

## **Unstable meanings, unstable methods: Analysing Linkin Park's song "What I've Done"**

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**Abstract:** Pop and rock have been widely researched as cultural phenomena, yet the analysis of songs remains problematic. The lyrics of songs of past centuries are even studied by Literary Studies; however, the lyrics of contemporary pop and rock songs are often too low quality for literary (much less poetic) analysis and remain on a singular methodological limbo. Besides, although the ideal methodology to study songs would demand training in music few Cultural Studies specialists have that training, whereas few musicologists specialise in Cultural Studies. To complicate matters, internet forums show that the few fans that bother considering lyrics by their favourite musicians hardly ever reach a consensus. Music videos add another difficulty by imposing on songs other layers of meaning. This paper deals with these difficulties by taking as an example a song by American 'nu-rock' band Linkin Park "What I've Done", from their best-selling CD *Minutes to Midnight* (2007). It is my intention to defend the idea that given the instability of songs like this one we need an equally unstable methodology to study them, at least for the time being.

**Keywords:** Cultural Studies, Musicology, pop and rock, songs, lyrics

### **Introduction: Looking for a new method**

"Studying popular music in an interdisciplinary matter", musicologist Philip Tagg reminds us (2003: 74). Yet, the required interdisciplinary method is proving very hard to consolidate. Frith's volume *The Sociology of Rock* (1978), already pointed out that Cultural Studies is too focused on the socio-cultural context of songs. On their side, "until recently, academic musicologists have neglected rock/pop music, in part out of an unwillingness to engage with a form of music which is accorded low cultural value in comparison with 'serious' music" (Shuker 2001: 140). Many have recommended a new balance, based on the need to acknowledge that popular music is a complex text "comprised of sounds, words, images and movements" (Shepherd 1999: 174) placed in a particular context. To this, Richard Middleton adds that "Somehow, we need to find ways to bring in the patterns created in the sounds themselves back into the foreground, without as a consequence retreating into an inappropriate formalism" (2003: 104).

The problem is that the vocabularies of Cultural Studies and of Musicology seem hardly compatible. Tagg's own proposal is not really accessible to most Cultural Studies specialists whereas musicologists criticise Cultural Studies for its impressionistic methods. Other vocabularies also fail to bridge the gap. Moser, working on audience reception of lyrics within Cognitive Linguistics, comes to the

unsurprising conclusion that “Print-oriented questions will produce print-oriented answers, thereby ultimately telling us little about the pleasures of inner listening (print), ‘outer’ listening (song) and the semantics of sound” (2007: 238). Kreyer and Mukherjee claim that “It is only by analysing a sufficiently large corpus that previous assumptions about the vocabulary, the syntax, the conversation-like style and the underlying metaphors of pop song lyrics can be put on a truly empirical footing” (2007: 33), a claim that actually questions the usefulness of the ‘empirical footing.’

What further complicates analysis is that in popular songs the cohesion expected of complex texts is ostensibly subordinated to eliciting an incoherent emotional response from audiences based, no doubt, on their idea of ‘coolness,’ that is, on how audiences rate the appeal and novelty of songs. This ingrained textual instability requires, thus, an equally unstable method that can generate effective analysis and still accept that songs may be highly appreciated by audiences regardless of their bafflement as to what they actually mean or why they like them.

I will turn now to Linkin Park’s hit song “What I’ve Done” to examine the problems in trying to offer a stable analysis of an unstable text.

