (Moore 2012). In contrast to written lyric poetry, however, song lyrics are imbued with unique meaning potential as they are construed by audiences through the interpretive frame of musical genre (Eckstein 2010). Importantly, close listening cannot entirely capture the effect of musical genre on song lyrics. Music is not denotative. As stated by Fabian Holt, it "does not have the precision of iconic or indexical representation even when it accompanies words" (Holt 2007: 5). Its significance to the listener is based on cultural and intertextual references that go beyond any individual text and moment of performance. Close listening must therefore be supplemented by a contextualizing analytical framework which considers the expanded social and cultural significance of genre.

The role of genre in determining the meaning of popular music has most often been explored sociologically, by examining how music relates to socially organized "genre worlds" (Frith 1996: 35-42) or organizational structures of the music industry (Negus 1999). Christopher Small argues that music should be regarded as an act in which musical meaning is co-created by everyone who relates to a performance in any capacity (Small 1998: 9). The act of "musicking" establishes relationships between the people taking part, and it can "model, or stand as metaphor for, ideal relationships as the participants in the performance imagine them to be: relationships between person and person, between individual and society, between humanity and the natural world and even perhaps the supernatural world" (Small 1998: 13). This may be why some genres become closely associated with specific cultural tropes such as apocalypse or pastoral. Jennifer Lena (2012) similarly notes how genres project and aspire to an idealized world, but with the added emphasis that the ideal relationships established in genres may be altered over time as genres follow different trajectories based on stages of development of various musical communities.

Sociological knowledge has a place in all studies of popular music genre, including this one. However, since I am looking for the effect of genre not on an audience reception per se (nor on genre discourse itself), but on song lyrics, and specifically on political/environmental contents in popular songs, I favor here a rhetorical approach. Where rhetorics is concerned with effective communication, genre can be considered a framework that exerts influence on a song's communicative possibilities. As John Frow writes, "genre is one of the ways in which texts seek to control the uncertainty of communication" (Frow 2015: 4). This statement presents genre as more than a set of aesthetic patterns across different songs, but as a shorthand for the connections between the textual and cultural levels

of songs, and thus a key to the hermeneutics of music. A rhetorical approach maintains that genre is a contributing factor to the effect of musical texts on real-world political situations.

Selection

Two genres will be explored through case examinations of songs by heavy metal band Gojira and indie folk band First Aid Kit. Together these can illustrate how genre conventions impact the possibilities for meaningful environmental lyrics. Rephrasing the initial research question to accommodate these case examples we can ask: What is the role of heavy metal, in the case of Gojira, and indie folk, in the case of First Aid Kit, in establishing an environmentalist framework for the performance and reception of song lyrics? To answer this question, we must first examine what meaning potential is generally generated in each genre, before more closely examining the song lyrics of each artist in light of their respective genre and political/environmental historical context.

Genres are defined by patterns of performance practice with which artists and audiences engage. They are not simply governed by a "definite set of rules", as many have assumed based on Franco Fabbri's famous definition of musical genre (Fabbri 1981: 52). Rather, genres are conceptualized on the basis of their component texts, which, as David Brackett reminds us, do not "belong" to genres with stability, but rather participate in them, reproducing and altering them through a dynamic process of repetition and differentiation (Brackett 2016: 13). Indeed, music is hardly created nor consumed within strict and stable genre boundaries. As Robert Walser notes in his study of many related styles within the umbrella of heavy metal: "Nowhere are genre boundaries more fluid than in popular music (…) musicians are ceaselessly creating new fusions and extensions of popular genres" (Walser 1993: 27). Each performance and each informal discussion among fans about good or bad music is part of genre negotiations which may slightly adjust what is considered appropriate to a given genre. Nevertheless, Walser continues, "musical structures and experiences are intelligible only with respect to these historically developing discursive systems" (ibid.). That is to say that genre alone may not establish musical meaning, and a rigid focus on genre may limit attention to artistic innovation in many songs. Yet each style of music is shaped by historical situations which connect artists and audiences on a perceived common ground of musical expression, forming expectations about which elements are appropriate to composition, performance, and consumption in order to share in a meaningful musical interaction. Genre determines certain expectations to which both artists and audiences respond. Via adherence to genre conventions (as we will see in the examples below), songs evoke certain meanings by association with an admittedly fluid and changing genre field. Navigating music in terms of the genre context of songs, which allows artists and audiences to break away from conventions or to defend their musical taste is usually a matter of identifiable conventions in a vast system of various genre constellations.

