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“Analysis beyond Notation in XXth and XXIst Century Music”

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Kaleidoscoping the Simple: Graphic Representations and Form in The Black Key’s “Lonely Boy”

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Abstract

Formal definition of songs in popular music is often thought of as a simple operation of detecting the juxtaposition of sections such as verse, chorus, bridge, special and so on. In the first part of my paper I propose a different theoretical outlook on the problem of form, showing how it can be fruitfully approached if considered as a system of four underlying principles in a dynamic equilibrium: repetition, superimposition, modularity and stratification.

In the second part of the paper a quick survey on the specific case study of The Black Key’s “Lonely boy” shows these different forces at work. The relationships between the various formal principles can be best understood through different sorts of graphic representational strategies, gaining different perspectives on the same object. This multiplication of viable vantage points presents a twofold analytical relevance: it opens the interpretation of the structural traits of cultural objects as part of a complex semiotic system, at same time helping reconstruct a network of meanings which represents their own unique features.

Keywords: Popular song, form, meaning, structure, music analysis, The Black Keys, “Lonely boy”



Caleidoscopio de lo simple: las representaciones gráficas y la forma de “Lonely boy” de The Black Keys

Resumen

La definición de la forma en las canciones de la música popular es a menudo considerada una operación simple que consiste en detectar la yuxtaposición de secciones tales como el verso, el estribillo, el puente, y el *vamp*, entre otras. En la primera parte del artículo propongo una perspectiva diferente sobre el problema de la forma, mostrando cómo ésta puede ser provechosamente analizada si se la considera un sistema que contiene cuatro principios subyacentes en equilibrio dinámico: repetición, superposición, modularidad y estratificación. En la segunda parte del artículo, una rápida encuesta sobre el caso específico de la canción “Lonely boy” muestra esos principios en acción. Las relaciones entre los principios formales pueden ser entendidas mediante diferentes estrategias de representación gráfica con el propósito de obtener diferentes puntos de vista del mismo objeto. La multiplicación de posibles puntos de vista presenta una doble relevancia analítica: posibilita la interpretación de los rasgos estructurales de los objetos culturales como parte de un complejo sistema semiótico y, a la vez, ayuda a reconstruir una red de significados que representan sus propios rasgos distintivos.

Palabras clave: canción popular, forma, significado, estructura, análisis musical, The Black Keys, “Lonely boy”

Caleidoscópio do simples: as representações gráficas e a forma de “Lonely Boy” de The Black Keys

Resumo

A definição formal de canções na música popular é muitas vezes pensada como uma operação simples de detecção da justaposição de seções tais como o verso, o refrão, a ponte e a *vamp*, entre outras. Na primeira parte deste artigo proponho um olhar teórico diferente sobre o problema da forma, mostrando como pode ser abordado se for considerado um sistema de quatro princípios básicos num equilíbrio dinâmico: repetição, superposição, modularidade e estratificação.

Na segunda parte do artigo uma abordagem rápida ao caso específico da canção “Lonely Boy” dos The Black Key mostra esses princípios em ação. As relações entre os vários princípios formais podem ser melhor entendidas através de diferentes estratégias de representação gráfica com o objetivo de obter diferentes pontos de vista do mesmo objeto. A multiplicação de possíveis pontos de vista tem uma dupla relevância analítica: possibilita a interpretação dos características estruturais dos objetos culturais como parte de um complexo sistema semiótico e, ao mesmo tempo, ajuda a reconstruir uma rede de significados que representam as suas próprias características distintivas.

Palavras-chave: canção popular, forma, significado, estrutura, análise musical, The Black Keys, "Lonely Boy"

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Defining the form of a popular song is a problem whose apparent simplicity is often belied by its theoretical underpinnings and inner complexity. Most of the attempts made so far to systematize our knowledge of this matter have privileged a perspective based on the segmentation of a song into well-defined sections associated with special formal functions, with conventional labels such as intro, verse, chorus, bridge, special, pre-chorus, break, and so on¹. What I want to discuss in this article is not the use of this terminology in itself; rather, I want to argue that challenging such a conception of form in popular song could be a step forward in imagining the analysis of a song as: “an *individual* and *imaginative* account of musical events and their interrelations within a particular piece of music” (Hanninen 2012: 15). In my attempt to do that, I will focus on a single song, The Black Key's “Lonely boy”, as an example in which the relationship between structure and content, form and meaning can afford different, in some cases also contradictory, readings. Looking at this song through the lens of four basic organizational principles led my particular understanding of this song to different areas of signification. The result of such shifts is the consideration that, when a track is approached holistically (Aitken 1997), questions related to form as the reconstruction of the meaningful relationship between structure and communicative content can have multiple answers, and move the consideration of the aspect of a song from its individual structural features to the sort of processes that are involved in its construction as a media object. In turn, this also raises issues related to the visualization of specific aspects of the song's organization. In this respect, forms of representation that do not involve transcription on staff notation have improved my understanding of single elements of the track, above all when placed within a broader picture where they can find their respective place as part of my overall interpretation of the song².

I will start by considering song as a multimedia construction, in which words and music dynamically interact in setting the stage on which a narrative project will be deployed. Then I will consider the processes of layering (Krimms 2000) which are typical of popular music tracks as compositional objects based on recording and editing. I will discuss these compositional aspects as capable of triggering different possibilities for the listener to become involved in the relational network designed by the materiality of its sound. Multimediality and layering highlight the syntactical development of a song, but its paradigmatic organization also has to be taken into account. Doing this, I will distinguish between repetition and modularity as two complementary forces that define the similarities between recurring events in the course of the song, whose primary role is to articulate its particular narrative project. What I want to achieve at the end of this survey is to propose a set of relevant points of view from which the formal features of “Lonely

¹ See for example Fabbri (1996), Everett (2009: 134-156), Ulrich (2011), Biamonte (2011), Tagg (2012: 393-416) and von Appen-Frei-Hauenschild (2012). This terminology is often borrowed from manuals and practical methods of songwriting, such as Weissman (2001), Rooksby (2003), Peteryk-Austin-Cathy (2010).

² The context in which this paper was originally presented was the session at the VIII European Music Analysis Conference (Leuven 2014), entitled *Analysis beyond Notation in XXth and XXIst Century Music*. I want to thank the other panellists and the audience of these sessions for their work and intellectual stimuli (together with the anonymous reviewer), which helped me to dramatically improve and broaden the perspectives and the content of this article.

boy” could be interpreted, in order to gain a richer view of it as an “architectural construction”, whose structural features lay the foundations for an open semantics, rather than preceding it: “[...] the architecture of ambiguity is fundamental to the practice of songwriting and the social life of songs. It is the play with a song’s ambiguities that opens up possibilities, accommodating different types of structural modifications yet still retaining its enduring characteristics” (Negus-Astor 2015: 241).