### **1. What They’ve Done?: *Minutes to Midnight* and the problem of authenticity**

Since “What I’ve Done” was the first single from the CD *Minutes to Midnight* (2007), I’ll consider first this album’s reception. Coming third after *Hybrid Theory* (2000) and *Meteora* (2003), and struggling to accommodate the passing out of fashion of the genre that best defined the band’s style –‘nu-metal,’ or hard rock mixing melody, screaming and occasionally rapping– Linkin Park’s new CD got mixed reviews. Reviewers criticised mainly the band’s departure from nu-metal’s harsh sound and lyrics (particularly those of the universally revered *Hybrid Theory*) to become, woefully, a mere ambient rock band. The band’s determination to “move beyond adolescent finger pointing and start to get really angry” (Reynolds 2007), regarding topical issues like Bush’s catastrophic failures in Iraq and in New Orleans, was often received with scepticism. The foregrounding of Chester Bennington’s pliable voice and image over Mike Shinoda’s rapping was greeted with disappointment: “Without Shinoda to interrupt”, we’re told, “Bennington is forced all the more to be his own egocentric, emo-centric foil” (Willman 2007). Many agreed that “the thing with this album is that it really is not a bad album. ... But, it is, however, a bad Linkin Park album” (Ratliff 2007), since *Minutes to Midnight* “doesn’t really rock, it broods” (*Itunes*). In the most negative reviews, “What I’ve Done” was highlighted as glaring proof of Linkin Park’s self-indulgence. Reviewers claimed that this song “feels like a thin rewrite of ‘Numb’ [from *Meteora*], the sound of a band alarmingly trapped in its’ [sic] own formula” (Reynolds 2007); others called it simply “pre-packed” (Becker 2007). Positive criticism was limited, with some critics commending its

effectiveness as first single.

"In the reception of rock albums, a canon is often implied but rarely spoken of", Carys Wyn Jones observes (2008: 119). This canon refers actually both to the genre within which a band works *and* to the career of the band itself. In the case of Linkin Park, *Hybrid Theory* –a brash album full of youthful *angst*– has become for fans and critics the masterpiece in comparison to which anything else the band produces pales. Reviewers note that the times have changed as regards the age of the band members –now men in their thirties–, the evolution of nu-metal, and even the way in which rock is consumed (internet downloading rather than CD purchases). They do acknowledge that "Linkin Park are in the grip of an identity crisis garnished with a Catch 22 dilemma: do they replicate what they've done to howls of mass derision or do they try to move forward with a degree of maturity and risk alienating the very people that put them where they are?" (Marszalek 2007). Yet, many reviewers they still expect Linkin Park to release the equivalent of *Hybrid Theory* with each new album and criticise *Minutes to Midnight*, above all, for publicising the new politically correct guilty conscience of the band at a time when success has turned them into millionaires (Marszalek 2007). "What I've Done", which uses their trade-mark male rage in the lyrics and assuages that political guilty conscience in the video, would thus be the worst example of Linkin Park's selling out, although to a less passionate listener this song might seem quite similar to many in *Hybrid Theory*.

The Romantic myth of authenticity persists against all odds and in the face of the inescapable fact that everyone expects their talent to be rewarded with material success. Like most contemporary high-impact rock bands, Linkin Park fight a losing battle, as they must remain authentic, whatever that means, while struggling against odds that fans and critics refuse to acknowledge. "The need for rock groups to be creative", after all, "introduces acute strains into their structure that are related to the [inner] balance of influence and power" (Weinstein 2004: 189). And unlike what fans and critics assume regarding the pre-packaging of music by the corporations that sell it, "The entertainment giants minimise the risks of creativity and innovation for themselves by relegating those functions to the bands, which must engage in a Darwinian struggle for survival" (189). Ignoring this delicate balancing act fans and critics assess songs by measuring them against an authenticity scale based on pure subjectivity. In the end any appreciation of "What I've Done" depends not so much on what the song *is* as a text but on what listeners project onto it regarding Linkin Park's credibility, the point to which I turn next.

## 2. "What I've Done:" Validating authenticity (and the rhetoric of cool)

Authenticity, which confers a song its 'coolness', depends, as Moore argues, on "second person' authenticity, or authenticity of experience, which occurs when a performance succeeds in conveying the impression to a listener that that listener's

experience of life is being validated, that the music is ‘telling it like it is’ for them” (2002: 220). As he adds, “‘Authenticity’ is a matter of interpretation which is made and fought for from within a cultural and, thus, historicised position. It is ascribed, not inscribed” (210). In the case of “What I’ve Done”, the problem is that Linkin Park aim too obviously at sounding (and looking) cool while failing in the process to strengthen their new political rhetoric. Their need to complement the ambiguous lyrics with the images of the video is a sign of this alleged failure, which in its turn is the very reason why not even fans can find a stable meaning in the song, much less validate its authenticity –even though, paradoxically, they may love it.