Obviously, no artist is entirely representative of their genre, but being situated clearly within established genre discourses, the selected songs are representative of

necessary negotiations between their climate conscious messages and their genres more broadly. As explained by Tzvetan Todorov, the relationship between a work and its genre is of a probabilistic nature. There is no necessity that a work will incarnate its genre and follow the rules, there is only a probability (Todorov 1973: 22). Similarly, there may be no compulsion for environmentally engaged musical artists to write environmental songs, but it is likely that their songs will be interpreted in light of such activism and may consequently have an environmental effect all the same. The two bands I have selected for this study are both representative and singular as participants in (the ongoing production of) their respective genre discourses. Besides being among the most popular in their genres, both bands have strong connections to the environmental movement through events, festivals, or otherwise contributing to organizations which highlight and work to combat environmental destruction.

The genres examined here are both historically derived from the loosely defined umbrella of rock. Both genres cultivate an alternative to what is perceived as the cultural mainstream (even though each genre has historically passed through the very mainstream they seek to transgress). They contrast in terms of their respective "hard" and "soft" performance styles, each of which represents a musical strategy of differentiation against a perceived mainstream and an alignment to alternative culture. This, I suggest, goes hand in hand with a variance in lyrical content. Heavy metal's focus on power and excess feeds a fascination with dark metaphysics (Walser 1993; Morris 2014; Kahn-Harris 2007). Its predilection for grandiloquence appears in references to epic and fantastic literature. With a tradition of profane iconography, the genre is no stranger to apocalyptic symbolism. Indie folk's muted timbres with a focus on strummed guitar and vocal harmonies evokes quite a different set of associations. Scholars of the genre have noted that its compositions characteristically exhibit the desire to retreat from modern urban life, to connect with what is conceived as an authentic past through natural landscapes and musical conventions from orally transmitted folk music repertoires (Bamle 2022; Coleman 2017; Mitchell 2017; Størvold 2023; van Poecke 2017). Indie folk lyrics commonly demonstrate anxieties about contemporary life, relating feelings of uncertainty and helplessness in the face of a present crisis (Coleman 2017). Often referencing remote locations, and aesthetically linked to both wilderness and rural landscapes, the genre evokes pastoral scenes. Such scenes become the setting for introspective reflection, making the genre a fertile setting for exploring the eco-utopian potential of music (Ingram 2010: 52). Although the strategies taken to address crisis is different, the environmental crisis imposes itself on all musical genres. In the following I will examine more closely how song lyrics unfold within the interpretive frameworks of each respective genre.

Case 1, Environmental heavy metal: Gojira's *From Mars to Sirius* (2005)

"Real content, real style" are words used by metal journalist D.X. Ferris to describe Gojira's 2005 breakthrough record *From Mars to Sirius* (Ferris 2009). The quote praises the album for its ability to bring the substance of environmental issues to heavy metal without sacrificing the elements that make the genre appealing to fans

in the first place. With Joe Duplantier on vocals and rhythm guitar, Mario Duplantier on drums, Christian Andreu on lead guitar, and Jean-Michel Labadie on bass, the band's style is firmly positioned within the extreme metal subgenre of heavy metal, with momentary departures into progressive and death metal. The music characteristically features displays of technical virtuosity through electric guitar shredding, double kick "blast beat" drumming, and a certain style of growling, that is, hoarsely screamed vocals. The vocal style is of particular importance to the bearing of lyrics. In Gojira's songs, the cadence of the singer will often follow the lead guitar rather than a natural prosody. This emphasis on stylized vocals can have the effect that words are particularly difficult to make out. It is perhaps a paradox that metal fans place such a strong emphasis on lyrics. Occasionally, growling can be replaced by singing in a deep register, serving dramatic tension and perspectival change. Gojira's lyrics, as is typical for the genre, mix images from Christianity, pagan mythologies and fantasy literature, and use both symbols and description to create a sense of overpowering psychological and cosmic forces. This builds an aesthetic that is simultaneously powerful and threatening.

What sets Gojira apart from other extreme metal bands from the early 2000s, is their ability to shape their lyrics into meaningful, politically oriented environmental narratives, without departing from the staples of the genre. Heavy metal music signifies cultural transgression. Its various subgenres exist along a continuum where extreme metal, as the name implies, lies at one end, emphasizing apocalyptic and misanthropic lyrics (Kahn-Harris 2007: 34). Misanthropy, according to Keith Kahn-Harris, involves "a determined effort to set oneself apart from the world" (ibid.: 40). Gravitating towards nihilism (the view that human life is inconsequential) and fatalism (a sense of inevitable doom) this tendency has led to apathy towards politics, at least to human-centered politics (Phillipov 2012: 54). As an early proponent of environmental extreme metal, Gojira are breaking new ground for the affective possibilities of environmentalism in their genre. Olivia R. Lucas's study of black metal band Botanist shows how extreme metal's penchant for misanthropy has later developed into a strain with more emphasis on posthumanist, biocentric environmentalism (Lucas 2019). Gojira, in contrast, have not given up on humanity. Their lyrics approach environmental issues from a human perspective throughout the album, albeit while constantly challenging environmentally destructive human-centered assumptions about the world.