1. Preliminary discussion

1.1. Why “Lonely boy”?

The original reason why I choose The Black Keys’ “Lonely boy” was the worldwide success of the song in 2012³. I started from a ‘statistical’ interest for a song whose popularity qualifies it as a well-known (and widely appreciated, we could presume) example of “pop song” within the Anglo-American mainstream repertoire. Its success bears witness to a global consumption, with the presence of a large base of listeners agreeing that it was a pleasurable, as well as recognizable in its essence, subject for aesthetic appreciation. It furthermore offers an example of a sort of “quintessential” song, particularly from a formal point of view, in which a few basic elements can be easily identified and immediately related to levels of both structure and meaning, which are the two poles of the discourse that will be developed over the course of this article. However, when I started my analysis, I was struck by a growing awareness that such a seemingly simple formal organization could be seen from different points of view, allowing for a plurality of distinct formal readings of the text itself. Finally, the limited magnitude of the example allows me to shift my attention among different features, providing an exercise in the comparison of a variety of analytical methods and concepts coming from popular music studies, musicology and ethnomusicology. The apparent simplicity of “Lonely boy” opens up to a multiplicity of different readings; a corollary of this first analysis and an agenda for future research, then, would be to continue along this path and see whether other songs that share a similar success can be consistent with the same characteristic of openness to different –even contrasting– readings and multiple instances of meaning formation and identification.

1.2. Methodological perspectives

From the point of view of musical analysis, the main issue when dealing with the form of a popular music track is that the object of our attention is a recorded artifact, whose primary compositional materials are performative traces on some kind of media support⁴. This raises a few questions when one tries to define formal structures straightforwardly, which are fundamentally different from those opened by works whose primary mean of preservation is the score, and for which recordings act as a second-degree interpretation. In a realm where this relationship is inverted, to deal with the same problem we need other theoretical tools that still have to be

³ In 2012 it reached the top as best rock song in *Billboard*’s chart, cfr. <http://www.billboard.com/charts/2012/year-end> [accessed: October 19, 2015].

⁴ Here I use the term “track” to indicate the ideal performance consigned to record as defined by Moore (2012: 15-16).

developed and integrated in music studies. As Simon Frith and Simon Zagorski-Thomas have argued in their introduction to the reader *The Art of Record Production*: “[...] in musicology classes, in courses in music theory and analysis, the focus is still the score; the study of recording as a material or musical object has largely been left to media or cultural studies modules” (2012: 2). The record is a kind of textuality capable of carrying a large amount of information, whose description is difficult without a basic knowledge of the technical processes at the core of its realization⁵. What is specific of recorded tracks is that their formal structure is inseparable from their material existence as products designed to be mediatized and distributed within an industrial production system. It is thus difficult to assess the definition of the formal features separating them from the alleged –i.e. technologically constructed– performance through which any of these sound artifacts reach and interact with their listeners⁶. The acknowledgment of this direct relationship between records and perceivers as a crucial dimension in the current panorama of popular music analysis is the turning point around which listening as an interpretative act can be reconstructed as a relational field of possible meanings, a constellation of subjective replies triggered by a text⁷. The potential of representation as a process of objectification and visualization of some specific aspects of music –which is at the beginning of any analytical– lies in the plurality of its possible results; their overall collation can greatly enrich the perspective of the analyst on a specific object⁸. In this sense, my attempt here is to provide some theoretical and practical bases to address the analysis of “Lonely boy” without reducing its musical experience to some basic constitutive principles, aiming rather at reconstructing a complex map we can only expand, but never expect to finish.

A direct consequence of these considerations is the relevance I have tried to give to the syntagmatic over the paradigmatic aspects of music, the latter usually being associated more closely with the definition of form in popular music, as a sequence of neatly divided parts and sections. While this is surely the way musicians describe and think about their creations *a posteriori*, taking into account the point of view of the listener and his/her experience has led me to focus on a different perspective, that first proceeds by following the temporal unfolding of

⁵ On this last point, Eliot Bates (2014: 17) argues that, with respect to the ‘traditional’ abilities requested to analytically engage with Western art music: “[...] an equivalent baseline for popular music studies would include the ability to understand recorded music theory and analysis, ear training skills geared towards hearing production techniques (also called ‘reverse-engineering’ the recording process), and a basic practical knowledge of how recording work, studio musicianship and production/arrangement is done”.

⁶ “Mediatized performance [...] is not just performance mediated by a microphone or television camera (for instance), but is performance whose very identity is, at least in part, shaped by those mediating processes” (Sanden 2012: 45). The theoretical background against which Sanden provides this definition is built upon the writings of Philip Auslander (2008) and Jean Baudrillard (1981).

⁷ In this respect an especially interesting approach consists in the attempt to build analyses of popular music as a collective practice, as developed in the recent *Song Interpretation in 21st-Century Pop Music*. In the introduction of the book, the authors write: “When every member of a group is arguing for his or her own interpretation by connecting it to the sounding structure of the music that may have provoked this meaning, then group work will put forth on a small-scale what musical analysis is all about in the first place: the communication of your individual interpretation of a piece of music to enhance our common understanding of it” (von Appen *et al.* 2015: 4).

⁸ A preliminary discussion and a survey of different methods of visualizing a song’s structure can be found in Fabbri (2014).

music, and then moves on to frame and classify its formal elements according to their specific patterns of similarity and recurrence. My aim in doing this is to try not to focus on pre-constituted paths of formal development, but to consider musical elements as “materials”, which trigger constellations of structural and cultural association in their listeners as they are heard (Dibben 2003: 194-199). Such a conception, while freeing discourse about form from the anxiety to find “the right solution” for processes of segmentation and focusing on the different paths that perception of organized sounds can elicit, also has the upside of obliterating the distinction between “primary” and “secondary” parameters (Meyer 1989) (or “syntactic” and “statistic”, according to Meyer’s later terminological revision (Meyer 1998)), and bringing our attention back to the relationship between elements, not towards the elements in themselves. As early as 1968, Edward T. Cone sketched a contrast between the “synoptic comprehension’ of the formal values of a work [...] with the ‘immediate apprehension’ of its sensuous surfaces and of its parts” (Cone 1985: 158). In the context of music theory, the gradual inclusion of alternative paradigms to the syntactical-grammatical one given by traditional morphology dates back at least to the second half of the 19th and early 20th century, when in the theoretical writings of Hugo Riemann, Ernst Kurth and even Heinrich Schenker the consideration of form

[...] loses its systematic character and becomes part of an analytical process that involves all the dimensions of a composition; [...] Form is no longer a schematization or abstraction of physical events, but is understood as the way in which time is configured by sound, i.e., in the opposite sense, how the way in which compositionally elaborated sound progresses through time (Borio 2003: 204)⁹.

If such a shift was necessary for approaches devoted to the analysis of musical scores, it is all the more needed when we confront recorded texts. In the theoretical model I will use to analyse The Black Keys’s “Lonely boy”, then, my main categorical opposition will be between continuity and discontinuity, those two terms being understood from the point of view of different categories of an underlying organizational framework operating within a musical object. The gap between these two categories has been underlined by Kofi Agawu as arising from a detachment between the methods of music analysis and its objects:

[...] music theorists working with Romantic repertoires have so far not invested considerably in accounts of discontinuity. Their methods all too often produce connections and continuities; explanations aim at promoting cohesion rather than breaks, fissures, or incoherence. [...] with this commitment to their methods rather than to the peculiarities of a given work of art, analysts undervalue what may sometimes be a central principle of structure (Agawu 2009: 93).

