

# ARGUMENTATIVE STRUCTURES AND THE FUNCTIONS OF THE PRESS IN MUSIC REVIEWS

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## Introduction

The written media comprises a variety of different genres, such as: news report, letter to the editor, advertisements, column, background feature, review and so on. There is much controversy as to what defines and delimits a genre and the aim of this study falls away from tackling this issue. What is common sense, however, is the fact that the great majority of ‘established’ genres of the press can be easily recognised despite the difficulties in clearly stating sometimes what tells one genre from another. A habitual reader of magazines and/or newspapers would not be expected to have problems saying what is it that s/he is reading in terms of genre. ‘Visible’ characteristics such as presentation and format integrate with ‘invisible’ ones such as style and textual structure so as to guarantee the identification of the different and more common genres.

In this paper I have chosen to focus on one of the genres above, namely, review – more precisely music review. I wish to look into sample texts of music reviews in order to see what argumentative functions are most commonly employed and find whether the functions of the written press – informing, forming opinions and criticising – are performed in this genre and, if so, how. My interest for this feature of the written media has arisen mostly from the fact that little work has yet been done on it.

### Arguments and their functions

First of all, what does the notion of argument entail? In broad terms, argumentation takes place whenever there is an utterance (or a stream or set of utterances) giving support to an/other utterance(s) standing for a certain point of view. According to Toulmin's (1958, apud. Ensink, 1995) view, an argument is a *datum* whose function is to support a *claim*, and this is what we call the *structural function* of an argument. Such denomination entertains the notion that an argument can be regarded as the expression of a supportive relationship between two utterances (Ensink, 1995).

Other functions are attached to arguments as well. The *interactional* or *dialectical* functions is frequently performed through the use of argumentation in the event of, e.g., a debate between two or more parties so as to reach a conclusion about which point of view is to be adopted under given circumstances (Ensink, 1995). The parties involved are aware that there is 'a real or potential dissent concerning standpoints or courses of action' (Maier, 1995 :260). The use of arguments on such occasions is decisive in order to attain to common sense and, hence, settle the debate.

Arguments can also have a *textual* function, which is defined by the relationship an argument has with the broader discourse within which it is to be found. In this case there are two possibilities of textual functions, both of them closely linked to the ambiguity of the term 'argument', as far the English language is concerned. The first possibility has to do exactly with the structural aspect of arguments described above (e.g. 'Chocolate must be suppressed from her diet because it is increasing her cholesterol rate.'). The second is related to an entire discourse category in which the ultimate goal is to persuade the receiver(s) (e.g. 'They used appealing arguments to convince us to stay.'). (Ensink, 1995). Argumentative discourses are, therefore, built upon argumentative structures and the former envelops the latter.

Once given the functions of arguments, it would be wise to remark that there may be relatively many instances of utterances which appear to be arguments but as a matter of fact are not. When such is the case, very likely we will have come across explanations, clarifications or background information. See, for instance, the following sentence: 'She has to leave because she was disloyal to us'. Only the contextualisation of this utterance would allow us to say whether 'because she was disloyal to us' is actually a supportive argument or and explanation to 'She has to leave'. Apparently, the structural function of arguments engulfs the interactional/dialectical and

the textual functions, so that the presence of these two avoids the possible misinterpretations in relation to the structural function.

### **The media and their function**

I shall now switch my focus of attention to the written media for a while. In the democratic societies the written press is regarded as a powerful vehicle responsible for conveying information to the population. In the most general sense possible, to perform the *informative* function is the essence of the press, even though it does exercise other functions as we shall briefly discuss further on in this article. If we bear in mind, however, that the spread of information is, so to speak, the ‘reason to be’ of the press, we may easily come to the reasoning that whatever is stated or reported by the written media can be taken as reliable, accurate, relevant, complete and – ultimately – true. This is what a great deal of the audience think. And I have mentioned the written media here because most of us are strongly prone to accept as incontestable any piece of written information that is rendered into printed language. But the fact of the matter is that there is a gap between ideal and real press. And all of us must learn to mind this gap, which in other words means to look at information provided by the media with critical eyes.

Come to talk of criticism, let me remind the reader that another function performed by the press is precisely the *critical* function. We can say that it branches off another function which is the *forming of opinions* in the democratic societies (Ensink, 1995; Veen, 1995). Opinions, within the perspective of this study, are mainly formed and expressed in two ways. One of them is to build a certain point of view on the basis of information. And here we can see how close a relation there is with the informative function. The other is to shape a standpoint grounded on proposed and previously formulated opinions. Both cases of opinion formation require that the readership be cautious before taking any position on account of what has been just exposed in the paragraph above. Finally, in order for us to close a cycle and understand how the press comes to have a critical function, I should only wish to mention that opinions are of an evaluative nature and they emerge from socially relevant questions in what regards mass communication.