From Mars to Sirius's cover art is inspired by the logo of the marine conservation organization Sea Shepherd, an organization the band actively supports. The logo depicts a whale, which on the album cover is taken out of the ocean and placed in front of a nondescript planet, transforming it into a "flying whale", a key image in the album's song lyrics. The album opens with whale sounds, and these periodically reoccur throughout the album as a reminder of this image. The sounds combine with sections of calm, acoustic instrumentation, creating an atmospheric contrast to the aggressive extreme metal which dominates the album. This use of contrasting instrumentation and mood creates compositional movements, underscoring a narrative in the lyrics, and reminds the listener that individual songs serve a larger meaning when interpreted collectively (a typical concept album structure). However, not all the lyrics can be easily integrated in a narrative structure. The first

half of the album is dominated by allusions to the emotional inner turmoil of a fictionalized first-person speaker, who, when approaching the halfway mark of the album, goes on an interstellar journey of self-examination. The second half of the album is less sonically intense and more atmospheric than the first half, signaling a transformation, although the music always returns to the extreme metal style suggesting a dialectic between the extremes of psychological despair and gradually emerging harmonies of ecological insight.

The story follows a person, initially overcome with despair on a burning "ocean planet" (presumably Earth, but possibly a fictionalized version of a water-filled Mars, on course for climatically induced devastation), who after encountering flying whales gains the ability to fly and goes an interstellar journey. It is not clear whether this journey is to be taken literally or is a dream of the speaker, or whether it is to be taken at face value as a fiction created by the words of the song as is suggested in the lyrics of "From Mars": "My words are the stairs I put my feet on / And I climb through starless night to my place" (Gojira 2005a). The journey itself is ultimately to be understood allegorically. This is revealed when lyrics speak directly about the state of our world. The songs that frame the album, the opening track "Ocean Planet" (Gojira 2005b) and closing track "Global Warming" (Gojira 2005c) hint that the journey between the two star systems is a journey of reflection on the state of the Earth and on humanity. On the tracks "Flying Whales" (Gojira 2005d), "In the Wilderness" (Gojira 2005e), and "World to Come" (Gojira 2005f), the speaker explicitly meditates on the state of planet Earth, and on humanity's hubris in thinking that they are in control: "Beneath the seas, I searched and had a different view / of us on Earth, the sinking ship of men" (Gojira 2005d); "Planet Earth will overcome / Men destroyed, scorned and killed their lives / But the world is on her way" (Gojira 2005e); "This is the Earth, but ages after / I know the world will overcome its pain" (Gojira 2005f).

The journey from the planet Mars to the fictional star system of Sirius C (4) corresponds with the speaker's psychological journey from a state of inner turmoil to a state of harmony. The speaker sees the society of Sirius C as an ideal that the Earth could achieve if humanity left behind its destructive ways. Joe Duplantier explained in an interview that the album title is meant to contrast Mars, who in Roman mythology is the god of war, with Sirius as symbol of peace (Dalzell 2005). In "To Sirius", the speaker faces a gradual realization of humanity's errors when he is confronted with a more advanced alien race:

> This place is a throne for brightness
> The age of war is over
> . . .
> Our force is sickening, killing all the time
> Human laws already slayed many lives
> . . .
> There was a streak of madness
> but now I know, I see it's not the only truth
> (Gojira 2005g).

Fantastical creatures provide another lyric contrast symbolic of humanity's inner conflict. Dragons (also called monsters or leviathans) representing something

uncomfortable and unresolved in the speaker's psychology, are contrasted with the flying whales (also called dolphins), representing some form of enlightenment that the speaker is seeking. In the song "Where Dragons Dwell", the dragon is a force inside the speaker: "In this region of me, a great dragon is lying" (Gojira 2005h). This force may be related to something outside, but there is no clear suggestion in this song that the dragon could be a metaphor for climate change. What is suggested is an internal battle, perhaps with despair, and with some truth (whether emotional or factual) that the speaker is resisting, unwilling to face, but from which he cannot turn away: "Now I bring evidence the beast is alive (…) When I turn my, turn my back on them, they devour me" (Gojira 2005h).