In this respect the process of visualizing sounds is a powerful tool to tackle the hiatus between what is heard and what can be transcribed on paper or on a computer screen, and to find ways in which it can be acknowledged and problematized, rather than accepted uncritically. It is

⁹ [...] perde il suo carattere sistematico e diventa parte di un processo analitico che coinvolge tutte le dimensioni della composizione; [...] La forma non è più una schematizzazione o astrazione di eventi fisici; essa viene intesa come il modo in cui il tempo viene configurato attraverso il suono, ossia, per converso, come il modo in cui il suono elaborato compositivamente percorre il tempo (Borio 2003: 204).

in the “blank spaces” between theory and practice, enunciation and reception, that we can catch a glimpse of the multilayered –and often contradictory– network of relationships that connects form with its content, and therefore structure with meaning. Bridging those contradictions is still a central issue in popular music analysis, where the distance between what can be notated on staff notation and what is perceptually relevant is all the larger.

One way to address the central issue of mapping such “blank spaces” relies on the graphical representation of some parameters that are considered crucially relevant to shed light on specific aspects of the organization of a song that could be evident in listening but that are “resistant” to the notational representation of sound phenomena. This is a typical situation especially in popular music cultures, where compositional practices that are perhaps loosely tied to staff notation are more often than not “heavily mixed in with aural practices, and used as a supplement rather than a major learning resource” (Green 2001: 38). Such visual presentations of specific aspect of a song will be used, in the following pages, to open possible interpretations of its structural organization. As Pierre Couprie has noted, in the analysis of electroacoustic music –a broad category stretching within whose boundaries a phonographic artifact like “Lonely boy” could also be included– it is the complexity of the sonic reality of these musics that inextricably binds analysis and graphical representation, allowing multiple purposes such as segmentation, annotation, overall structural interpretation (2004). Both the categories of symbolic and iconic functions that can be afforded by visual means have the effect of “enable[ing] multi-faceted representations to be constructed, each presenting a specific insight into the work, for a specific public” and resulting in an “enrichment of listening” (Couprie 2004: 110, 113). They are conceived as maps indeed, as they symbolically represent an object in its temporal and organizational characteristics according to some graphical conventions, chosen accordingly to the formal features that, in every paragraph, will be considered central to developing a possible reading of the sound events presented in the song. On the one hand, it is their sum, and their consideration as a whole, that is able to give a realistic reconstruction of the territory which is being mapped, in an attempt to bridge the gap between reality and its representation –and between the spatial representation of diagrams, tables and notation and the temporal dimension of music as a real experiential object (Mellberg 2006: 18-23)– that can be tentatively sketched in its complexity, but probably never fully overcome. On the other hand, the abstraction implied in every form of representation of sound phenomena marks the assumption of a point of view from which the object is observed, and is an analytical operation on its own. From the perspective I want to explore in this article, a multiplication of possible graphical representations is consistent with an holistic approach to cultural objects as “constellations” of different meanings, that are at the same time restricted by the specific elements used to build a particular song (which marks the limit of what can be included and what is referentially excluded), and opened by the processes that links those elements in a relational network characterized by a specific formal configuration. In this tension between the indexical reference of sound elements and their association with a larger set of connotations, the process of signification emerges as a negotiation between the song and its listeners. Here different representations of the structural organization of an object could help unpack these possibilities, both as a mean to represent its inner complexity and to offer interpretative readings that, perhaps,

can match (or open new, or bring to conscience) some interpretative readings already present in the experience of listening. By “exploding” the musical object into a plurality of “surfaces” not necessarily unified by an inner “depth”, such an analytical attitude attempts to “capture the fundamental contingency of musical experience” by putting onto the foreground what Robert Fink calls the “pleasures of surface”, opposed to “the defensive security of the depths” (2001: 137).

2. Continuities in the form of the song: Multimediality and layering

2.1. Multimediality

The first principle that shapes the form of “Lonely boy” is inherent in its belonging to the broad genre of vocal music, thus between different forms of communication that allow us to consider it as “musical multimedia” (Cook 1998). A clear and wide ranging definition of this principle operating in a song –as well as generally in vocal music– has been given by Stefano La Via, when he speaks of the “three-dimensional nature” (2006) that arises from the interaction between lyrics and music. In his view words and music, when participating in a song or any other form of vocal music, have a combined effect that can be explained and accounted for only with a consideration of their complementary roles: from their joint action originates what he calls a lyrical-musical form of expression, which is more than the mere sum of their structural features and gives origin to specific patterns of connection between form and meaning whose application is geographically and chronologically widespread and transcultural¹⁰. According to Cook (1998: 98-130), the analysis of any multimedia structure proceeds from the ‘difference test’ to which its individual components can be subjected, in order to verify whether their organization can be related to the principles of consistency, contrast or coherence. In a song, we can see the articulation of such a relationship between lyrics and their musical setting under two different aspects: (1) the macroformal distribution of words and music that results in a sequence of sections with and without text; (2) consequently, the synchronic, dischronic or a-chronic –meaning the presence of a single layer– superimposition between the two media components.

The first level of formal definition that arises from a comparison between the structural organization of words and music can be found at the level of large-scale organization. In “Lonely boy” this aspect can be represented using a table which shows how lyrics and words alternate, and their correspondences from the point of view of melodic and harmonic content:

¹⁰ An example of this principle applied to a wide array of vocal music throughout the centuries can be found in La Via (2014).

00:05	Intro (A ₁)		Break 2 (A ₁)
02:23			
00:16	Intro (A ₂)		Break 2 (A ₂)
02:34			
00:28	Intro (A ₃)	Break 1 (A ₃)	
01:24			
00:38	<i>Well I'm so above you...</i>	<i>Well, your mama kept you...</i>	
01:36			
01:02	<i>Oh oh oh oh / I got a love...</i>	<i>Oh oh oh oh / I got a love...</i>	<i>Oh oh oh oh / I got a love...</i>
01:42			
02:47			

Table 1. Distribution of instrumental and sung section in "Lonely Boy".

This tabular representation of the song underlines the contrast between sung and musical sections, that breaks the entire structure into three macroformal parts; in any of them, though, the proportion between the two components is unevenly distributed. By the opposition between sung and instrumental moments, the multimedia construction of the song produces its meanings by dynamically shifting between the connotative potential of the words and the denotative potential of the musical elements, creating fruitful spaces for multiple signification. Starting with the maximum presence of music with respect to lyrics in the first columns, the song first affirms its identity by attracting the bodily response of the listener, and –when this kind of relationship is established– then dramatically inverts this proportion in the part aligned into the second column. Then the listener is led into a third part where the beginning of the song is mimicked and abridged in what seems like a “summarized version” of its first macro-formal segment.

The second issue related to the song as a multimedia construction is the consideration of the temporal organization of words and music in their mutual relationship, in which the possibilities of dischrony, synchrony and achrony arises. These three possibilities trace a single line of development throughout the song, that defines the articulation of the narration and its phases, according to a climactic pattern going from achrony –in the introduction, where only the instrumental background is heard– to dischrony –during the verse– and synchrony –in the chorus.