All such functions will eventually make for the *democratic* function of the media (Ensink, 1995). Since it is very improbable that there be in the press such things as absolute information and unanimous opinion, the condition of plurality – vital for democracy – is then met. Divergent information and opinions are expressed and made known for the audience to take its own stand. This is the core of the notion of freedom of press.

### **Arguments and the functions of the media**

At this point I believe we can turn to the issue of what kind of relation there is between arguments and the functions of the media, and the discourse genres previously mentioned as well. It is fairly easy to make the connections

between the use of argumentative strategies and the opinion forming and critical functions of the written media. Opinions are the manifestations of standpoints which need to be defended against divergent ideas or doubt whenever such conflicts are to take place in a community, group or even when there are no more than two participants in a communication act. Criticism to a large extent involves evaluation and the use of parameters. Both cases require the use of argumentative devices. Relating argumentation to the informative function of the press, however, precludes us from clinging to a logical thread of thought, if we are to consider that informing is a process confined to the presentation of facts. This is actually what is expected to be done in some genres regarded and described as informative. Nevertheless, this is not always so, due to: a) dynamism; b) overlapping and c) difficulty in defining and delimiting the domains of a genre. This is why it is no wonder to find a news report with sudden sparks of argumentative structures in spite of the journalistic rules saying that fact and opinion are to be kept apart.

### Data analysis

The corpus I analyse in this research consists of six texts belonging to the genre labelled as (music) review. The texts were taken out at random from six issues of the *Newsweek* magazine, year 1995. They are referred to in the body of this work as T1, ..., T6, in chronological order of publication. I do not intend here to dwell into any study of review as a genre, for this is not the purpose of this paper. What is relevant to mention is that argumentative structures are expected to be found in reviews of any kind because, apart from informing, their goal is to offer the audience opinions, comments or evaluations in relation to what is being reviewed. Therefore reviews cannot but rely on argumentative strategies.

My objective is to detect within the argumentative structures present in the sample reviews what functions – structural, interactional/dialectical and textual – are more strongly emphasised in this genre and in this particular magazine. Additionally, being a genre of the written media, reviews are expected to perform three other functions previously discussed, i.e. informative, forming of opinions and critical. Thus, I also set out to analyse the texts under this perspective and see whether such functions are performed and, if so, how.

#### Excerpt 1 (T2 – May 29)

R.E.M. may be the patron saints of all the new alternative-rock superstars. But as this show suggests, they're more comfortable in their skin than their young counterparts. Unlike Pearl Jam – who, in a strange way are the fussiest image-makers since Madonna – R.E.M. has never disowned their fans simply because they've mushroomed in numbers. And, unlike Nirvana, they've never disowned their songs simply because they've become hits. (OK, they've disowned 'Shiny Happy People,' but who wouldn't?).

This is a typical example of the use of the structural function of arguments, i.e., the writer puts forward some claims which are subsequently

supported by pertinent data. We can see here the following schematic framework of arguments (Ensink, 1995):

1. – protagonist: R.E.M.;

- point of view defended: although R.E.M. is one of the oldest groups of alternative rock, they are the most consistent one;
- argument: they disowned neither their fans nor their songs.

2. – protagonist: R.E.M.;

- point of view defended: the fact that they actually disowned one of their songs can be overlooked;
- argument: anyone would have disowned this particular song.

Excerpt 2 (T5 – June 26)

It's hard to know which moment on 'Prime Time Live' last week was the most bizarre... Maybe it was when Diane Sawyer confronted Jackson about a promotional trailer for his new album 'HIStory,' that shows him marching in front of a red army, à la Leni Riefenstahl's 'Triumph of the Will.' Jackson argued, 'It's not political. It's not fascist. It's pure, simple love.'

In this situation the interactional/dialectical function of argumentation is the one clearly at play and the whole picture is typical of the instances in which such function comes into action, i.e., there is a debate going on that needs to be settled – by means of argumentation, of course.

Excerpt 3 (T4 – June 19)

Prague has always taken pride in his Mozart connection. Though the great composer was born in Salzburg and spent most of his adult life in Vienna, Czechs argue that he was most appreciated in what was then the kingdom of Bohemia. Prague audiences went wild for 'The Abduction From the Seraglio' in 1783 and the 'Marriage of Figaro' in 1786. When Vienna's music lovers began to tire of Mozart's work, Prague was delighted to put on the premieres of 'Don Giovanni' and 'The Clemency of Titus'. 'My beloved Praguers do understand me,' Mozart once said.

This excerpt presents us with an instance of the textual function of arguments in use. In this case, this passage represents a discourse category called persuasive discourse aiming at convincing the audience that Prague was highly regarded by Mozart because the Czech did not turn their back on the composer, in spite of the short period during which he lived there.