Natural elements play a key symbolic role in the lyrics. In addition to serving as mirrors of the speaker's inner psychological state, they trigger associations of environmental destruction and transformation. Furthermore, the two songs "From Mars" and "To Sirius" contain lyrics reminiscent of ecocritical concepts. The line "I have lost my reason, and I've made my sense" (Gojira 2005a) indicates an opposition between "reason" and "sense", which can be understood as a criticism of the instrumental rationality that is often seen as a driving force of environmental destruction, in favor of sensitivity towards the world as an ecosystem. This interpretation could be supported by the speaker seeking an alternative form of knowledge from the alien species, one that will align him with his "being". "I come to Sirius C to learn from your friends of old / And wish to come into being" (Gojira 2005g). In the philosophy of deep ecologists, what the speaker finds is a sense of alignment with nature as a whole. The speaker ultimately affirms that he has resolved the inner conflict after he has seen the dolphins' world and gained perspective on humanity's destructive ways: "This is my way / I've found my home / My state of real" (Gojira 2005g).

From the first few tracks on the album, it is not clear that we are dealing with the despair of a collective facing an extinction event. However, there are several stand-out songs in terms of an environmental message. "Flying Whales" references "flood on Earth" (Gojira 2005d), and "In the Wilderness" is full of descriptions of vibrant landscapes and even includes didactic passages such as "Living respectful, low your axe / and learn from the trees" (Gojira 2005e). The clearest expression of environmental resolve, however, is found on the album's closing track, titled "Global Warming". This song in a way summarizes the album, providing additional detail to the sci-fi narrative listeners have thus far experienced. In this song, the now clear-minded protagonist takes a stance of opposition to the rest of humankind, identifying instead with the natural elements: "I feel like I'm not from humankind down there / I feel like glaciers are my eyes / and mountains are my head / my heart is ocean" (Gojira 2005c). The song is a meditation on the resolve to return to the ocean planet and save it, a possibility which the protagonist considers from both sides. Following the first verse, an instrumental bridge features especially fatalistic lyrics:

> A world is down, and none can rebuild it
> Disabled lands are evolving
> My eyes are shut, a vision is dying
> My head explodes, and I fall in disgrace
> (Gojira 2005c).

Musically, this section stands out from the surrounding verses. A sudden tempo change announces a significant departure in musical texture and rhythm. The intricate, arpeggiated lead guitar riff of the verse is replaced by a spacious strumming of power chords in a much slower tempo. Whereas the first and third verses are performed with a deep chest voice, the vocalist employs the full force of the growl technique in the bridge. This vocal dynamic shows a changing emotional charge specifically related to the lyrics, suggesting that the bridge is a perspectival interlude, before the protagonist returns to level-headed meditation in the next verse. The dialectic reaches a synthesis as the main part of the song culminates in the third verse, where lyrics about hope of rebuilding and regrowing the planet are performed with the same instrumental and vocal intensity as the bridge: "Open thy eyes and let all this flow in / Now see a new hope is growing inside" (Gojira 2005c). The journey ends here, where hope is grasped but with resolve rather than resolution. The album ends on a motivational mantra repeated 13 times over two and a half minutes to the insistent guitar riff that has served as the motif of hope in this song: "We will see our children growing" (Gojira 2005c).

The titular concept of global warming is not mentioned in the song lyrics themselves, and only indirectly alluded to on the album's opening track. In engaging with lyrics, however, one cannot avoid the paratextual titles. Just like the cover art, titles inform the listening experience. Nonetheless, even without paratextual references the album is strikingly explicit in its environmental message. From the coded symbolism of natural elements to the didactic lessons from the dolphin planet, the lyrics support the narrative conclusion wherein the protagonist denounces those who continue to live in denial and resolves to see a better future. The rhetorical force of this narrative is bound to the instrumental and vocal dynamics of the genre. Intensity in the musical performance underscores the psychological turmoil expressed in some lyrics, while musically contrasting sections remind listeners both that the psychological turmoil is related to environmental issues, and that we are engaged on a journey of transformation (and possibly reconciliation) in relation to the environment. In a genre that is customarily anti-political, Gojira's lyrics thus manage to utilize the music's affective potential to advocate change.