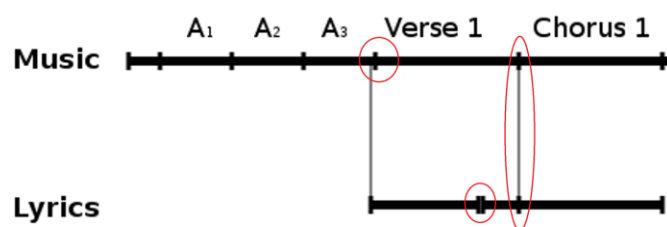


Figure 1. Patterns of achrony, dischrony and synchrony between lyrics and music in the first part of "Lonely Boy".

The red circles in Figure 1 highlight this process in a linear representation of the temporal relationship between words and music from the instrumental introduction through the entire first

chorus. Here we see how the beginning of the lyrics precedes the first bar of the verse in strictly musical terms, the tune being built on four-beat long melodic segments that begin on the fourth beat of the bar and articulating a metrical dissonance with the underlying rhythmical pattern of the instrumental parts¹¹. The first six lines are displaced with respect to the regular frame provided by the drums and the instrumental riffs, beginning on the last beat of each bar, even though they both are built on a 4/4 basic cell. The last two lines, in contrast, anticipate both lyrically and musically the restored parallelism between the metrical organization of words and melody at the beginning of the chorus. The effect of this level of superimposition is to soften the passage from the more unstable and uncentered verse to the collective explosion of the chorus, actively exploiting the song's fundamental ambiguity between contempt and celebration of loneliness. Lyrically, in the first section the song's protagonist is alone, but nevertheless tries to reclaim a dominant position by mocking and showing contempt for his partner. By contrast, with the beginning of the chorus, both voices and instruments conform to an organization in synch with the beat, thus pointing towards a similarity between the two media components, rather than towards difference, using the terminology proposed by Cook (1998). The chorus inverts the mode of connection between lyrics and music used during the verse, by celebrating the condition of the "lonely boy" with a renewed synchronization of the parts, not to mention the sudden introduction of the (female) choir and the changing accompanying patterns of the guitars, that switch from the a sparse riff to an unison on power chords. The combined effect of the temporal organization of words and music affects the form of the song as a continuous sounding phenomenon, stretching from the beginning through the end, in which what is relevant is the temporal succession of the individual sections and their vertical alignment. This aspect of "Lonely boy" can be best understood by a visualization that emphasizes the syntagmatic development of the track: it is thus more qualitative than quantitative, and focuses more on contrast than on equivalence relationships.

If the multimedia construction of a song can be conceived in terms of a transition from personal to collective expression of specific feelings, and thus between connotation and denotation, the trajectory drawn in "Lonely boy" by such a process is clearly oriented towards the first pole. The organization of the song through the temporal organization of lyrics and instrumental accompaniment defines the form of "Lonely boy" as tripartite, where each cycle is the shortened version of the previous one. In terms of the connection between form and meaning, the message of the song exponentially insists on its own thesis, working through anticipation and restatement: we are all lonely boys expecting our lovers to show up, and this is also an opportunity for the individual to be mirrored by other fellow human beings and to feel part of a community. We see, then, how –at the level of large-scale organization– the music does not merely parallel the lyrics, but rather provides a temporal framework for them to be exposed and perceived, acting not as a mere vehicle for them, but spacing them in order to reach their listeners more effectively.

¹¹ On the role of metrical dissonance in rock music in relation to both the genre itself and the historical development of songwriting, see Biamonte (2014).

2.2. Layering

I borrow the second principle I want to propose for defining the form of “Lonely boy” from Adam Krims’ concept of “layering” (2000: 46-92). Others have described popular music’s musical structure as being built on different strata—from Allan Moore’s distinction of four functional layers in popular music (Moore 2012: 19-28) to recent approaches to electronic dance music (Tagg 1994: 367-387; Hawkins 2003: 80-102; Spaziante 2007: 101-129; Everett 2009: 155-156; Bratus 2014)—, but Krims uses it specifically to define the “practice of building up the musical tracks via the assemblage of disparate musical sources, creating polyrhythmic (and polytimbral) textures” (2000: 52)¹². A relevant feature of this category is that such a definition of layering implies the consideration of the conditions of production of popular music as the creation of recorded tracks, and the acknowledgement of this process as the construction of “a simulated performance in a simulated space” (Wicke 2009: 157) resulting from operations of vertical multitrack editing.

In “Lonely boy” we can clearly see the principle of layering at work in the definition of a distinctive kind of relational space in the overall development of the track, that reveals a large-scale trajectory in the treatment of the overall sound. From this point of view, the trajectory implied by the track is circular and symmetrical: it begins with the first sound we hear (an e₁ played on the lower string of the electric guitar) and ends with a *glissando* of a single synthesizer note towards the higher end of the sound spectrum. The track begins with a single instrument—at first playing an isolated sound at the very beginning of the track, soon replaced by the first riff—and then introduces a dramatic expansion in frequency range before the attack of the drums. In section A₂ the higher end of the spectrum is reinforced by the melodic instrumental *hook* played on the synthesizer. Then, in the sequence A₃-verse-chorus, the song undertakes a new phase of expansion until the climactic point of the chorus, then repeated and concluded with an abridged version of the crescendo with the A₁-A₂-chorus in the final part of the song.

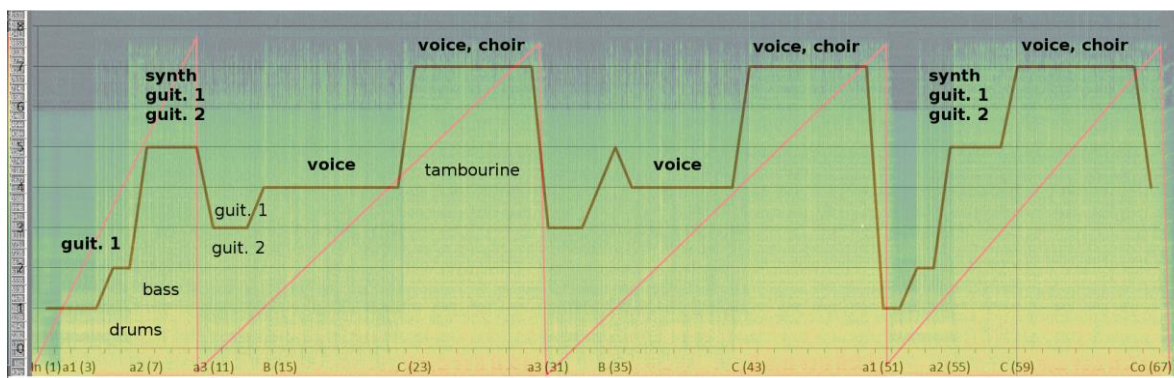


Figure 2. Sonogram of the song, with the indication of the number of the instrument playing in each section (melodic parts are highlighted in bold).