The textual and interactional/dialectical functions of arguments as exemplified in Excerpts 2 and 3 occur rather sparsely in relation to the structural function, which dominates throughout the six texts analysed.

Let us now turn to the analysis of the reviews as a genre of the written press and the respective functions supposed to be found in such texts.

Excerpt 4 (T1 – May 22)

At 24, Sean (Puff Daddy) Combs, the record mogul in the L.A. Kings hockey jersey and baggy pants, is one of the busiest hands in the music industry. A talented producer and canny imagemaker, he is micromanaging his label, Bad Boy Entertainment, which in its first year has launched two million selling acts, the rappers Craig Mac and Notorious B.I.G. The creative force behind

all his acts, he does not play an instrument. Two years ago he signed a deal with Arista for his then unlaunched company for a reported \$15 million.

These lines taken from T4 provide us with an evident case of performance of the informative function. As the artist presented is not yet famous as to be referred to without linkage to referentials, the first step is to situate the audience by means of giving some basic information about him so as to contextualise or 'locate' him in the constellation of stars of the showbizz. Some degree of evaluation can be observed through the use of the words 'record mogul', 'talented' and 'canny' as well as the description of his clothes. The argumentative devices here are the launching of two million selling acts in the first year and the deal with Arista, which are data supporting the claim that S.C. is a 'talented producer and canny imagemaker'. It is worth remarking that the functions in most cases do not work in isolation. Hence, a given text aimed at being informative shall not necessarily be robbed of this feature if it displays strokes of evaluation and/or argumentation now and then. Rather, it might even gain dynamism.

Excerpt 5 (T6 – July 31)

Since her arrival in Miami two years ago, Albita has been mesmerizing nostalgic exiles, curious gringos and more than a few celebrities with the traditional country tunes and African rhythms of prerevolutionary Cuba. Madonna, Liza Minelli, Cindy Crawford, Sean Connery and Gianni Versace have all flocked to Centro Vasco to see the woman who's resurrected the old sounds while creating new arrangements with elements of rock and jazz. Critics have dubbed her the Latin k. d. lang, but it remains to be seen if Albita's high-powered friends can help her cross over the Anglo market.

This is a more-than-perfect example of a clever strategy of the media to start forming opinions about a débutante of the music market. They cite famous and fashionable people ('celebrities' as they describe them) and authorities in the field (critics) to grant credibility to the new 'product' being released, adopting the old – but effective – premise that 'if THEY like it, it must be good' on the basis of proposed and formulated opinions in order to generate inferences. For details on the relation of argument to inference, see Pinto (1995). The likelihood is that most people are going to listen to this music for the first time with a positively predisposed state of mind. Anyway, it is wise to keep in mind that 'the merits of something are one matter and its popularity another' (O'Keefe, 1995).

Excerpt 6 (T3 – June 5)

'HiStory' is Jackson's showy monument to himself. (The album's full title is a mouthful: HiStory: 'Past, Present and Future – Book I.')

Stylistically, the singer races from rock to hip-hop to R&B in what seems a calculated effort to tap every market. Lyrically, he's full of self-righteous rage over his recent travails. 'Scream,' a duet with sister Janet, is nicely noisy and mean. But the fulsome, orchestral 'Childhood' sounds like Jackson doing Barbra Streisand doing Andrew Lloyd Webber.

This excerpt shows the press performing the critical function since it has a strikingly evaluative character and deals with an issue that somehow

of other is socially relevant (regardless of how relevant and social). The authors raise the pros and cons of the subject of their criticism, even though the overall tone here is perceptibly unfavourable to the protagonist of the event.

### **Final remarks**

I have chosen not to analyse nor discuss the reviews in relation to the democratic function for it falls out of the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, I shall insist that it is no less relevant than the issues herein approached.

This study has tried to demonstrate that the kind of argumentation used in music reviews relies mostly on the structural function of arguments. Due to its characteristics, this genre allows relatively little space for the textual function when compared with the structural. And even less space there is for the interactional/dialectical function, since in most cases only one voice is heard throughout the text.

The material analysed has performed the three basic functions expected from a genre of the press. This does not mean that all genres of the press make use of the three functions as clearly as we have just seen in this investigation. Some tend to be more informative; some others tend to be more critical. To a lesser or greater degree, however, all of them integrate the three functions in their structures, adjusting them to their purposes and needs. According to Veen (1995:489), 'argumentation frequently functions in the context of a political vision or a philosophy of life.' Thus, we can reason so as to extend this notion to reviews, since they do have argumentation as a constitutive element.

Of course the analysis of six samples only and from one source does not provide grounds for daring extrapolations. A study of a larger corpus from different sources would be required should that be the case. Nonetheless, I hope to have shed some light onto the question of how argumentation is structured and used in music reviews.

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