Case 2, Environmental indie folk: First Aid Kit's "Wolf" and "The Lion's Roar" (2012)

At Climate Live in Stockholm on October 16, 2021, sisters Johanna and Klara Söderberg, who make up the indie folk duo First Aid Kit, displayed both their musical appeal and commitment to the climate movement. Before introducing speaker and generational icon Greta Thunberg to the stage, the band performed "Wolf" from their 2012 album *The Lion's Roar*. The song takes inspiration from pop

cultural stereotypes of Appalachian and Native American music, with a vocal twang and register changes that border on yodeling, interspaced with calls of "hey-ya" (First Aid Kit 2012a). Some of these stereotyped sounds are often used in popular music to recall a version of the "ecological Indian" cultural trope, a seductive and problematic essentialization of indigenous cultures, albeit a signal commonly used to criticize Western modernity from within (Garrard 2012: 129; Størvold 2025). On the recorded song, a rhythm like the slowed down gallop of a horse is played on toms and bass drum, referencing the sound of Western movies, and evoking the sound of tribal drums. The live performance in Stockholm leaves out the drumbeat, but accompanying Klara's acoustic guitar an electric keyboard (possibly a Mellotron playing a flute sound) provides an atmospheric background layer giving the song a windy texture, evoking the outdoors. The vocal is clear, and any periodic roughness is smoothed out by vocal harmonies in the chorus. The song is an indie folk hit, and the performance testifies to its environmentalist sentiments.

Indie folk stands out as a popular music genre with an environmentalist tint (Størvold 2023; Bamle 2024). The genre grew into mainstream popularity around the same time global warming became the pre-eminent environmental issue, with artists gaining mainstream success from ca. 2006 and featuring some of the biggest bands in the world by 2012 (van Poecke 2017: 15). The prominence of indie folk in the environmental movement indicates that there are properties to this genre which resonate with climate conscious audiences. Evidence of this is seen when artists usually associated with other genres approach indie folk in environmentalist performance contexts, for instance when Climate Live saw many pop artists drop electronic instruments and voice filters in favor of acoustic instruments and vocal harmonies. Mark Pedelty has noted how pop and rock tend to adopt folk qualities in environmental contexts:

> To signal environmental themes, pop musicians tend to use more subdued rhythms than usual, create simpler timbral textures, incorporate acoustic instrumentation (or electronic sampling), and either bring lead vocals up front or drop backup harmonies altogether, thus allowing the lyrics to be more clearly understood and producing a relatively spare, folk-vocal sound. (Pedelty 2012: 72).

Indie folk does not abandon electronic sound technologies, but the predominance of acoustic instruments signals a musical attempt to connect with a more primordial state of nature, as opposed to the hyper-technologized urban society whence the artists generally emerge. The way the genre utilizes vocal harmonies takes note from the music of Laurel Canyon, where the 1960s and 1970s saw urban rock artists like Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young, Joni Mitchell, and the Eagles, inspired by a "country roots" way of living, combine music from the American North and South, that is, combining the grand arrangements of pop with the rhythms of country music (Ingram 2010: 144f.).

Musically speaking, indie folk is a hybrid genre combining indie rock, one of many successors of the punk movement, with influences of North American folk rock and traditional music from specific geographic areas such as the Appalachian region of the United States (5). Its legacy may be charged with politics, but its stylistic predecessors had very different rhetorical strategies. Whereas punk

approached its anti-establishment ethos through aggressive music meant to deter conformists, folk was "more likely to allow for serious messages and more likely to be taken seriously" (Pedelty 2012: 143). Combining the two would give rise to an interesting synthesis, and one that we can witness in the music of some lesser-known indie folk artists (see for example my study of the Norwegian artist Moddi, Bamle 2024). However, the mainstream of indie folk does not spring directly out of these two, but from indie rock, which had already diverted from oppositional politics towards the mainstream of popular music in the 1990s (Hesmondhalgh 1999). The commercially successful strain of indie folk springs out of a culture that is introspective, stripped of the in-your-face attitudes of punk, and being less overtly political in its lyrics than folk. While the potential for political messaging is great, in practice there is little explicit politics to be found in the song lyrics of mainstream indie folk artists (6).

This does not mean that indie folk songs are devoid of politics, rather that the genre prefers an implicit lyrical approach to political issues. Indirection, symbols and allegory are supported by associations generated by the conditions and wealth of political connotations residing in the genre. Two songs by First Aid Kit exemplify the genre's underlying environmental politics. In the song "Wolf", the wolf appears as a symbol of lost connections. In the verse, the speaker sees the "wolf mother" and "wolf father" in a diminished state of being and addresses them in direct speech. The descriptions are suggestive: "You look so worn, so thin / (…) you don't smile anymore" (First Aid Kit 2012a). From the perspective of the speaker, the wolves have diverged from their natural state. The speaker calls on them to sing and run again, encouraging them to regain their stature. Addressing the animals with the familial terms ("mother" and "father"), is a gesture linking the animals as familiar or spiritually related to the speaker. This has the effect of diminishing the distance between animals and the humans engaging with this song, an effect that is intensified in the chorus.