Layering makes explicit at least one feature of “Lonely boy”’s formal definition that was not acknowledged when considering the interaction between words and music: a different

¹² Krims’ usage of the term is, in turn, borrowed from Rose (1994: 38-39).

definition of the energetic aspects of form and a different formal segmentation. A possible representation for this second formal account is shown in the above image, where the sonogram is used as the background for a graph representing the superimposition of different instruments over the course of the song. From this point of view, the track has a first introductory section that ends with section A₂, then the song develops through a literal repetition of the same trajectory of intensity and ends with a compressed version of the preceding formal cycles. A comparison with the formal segmentation with the one proposed in the previous paragraph shows that we can now divide up the track into four sections, rather than three: a first introductory section until section A₂, a twice recurring verse-chorus section, and a last repetition of the first two initial instrumental parts leading to the final chorus. Layering does not entirely change our conception of the track's formal definition: rather, it changes our perspective on it, and focuses our attention on the introduction of the song as a prelude "in small scale" of the processual development of the entire track.

Another perspective on layering as a structuring principle can be gained by looking at the instrumental texture, which adds to the statistical model provided by the sonogram a "syntactical" measurement of the number and role of the instruments. The new information that this second level of representation provides underlines the relationship between the melody (in bold) and the accompaniment, giving us information about what Eric Clarke (1999) would read in terms of subject position, and Allan Moore defines as the persona/environment relation (2005). The nature of the intensification process showed by the sonogram is then revealed as an inversion of roles between background and melody and their relative instrumentation. The song starts with a riff of a guitar alone (1:0)¹³ accompanied by the drum (1:1), followed by the A₂ section, in which more instruments are involved in the figural part than in the rhythmic section (3:2). Then, with the beginning of the main formal cycle of the song, we go back to the situation in which the background is again foregrounded (0:4), even during the verse with the addition of the voice (1:4). In the chorus the proportion between the two functions is again reversed, mainly thanks to the insertion of the female backing vocals, introducing an undetermined relation of the type "many vs. few" into the textural balance. The climactic nature of the verse-chorus cycle creates a dynamic opposition with the content of the lyrics: in the first section the one-way dialogue of the main character with his absent partner is aurally staged as a monologue, and in the second the assertion of his loneliness is celebrated collectively, urging listeners to identify themselves with the singer and to engage in what seems to be acknowledged (and cheered, perhaps bitterly) as an universal condition of shared solitude.

3. Discontinuities in the form of the song: Repetition and modularity

3.1. Repetition

As shown by Richard Middleton's pioneering works (1983, 1990: 247-294; 2006: 137-197), repetition is perhaps the most prominent feature of popular song from a morphological point of

¹³ The numbers in parentheses refer to the instruments playing the melody (first figure) or background patterns (figure 2).

view, whether in the macro-formal succession of its parts (which situate themselves at the level that Richard Middleton calls “discursive repetition” and Philip Tagg “diataxis”) or at the micro-formal level of the “musematic repetition” that has to do with the horizon of a cognitive “extended present” (that Philip Tagg labels as “syncrisis”) (Tagg 2012: 383-484). As a structuring force, repetition works because it settles a horizon of expectations in the course of listening. Middleton connects such processes with the Barthesian concepts of *plaisir* and *jouissance*, and therefore with the Freudian theory of the pleasure principle arising from the the “friction” that “[...] can operate between the expectations listeners may bring to a track, on the basis of normative assumptions, and a track’s frequent refusal to conform to those assumptions” (Moore 2012: 163). Repetition, in Middleton’s own words, is deeply connected with the organization of time because:

[...] the flow of time is shaped by periodic divisions associated with the ends and the beginnings of phrases and sections; these moments, which usually coincide with divisions between lines and verses in the lyrics, articulate the temporal process hierarchically, so that, say, a shift from verse to chorus or the reprise of a previous section takes on a particular structural significance, allowing subordinate sets of relationships to work themselves out at lower levels between these ‘structural downbeats’ (Middleton 2000: 174).

One of the ways to visualize this level of formal organization of a song can be represented as in the table below, where the temporal duration of any part and its repetition is measured according to the minimal unit of time organization, i.e. the 1-beat pattern of the tambourine in the chorus of “Lonely boy”, and highlighted with a different graphic fillings.

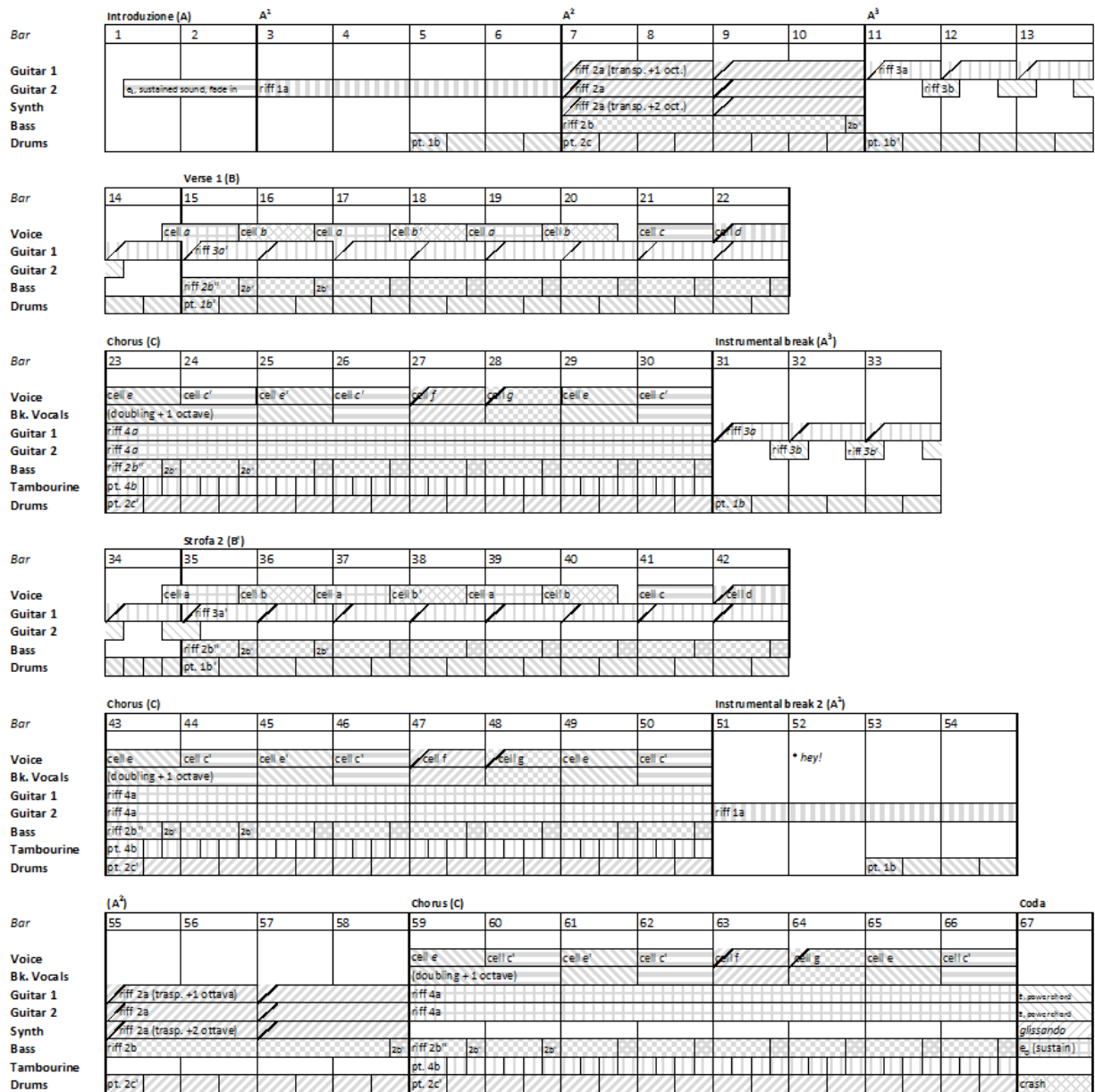


Figure 3. Visualization of the song structure, according to patterns of repetition.

Taking into account this level of formal organization means acknowledging how the individual instrumental and vocal parts relate to a shared temporal grid. In the chorus, for example, we see how all the patterns tend to conform to a regular periodicity in accordance with their common temporal grid, with the exception of the vocal motives labelled as *f* and *g*, which begin on the first off-beat of the bar (graphically represented by the diagonal line at the beginning of the pattern). This detail is meaningful, as in both of them the title is sung (*I'm a lonely boy*), and so they underline the culminating event of the track, giving more structural prominence to the vocal part in this specific moment by the use of metrical dissonance. At the other end of the spectrum

we can find the section A_3 of the introduction (then repeated at 01:25), in which only the 2-beat drum pattern regularly stresses the 4/4 organization of musical time, while the first guitar plays a 1-bar accompanying riff beginning off-beat and the second guitar a 2-beat rhythmic fill-in between bars. This latter element anticipates the main feature of the verse's vocal part, which is organized into 4-beat units beginning on the last beat of the bar (motives *a* and *b*). Mirroring the overall development of the chorus, then, the last part of the verse (lines 7-8, motives *c* and *d*) anticipates the emphasis on the beat of the former section, with their beginning in the first beat of the bar. In the diachronic development of "Lonely boy", I interpret this transition as a shift from convergence to divergence with respect to a metrical grid (from the first to the third part of the introduction), followed by a return from the latter to the former over the course of the verse-chorus sequence.

So far, we have treated what is called "musematic" repetition –i.e. the repetition of minimal musical units that occur one after the other– and have left aside the second typology of repetition considered by Middleton, the discursive one. I have done this on purpose, because I will treat the latter in the next paragraph, framing it against the broader formal principle of modularity. A literal interpretation of repetition is indeed more related to those events that are actually part of a continuity that can be fragmented into several equal parts –but at the same time it can also be composed of smaller modular units. Such an ambiguity can lead repetition to be used as an umbrella-term to define different structural levels. One example is the organization of the vocal part, in which motives *a* and *b* give origin to a macro-unit that is repeated three times over the course of the verse, and motives *e* and *c*, that are sequenced in a similar way at the beginning of the chorus, but repeated twice (we will return in the next paragraph to a structural and hermeneutic interpretation of the vocal part arising from such a consideration). In the bass riff accompanying the verse and chorus as well, the difference between these two formal principles can be discerned: the instrumental part is formed by a recurrent 1-bar pattern, which in turn is modularly constructed by two basic elements (labelled in the figure as $2b$ and $2b'$).



Example 1.

In the variant of the riff used under the verse and chorus ($2b'$), the interaction between modularity and repetition as a structural principle is even more nested: rhythmically it opposes a first part on the three first beats with the semiquaver-semiquaver-quaver figure on the fourth beat, and melodically it replicates the transition from e_1 to g_1 and a_1 , which is the real repeated pattern at the core of the sung sections of "Lonely boy". I have tried here to work with the differentiation between musematic and discursive repetition in terms of "repetition" and "modularity", which I think can be a possibility to describe musical processes more accurately.

From the point of view of communication, the use of different patterns of repetition is a sign of the goal-oriented strategy at the core of the formal construction of the song, reinforcing the ambiguity between stability and instability, collective affirmation and individual loneliness. In

other words, repetition specifies the temporal quality of the narration provided by the articulation between music and words, whereas layering –as we have already seen– gives some hints as to the relational quality behind the narrative project that unfolds as the song proceeds. Repetition, as understood here, can be seen as a symbol of the universal value of the situation depicted in the song, favouring identification in the listener by presenting a recurring set of musical and melodic material that can be internalized and become part of anyone's conceptualization of a specific situation. It works precisely because it does not rely on paradigmatic equivalence, as such a thing is non-existent in music. Furthermore, a general consideration of the effect of repetition cannot overshadow the internal dynamics according to which music is constructed, considering it as the result of purely paradigmatic relationships (Adorno 1991: 144-145). Rather than going backwards in time, repetition adds to itself in an accumulative way, and can thus not only be represented as above, in its qualitative aspects, but can also be displayed quantitatively in a graph such as the one below.

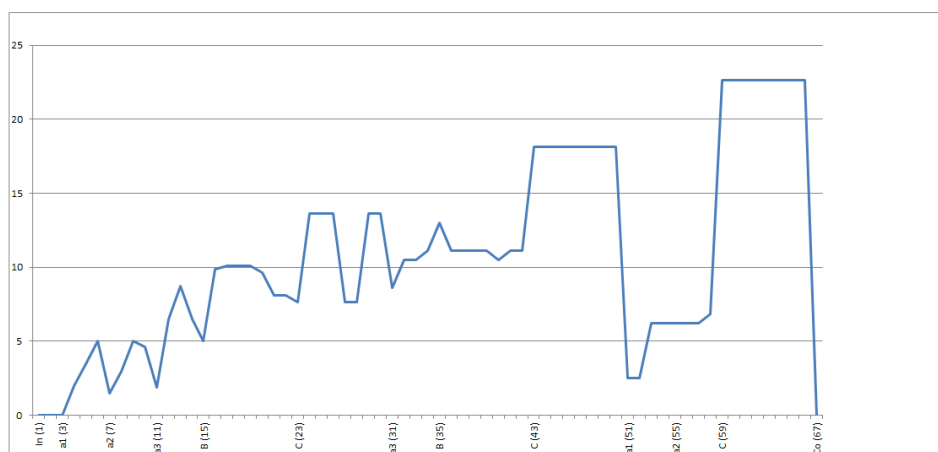


Figure 4. Accumulation of repeated patterns in "Lonely Boy".

Here, I have assigned to each instrumental and vocal part a numeric quotient (from 1 to 4) inversely proportional to the length of the repeated pattern, from a minimum of 1-beat (4) to the maximum of 2-bar (1). On the basis of these values, I have calculated a sort of "repetition quotient" for each bar (also applying a multiplying factor of 1.25 when the repetition is discursively repeated over time). In the overall development of a track, what the graphical representation makes clear is another possibility for the macroformal segmentation of the track, this time understandable as a two-part sequence: the former closing with the second recurrence of the verse-chorus unit, and the latter beginning with section A₁ and A₂ just before the final chorus.