The chorus brings a lyrical transition from direct speech addressing the wolves in the third person to a narrative told from a first-person perspective. This is also a shift from an outside perspective on nature, to the perspective of the natural world. As the speaker "run[s] through the deep dark forest", the listener enters the forest with her, beholden to a shamanistic transformation, as indicated by the speaker naming the wolf a "shapeshifter" in the verse. (In the song's music video, stereotypical "tribal" symbolism and light projections transposed onto the faces of the band underscores the symbol of shapeshifting). The scene that listeners are invited to behold is one of lost natural landscapes: "The sun would set, the trees were dead, and the rivers were none". The words in the chorus indicate that the reflection on the state of nature is set in the future. The speaker searches for a way "back home". However, the final line changes to the past tense indicating a realization that the future vision was a reflection on the present, and on the speaker herself: "There was no sound, there was only me and my disgrace". Even though the song relates a narrative moving across time, it is focalized on a lyrical speaker, making the lamentation on the state of nature simultaneously an allusion to self-criticism.

In between the verse and the chorus, the pre-chorus is the speaker's call to maintain hope that strength can be regained: "keep the spirits strong. The section serves both musically and lyrically as a liminal space, using spiritual language (for

example, "holy light, oh, burn the night") to express an uncertain hope of regained strength. The pre-chorus indicates an appeal to a higher order of natural connections, a spiritual connection that has been severed. What is in danger of being lost is not simply the natural landscapes, but the great connection between all nature, in which the human speaker relates to the animal world. Whereas the verse and chorus of the song repeat identically twice, the second iteration of the pre-chorus brings a change of words. The second time around, the speaker meditates on a voice singing of the "forgotten land". The "child of woe", presumably the singer who laments the land's fall, is called to "lend a mending hand", suggesting that the song itself can provide some comfort to both witness and nature. This marks the song as a self-reflexive elegy for the nature that will soon be lost.

David Ingram notes that the favored lyrical modes of environmentally concerned popular music have been elegy and satire:

> [B]oth explore what ecocritic Jonathan Bate calls 'the contradiction between actuality and the ideal' ([Bate] 2000, 73). The ideal tends to be a pastoral landscape in which human beings feel at home in the natural world; elegy is a lyrical meditation on its loss, and satire a denunciation of those deemed responsible for that loss (Ingram 2010: 52).

While elegy is apparent in "Wolf", there may be an element of satire as well. A decisive factor in the interpretation of "Wolf" is to decide who the lyrical "I" belongs to. Who witnesses their own "disgrace"? If it is the human speaker, listeners are invited to identify as co-responsible for the environmental destruction. On the other hand, it could be the wolf, asking for the listener's sympathy. My suggestion is that the environmental themes of "Wolf", by virtue of genre associations, carry over to other songs juxtaposed in context of the genre, on the album, and in live performances. The album's title track, "The Lion's Roar" (First Aid Kit 2012b), may be regarded as the satire which accompanies the elegy of "Wolf" on both record and in many of the band's live performances. This song similarly engages with the natural world as something estranged from the speaker, however it is lighter on spiritualist symbolism. Without the genre connotations and performative juxtaposition connecting the song to environmental issues it can appear as a love song, lamenting the end of a relationship. However, in the context of a heightened attention to spiritual ecological connections, the song's evocation of natural landscapes and animal metaphors feed an overarching theme of a threatened environment, and the role of artists in calling attention to the issue.

The opening of "The Lion's Roar" presents an allegorical scene of a musical performance, personifying "morning" and "night" as the actors in this scene:

> Now the pale morning sings of forgotten things
> She plays a tune for those who wish to overlook
> The fact that they've been blindly deceived
> By those who preach and pray and teach
> But she falls short and the night explodes in laughter
> (First Aid Kit 2012b).

These lines present nature as a witness to something that is being ignored, with the brightness of morning symbolizing the possibility of enlightenment to some reality about which "they" have been deceived, and the night signaling a contrasting cover of darkness over this reality. So far, the song is quite mysterious. It is unclear who the targets of allusion are. Following a shift from third person to first-person perspective, the second verse relates a warning against hubris in the face of a changing world:

> Don't you come here and say I didn't warn you
> About the way your world can alter
> And oh how you try to command it all still
> Every single time it all shifts one way or the other

These lines have strong connotations of the issue of global warming. The lines may be read as a warning directed at those who do not heed the warnings of climate scientists. The target of satire may be those in power, or indeed any people who live in disregard of the risks of climate change due to either deception, naïve optimism or willful ignorance. This implicates the song's speaker as well, who states in the first line of the chorus that "I'm a goddamn coward, but then again so are you".