3.2. Modularity

A discussion of repetition can never be detached from the last formal principle that can be seen at work within a large range of popular songs, "Lonely boy" being no exception: modularity. As I have already stated, I prefer it over a term such as 'discursive repetition'. The difference is not only terminological, but comes from another point of view regarding the same phenomenon;

focusing on the presence of a different kind of repetition throughout the song means highlighting the tension between what is continuous and what is discontinuous, from the point of view of proximity and sameness/difference, respectively. A modular organization is what assures formal recognisability in a song, in which individual sections act as part of an ideal referent, –“systems of rules” or “formal schemes” (Caporaletti 2005: 43)– in spite of the performative variants that can modify to different degrees its various recorded or live performances. The concept of ‘model’ developed in the analysis of traditional music provides an important theoretical basis here, that also can help underline the crucial relevance of a modular logic in the form of popular song (Nettl 1974, Lortat-Jacob 1987, and Arom 1987). Models, intended as clusters of musical elements that set boundaries on a musicians’ behaviour if he/she wants to be understood as playing a specific song or musical piece, can be thought of as sequences of different events. They can (but can also not) reappear in the course of the song, generating in listeners expectations about the temporal and processual development of the song. Listening to a new song, for example, would create a mental framework consistent with the most widespread strategies used to organize this particular compositional genre, which is often characterized by the presence of recurrent patterns. Studying the Beatles’ repertoire, for example, Franco Fabbri (1996) has acknowledged the presence of two possibilities, one that works through accumulation (Verse-Refrain), and another in which the listener’s attention is directed toward the beginning of the song (Chorus-Bridge). Considering modularity as a key source of formal tension in a song highlights the relevance of the processual aspect of music as a form of communication that unfolds over time, shifting between the two extremes of the recurrence of known elements and the introduction of new material. On the other hand, listening to a new performance or recording of a known song allows it to be identified and generates a set of expectations shaped by our previous experiences of the same song in terms of its overall modular organization.

The first level of the modular form of “Lonely boy” is clearly shown in the macro-formal profile of the song, as emerges from the table commented in the previous paragraph. As well as underlining the repetition of musematic units, we see here how the song is organized into several sections: a tripartite introduction, whose individual parts reappear later in the song as part of instrumental breaks, a verse repeated twice and interspersed with a climactic chorus. The latter also provides the conclusion of the song with a third literal reprise of the same words and music. But, as we began to sketch out in the preceding paragraph, modularity is so embedded in the structure of a song like this that it also influences its small-scale construction. In the vocal part, for example, the sung line is constructed through the interaction of four basic cells, marked with the letters *a* to *d*, that can be framed into phrasal units *a+b* and *c+d*. The first two units have a complementary profile: *a* is an ascending arc that goes from b_3 to d_4 passing through e_4 , while *b* draws a trajectory from b_3 to $c\#_4$ passing through a_3 and d_4 as extreme points. The third and fourth motive, on the contrary, have a consistent overall descending shape, articulating and repeating the transition from b_3 to e_3 in two different ways.

Well, I'm so a-bove you And it's plain to see But I came to love you A-ny - way So you
 pulled my heart out And I don't mind bleedin' And the whole time you keep me wait - ting Wait-ting wait-ting

Example 2. Modular organization of the melodic line in the first verse of "Lonely Boy".

Modules are constituted here by the association between motivic cells with profiles that can be paired by way of shared features, either contrast or similarity.

More interesting from the point of view of modularity is what happens in the chorus, that begins with the repeated introduction of a new melodic idea (*e*) –a static movement that begins and ends on b_3 , acting as a sort of prolongation of the starting point of the subsequent motive–, then introduces a slight variation of the *c* motive. The introduction of two new elements (*f+g*) is marked by motivic material, melodically associated with the twofold repetition of the song's title: the first inverts the cadential movement of motive *c* by going upward from e_3 to b_3 , and the second alternates the two pitches of d_4 and b_3 , concluding on the starting point of the final *e+c'* unit.

Oh oh oh oh I got a love that keeps me wait - ting Oh oh oh oh I got a love that keeps me wait - ting
 I'm a lone-ly boy I'm a lone-ly boy Oh oh oh oh I got a love that keeps me wait - ting

Example 3. Modular organization of the melodic line in the first verse of "Lonely Boy".

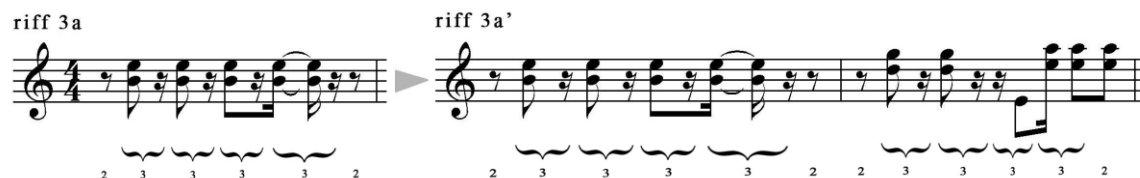
The lyrics also participate in this modular logic, as we can see in the table below, where a paradigmatic comparison of different sections allows us to clearly visualize not only the parallelism between the two verses, but also the role as a structural fulcrum played by motive *c*, which acts as a point of contact between the two sections. The recurrences are literal, highlighted in bold, as well as semantic, in italics, between the two verses; in the chorus the modular repetition of lyrics divides up the eight lines into four pairs that make of this section a small AABA form.

<p>Well, I'm so above you And it's plain to see But I came to love you <i>Anyway</i> So you pulled my heart out And I don't mind bleeding Any old time you keep me waiting Waiting, waiting</p>	<p>Oh, oh-oh I got a love that keeps me waiting Oh, oh-oh I got a love that keeps me waiting I'm a lonely boy I'm a lonely boy Oh, oh-oh I got a love that keeps me waiting</p>	<p>Well, your mama kept you But your daddy left you And I should've done you <i>Just the same</i> But I came to love you Am I born to bleed? Any old time you keep me waiting Waiting, waiting</p>
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Table 2. Lyrics of the song, according to patterns of modularity.

From a structural point of view, the vocal part of "Lonely boy" highlights a further point that reinforces the crucial role of modularity: there are musical or verbal elements, such as motive *c* in the vocal part or the line that ends with "keep/s me waiting", that do not necessarily belong to a certain section. On the contrary, they are shared elements in the development of the form as a sequencing of interlocking elements in which they operate as small-scale signs of unity against the differentiation into macro-formal sections. By emphasising that they belong to the song, rather than to a specific section, their role is to reinforce the reading of a song as a global communicative project where all the details can be part of a broader picture.

Similar considerations can be extended to other micro-formal elements of the song, such as in the transformation of the 1-bar riff 3a of the guitar (A_3) into the 2-bar riff ($3a'$) accompanying the verse.



Example 4. Modular organization in the transformation of the riff 3a.

Here we can see two processes working at the same time: the first is the symmetrical pattern of rests and notes that splits the 1-bar riff 3a into two mirroring parts characterized by 2+3+3 grouping, and the second is the use of the same rhythmical pattern for the second half of the $3a'$ riff, where the superimposed fourths of the first half are transposed, respectively, up a third and a fourth, according to the repeated bass progression from e to g and a. This latter bass progression is another modular element, since it is shared between the verse and the chorus, again overshadowing the clear differentiation between the two contrasting sections. The drums also follow a similar logic, by alternating between two basic patterns throughout different subsequent sections, working against the principle of a "pure" sectional logic in which adjacent sections are totally different. Pattern *b1* acts as a point of contact between the last section of the introduction

and the verse, making the transition between the two so easy to obtain that the second verse-chorus cycle is introduced by the reprise of this third part of the introduction. Pattern 2b, in contrast, is associated with the chorus and the other two parts of the introduction, that will actually be repeated in the climactic finale of the song, where the musematic repetition of the same rhythmical patterns for the longest period in the song also have the effect of bodily involving the listener through phenomena of entrainment.

Acknowledging the modular principle thus allow us to understand the structure of a song as a perceptual object in which different details are intertwined in a dynamic interaction, that affords multiple (and contrasting) levels of segmentation. In the example of "Lonely boy", while the sectional organization is clearly separated into instrumental parts, verses and choruses, there are forces that actively contrast this logic. It is particularly relevant here to note that they are focused, on the one hand, on stressing the concept of "waiting" (for example in the repetition of motif *c* in the vocal part or in the lyrics), and on the other hand, on the continuity of the drum and bass groove. The rhythmic section of the track has the role of providing the background for the communicative project of the song, and its continuity over different sections is both consistent with the idea of "being stuck in a situation" (waiting for something that brings a change in the present state of things), and with the physical call to dance. As a formal principle, I use the term modularity here, to attract attention to two different phenomena related to the formal organization of "Lonely boy": the macro-formal development of the song through the lyrics and their sectional organization, and the large-scale recurrence of the same musical elements throughout the sections defined above.

4. Conclusion: On analysing ambiguity

As emerges from the preceding analysis, "Lonely boy" seems not only to be a song about the loneliness of a boy who is not loved enough by his partner. It seems to be about the ambiguities of feelings that are implied in a torn relationship in which love and hate actually become undistinguishable. It seems to be about waiting, and a specific quality of waiting strongly related to the loneliness of a solitary expectancy for someone that we know almost certainly will not come. It seems to be about the pleasure of waiting as part of a loving relationship, and it seems to deny that waiting is in the least a pleasurable state of being. It seems to be about loneliness as implied in love, and as a shared feeling that every one of us has felt in some moments of his/her life, which goes beyond the subjective experience that the song recounts. It seems to be about being alone as well as being part of a "lonely crowd" (Riesman, Glazer, and Denney 2001) in which everyone is loved, and the sense of loneliness that the knowledge of such a situation implies. It seems to be about the recurrence of some events in the situations of life, and how they are somewhat new every time they recur. Most of it all, it seems to be about different perspectives on the relationship between love and waiting, loneliness and collective recognition, shared feelings and individual desire, absence and presence.

Analysis probably cannot tell anyone what a song is about, but perhaps can help its listeners unpack the possible readings of a cultural object when it comes into contact with individual experience and sensibility. Formal investigation, as understood in this paper, thus consists in

identifying the textual conditions that allow such readings, that I have tentatively grouped along two basic axes. The first is related to a consideration of the musical object in its development over time, as a syntagmatic chain that affects the apperception of song as a series of events, or as an organization of recurring patterns that can be paradigmatically listed and related according to their internal constitution. The second axis is related to the song as a narrative project with a specific internal articulation, affording an identification of the listeners with the point of view expressed by the song's authorial project. In their overall relationship, these two axes define the areas that the four formal principles, all structurally relevant in the construction of "Lonely boy", define as sites connecting structural features and opportunities for the emergence of meaning.

		Focus of analysis	
		<i>Continuity</i>	<i>Discontinuity</i>
Narrative project	<i>Articulation</i>	Multimedia	Modularity
	<i>Identification</i>	Layering	Repetition

Table 3.

Implying an interplay between lyrics and music, words provide the song with a precise content, and articulate the musical development with something that is more specifically connoted in terms of extra-musical reference and more openly readable to people with no specifically musical skills. They shape a narrative project that has a beginning and an end, like a poem or a short story; however, more than in these literary forms, it is expected for a song to be structured around sets of sections, that can be repeated or that simply occur one after the other, highlighting the significance of modularity in pointing towards different degrees of contrast and similarity. As a popular form, whose primary aim is to communicate, songs are deemed to trigger identification as they unfold in a dynamic between individual and collective instances, represented by the relational matrix provided by the opposition between background and melody. Finally, repetition is the mechanism through which possibilities of identification are multiplied for listeners, becoming part of his/her own way to conceptualize and define his/her own experiences by favouring memorization and bodily entrainment.

Graphic representations of musical events have played a crucial part in the analysis of song conducted along the lines sketched out in this paper, since they provide a way to access the complexity of song as a dense form of textuality represented by the recorded track. What Stan Hawkins defines as the "inextricable link between the musical and the recording parameter" goes hand in hand with the awareness and the subjective acknowledgement of the different perspectives from which a listener can approach the track as a perceptual object whose "overall structure [...], whilst being held together by numerous factors, is controlled and generated primarily by studio devices and processes" (Hawkins 2000: 65-66). Different representations of the single parameters and organizational structures of "Lonely boy" have opened multiple paths for the song's interpretation, disclosing a set of potential trajectories to navigate within its textual features. Such an openness serves both to make the narration of the song, especially in mainstream genres aimed at a general audience, more accessible and easily remembered, as well as giving coherence to a

communicative recorded artefact that attempts to transcend individual experience. Furthermore, it can be connected to the lineage that connects popular music with the orally transmitted music preceding the invention of the technology of sound reproduction, including the “structural limitations” inherent to traditional and collective forms of creativity (Nettl 2015: 296-301). The reconstruction of this structural network, that thanks to graphical means I have been able to –at least partially– unpack, is a way of reversing the perspective that privileges theoretical approaches to form focused on the segmentation and identification of schemes that are common to many songs as an objective of music analysis *per se* (form-as-content)¹⁴. Rather, the proposal sketched out in this paper, which is a preliminary introduction to a broader endeavour according to which every formal principle could be assessed on its own terms in the future, reverses this point of view (content-as-form). It could be a way of putting into the foreground the specific object and its underlying organizational logic, as has been suggested by Richard Middleton:

A [...] way to escape the formalist trap is to redefine the issue. Instead of ignoring “form”, one reconceptualises it in terms of *process*. The emphasis here is on the “internal” qualities of the musical flow, in all their detail, rather than on the “external” mould into which they may have been poured (2000: 146).

Generalization, then, is shifted from the realm of the particular –in which every object can be forced to fit into pre-determined frameworks– to the identification of the forces working behind every single track, capable of reconstructing the ways in which every listener understands and makes sense of his/her own experience. In this light, what I tried to do with this paper is to offer an overall look at the different kinds of processes that may be involved in the formal definition of a popular song, as a hub in which different paths of meaning formation can emerge and flourish every time a track becomes part of one’s own life.

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¹⁴ On the shortcomings of this type of analytical approach when dealing with popular music texts, see Fink (2002: 89-95).

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Biography / Biografía / Biografia

Alessandro Bratus received his PhD in Musicology in 2009 from the University of Pavia, where he is currently a Research Fellow. His teaching and research focus on analytical approaches to music and media in Anglo-American and Italian popular culture since the 1960s. He has published on musical and media experimentation in popular music, on the structural relationship between form and meaning, and on the trope of authenticity in contemporary media. He currently serves as a member of the Advisory Board of GATM (Study Group for Analysis and Music Theory) and is the editor of *Analitica: Online Journal of Music Studies*.

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