By identifying with the speaker, the audience is called to admit that they too are part of the problem, but it is a call that they may ultimately ignore. Performing the song is a self-incriminating practice. To the artist, concerts entail participation in the unsustainable practices of the commercial music industry (7). However, the emphasis in the song lies on the responsibility of the addressee. Besides making accusations towards the second person "you", the chorus indicates a desire to be heard. In this endeavor, the words underscore a feeling of powerlessness:

> [T]he lion's roar, the lion's roar
> Has me seeking out and searching for you
> And I never really knew what to do.

The speaker is prompted by the crisis to act but is at a loss for ideas about how to do so. If we hear the song as a reflection on the climate movement, the "lion's roar" can be understood either as nature's warning call or as the symbolic roar of the movement. This roar is sounding, but this distress signal continues to be ignored by most people. Audiences can sing along, and yet blindly disregard the subtext of the song. Art reaching out as art is bound to be the target of misinterpretation. The speaker in the song is at a loss for ideas about how to respond to the call. Genre, however, provides rhetorical support for the direction of the song's implicit environmental criticism.

In the studio version (and presumably also in most if not all live performances), the song's narrative is framed by a musical texture in which an otherwise calm soundscape is unsettled by an ominous overtone that cannot easily be attributed to any instrument. The sound, which is synthesized via an electric keyboard, starts to build immediately when the guitar is first heard in the song's opening, and continues throughout the song. The sound is possibly an early synthetic imitation of flutes, which in European classical music from Romanticism is associated with

the pastoral, yet the synthetic quality of this sound disturbs the possibility of a pastoral vision. The reverb of other instruments can be distinguished when instruments stop playing at the end of each chorus, giving emphasis to the line "I never really knew [instruments pause] what to do [instruments resume]". The ominous overtone is continuous, only briefly relieved in the third verse, around the lyrics "the ways of the old, old winds blowing you back round". This line can be taken to include a briefly hopeful sentiment that the song's antagonists might realize their mistake and be turned around by the "old, old winds", as if a return to antecedent conditions could save human beings from themselves. Building on the genre's nostalgic hallmark, the song's old-fashioned waltz rhythm reinforces connotations of times past.

Indie folk projects nature as something that may alleviate the threat of an uncertain future, but in the context of environmental destruction must be understood as something that is itself threatened by such a future. Despite efforts to exude an air of calmness and harmony, it is at heart an anxious genre. The popularity of the genre temporally correlates with the so-called "climate anxiety" generation of Greta Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion (Weston et al. 2021: 245). Anxiety finds expression in the elegy of nature in "Wolf" and in the almost conspiratorial blame game of "The Lion's Roar". Even though the songs do not state outright that they are about climate change or species extinction (in contrast to the explicit lyrics of Gojira), they are interpreted by their audiences as statements on the state of the environment. However, anxiety is not the end point of the affective potential of this genre. In the face of global environmental risk, anxiety may be a source not only of despair, but of solidarity and community building (Furuseth and Hennig 2023: 79; Beck 2016: 66). Both "Wolf" and "The Lion's Roar" may be understood in terms of their epideictic appeal.

Epideixis, defined by Aristotle as the branch of rhetoric concerned with assigning "praise and blame", has the rhetorical effect of engendering a sense of collectivity in audiences (Andersen & Fløttum 2022). Listeners who identify with the speaker in each song are called to relate to the plight of the natural environment. Through identification, either with nature itself or with the environmental movement, these songs may provide a collective boost to mobilize on behalf of the environment. As should be clear by now, genre does not only inhere in songs as cultural objects. Genres are patterns of social relations in which music is shared, or indeed in which an ideology or political opinion is affirmed. Genre is the way in which songs attach to and connect with an audience. It is the mechanism by which the collective is established, so that praise and blame may be imparted. In terms of the social organization of performances, indie folk is not particularly participatory, at least not any more than other genres of pop music. Performances follow a conservative artist – audience interaction: the artist produces, the audience consumes. Therefore, indie folk cannot facilitate connections as a community the way folk music does (Roy 2010). Instead, it invites a different kind of collective identification, one that may as well recognize that the connections individuals seek go beyond the social and cultural sphere, and that humanity's connection to the natural world is being threatened.

Conclusion

Genre is the social framework of the rhetorical appeal of song lyrics. Heavy metal and indie folk imbue song lyrics with a target set of community-negotiated values towards which audience interpretations of lyric meaning are guided. Music as an objectively non-denotative form of art will speak to listeners as art, leaving any potential underlying message open to misunderstanding or disregard. Yet songs are saturated with associative elements that listeners soon take for granted, affecting culture on an unconscious level. Today, music exploration is guided by algorithms which sever audiences from genre communities. This has led some to claim that genre, in the strictly prescriptive sense denoting a particular style of music within its own ecosystem of genre culture, matters less to music listeners than it used to (Petrusich 2021). Still, many artists continue to operate with stylistic preferences and ambitions. And genre will continue to guide associations of words to specific areas of signification, determining which messages will be heard, and by whom.

Generating engagement with politics through popular music requires rhetorical strategies. Pop music, however, is implicated in a non-confrontational ethos. Can political popular music be rhetorically productive? Do implications of popular music undermine artists' environmental support? Certainly, works of art should not be considered rhetorical acts in the same way as political speeches. Speech acts are political insofar as they have a political effect, or a political intention, despite lacking a clearly formulated political message. In popular music, genre provides a body of associations that may increase the appeal of political messages. Whether the words in a song are explicitly political, as in the case of Gojira, or implicitly political as in the case of First Aid Kit, they are infused with rhetorical force through the elements of genre, strengthening a song's meaning potential in a political context.

The power aesthetics of heavy metal may demand an explicit integration of environmental lyrics with the musical form, whereas indie folk is associative of environmental nostalgia even without direct lyrical reference to environmental issues. Even though the lyrical approaches in these two genres are different, that is not to say that they are equally effective. The explicitness of Gojira's lyrics allow them to be understood outside the genre community, even if some musical inflections on those meanings may be lost on audiences who are unfamiliar with the details of the genre. In this way, the genre itself may eventually penetrate the general cultural sphere with an ecological tint, the way that indie folk does. The implicitly environmental lyrics of First Aid Kit exhibit pathos in line with a sense of nature loss. As a form of environmentalist communication, however, this genre is hardly informing anyone about the issue. Its lyrics rely on their effectiveness as a form of epideictic rhetoric. They do not inform, rather they attempt to build a community around a desire to reconnect with a natural world that is being threatened.

Endnotes

(1) The concept of the political force of popular songs has been developed in relation to the philosophy of Jacques Rancière by Barry Shank (2014) and me (Bamle 2023). Force, in this meaning, refers to the possibility of making new perspectives on political realities

visible through aesthetic strategies. The purpose of the present article is not to examine specific strategies by which songs may be endowed with such force, but to examine how the context of genre impacts the possibilities of pursuing certain lyric strategies at all. In other words, this article does not discuss the implications of genre on political force, but on rhetorical force, that is, on the possibility of communicating environmentalist themes in song lyrics.

(2) The centrality of this conceptual pair in cultural discourse has been highlighted repeatedly in ecocriticism (see, for example, Buell 1995; Heise 2008; Garrard 2012; Bamle 2024).

(3) My use of the phrase "meaning potential" here is intended to be inclusive of the fact that multiple interpretations may be derived from both song lyric words and musical genre, while simultaneously recognizing that specific receptions are made more probable by specific configurations of song lyrics in the context of genre. The word "potential" is derived from similar words in German and Danish rhetorical theory, notably Karl-Otto Apel's sinnsinkarnationspotenz (Lindhardt 1989: 8) and Christian Kock's virkningspotensial (Kock 2008). These terms describe the ability of language to direct our consciousness towards specific interpretations, determining the likelihood of texts generating specific responses, whether aesthetic or political.

(4) The brightest star in our night sky, Sirius, is in fact a dual star system consisting of the main star Sirius A and a white dwarf, Sirius B. Sirius C, as mentioned in the song "To Sirius" is a fictional third star belonging to this system.

(5) In the case of First Aid Kit, there is also an implicit tradition of Swedish folk music and 1960s folk revival music asserting influence on the band's style, which, although the band prefers to highlight its North American influences, nevertheless is part of how audiences may perceive the meaning of their style.

(6) The loss of a political edge may be a plausible explanation as to what led some indie artists to approach the folk genre in the 1990s, the movement that initiated indie folk as a separate genre. In any case, indie folk seems to have continued indie rock's trajectory towards non-confrontational song lyrics.

(7) I am reminded of Timothy Morton's argument that ecological awareness in the Anthropocene takes the form of the ourobos, the self-swallowing snake, or a Möbius strip, a geometric figure twisted to have only one side, so that following the path will ultimately lead back to oneself (Morton 2016: 108-9).

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