The lyrics are the following:

In this farewell  
 There’s no blood  
 There’s no alibi  
 ‘Cause I’ve drawn regret  
 From the truth  
 Of a thousand lies

So let mercy come  
 And wash away  
 What I’ve done.

[Chorus:] I’ll face myself  
 To cross out what I’ve become  
 Erase myself  
 And let go of what I’ve done.

Put to rest  
 What you thought of me  
 While I clean this slate  
 With the hands of uncertainty.

So let mercy come  
 And wash away  
 What I’ve done.

[Chorus:] I’ll face myself  
 To cross out what I’ve become  
 Erase myself  
 And let go of what I’ve done.

For what I’ve done  
 I’ll start again  
 And whatever pain may come  
 Today this ends  
 I’m forgiving what I’ve done!!!

[Chorus:] I’ll face myself

To cross out what I've become  
Erase myself  
And let go of what I've done.

What I've done  
Forgiving what I've done.

This is accompanied in the music video, directed like most Linkin Park videos by band member DJ Hahn, by a montage of 200 shots (in 3:26 minutes), of which 99 show the band performing in the desert; the rest are a barrage of images related to the hot political personalities and issues of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century: from Stalin to atomic testing, passing through drug abuse and 9/11. As Frith reminds us:

in listening to the lyrics of pop songs we actually hear three things at once: *words*, which appear to give songs an independent source of semantic meaning; *rhetoric*, words being used in a special, musical way, a way which draws attention to features and problems of speech; and *voices*, words being spoken or sung in human tones which are themselves 'meaningful', signs of persons and personality. (1996: 159)

Of course, he refers to the CD performance, which is already different from the live performance and indeed from the music video, as this "draws our attention simultaneously to the song and away from it, positing itself in the place of what it represents" (Berland 1993: 25). In tune with my thesis that cool matters more than content, Jones comments that "People will try to put meaning to videos whether they reconstruct the intended one(s) or not, whether they have one or not" (1988: 25), which is precisely "why they can be thought of as a 'cool' medium, in McLuhan's terms" (25).

In fans' reception of "What I've Done" there's a clear confusion of lyrics and visuals and, as was to be expected, little comment on sound (except for Linkin Park's abandonment of nu-metal for softer options). The 190 comments on the song that can be found in the forum within the website *Song Meanings* are very obviously divided along two lines: those which read the lyrics as an acknowledgement of guilt in relation to personal behaviour, and those which read the song as an acknowledgement of universal guilt in relation to mankind's behaviour in the last hundred years, for, as a fan claims, "The video... shows the song in a whole different light". The fans that support the personal reading tend to project into the song their own personal situation (mostly as former abusers, or even drug-users) or beliefs, with some claiming that this is actually a Christian song about redemption. Fans aware of the video tend to discuss rather whether the band's new guilty conscience, personal or universal, seems an evolution from the aggressiveness of previous CDs.

To confuse matter even more, singer Chester Bennington's comments in an interview (Montgomery 2007) on how the song deals with the musical evolution of the band are often quoted though mostly misread, as he refers to the nature of their

music, not the lyrics. A fan even offers a detailed but far-fetched close reading of the song based on Bennington's words and smacking of the awful methods used to teach poetry. Unsurprisingly, given this confusion, a main bone of contention is whether the lyrics matter at all in enjoying the song. A fan claims that "I don't know, I usually never listen to Linkin Park for their lyrics anyway", while another, who notes that "all their songs are lyrically shallow", explains that "Linkin Park's strong suit is their unique style of music, not their lyrics. The people who actually listen to them for 'moving' lyrics are probably angsty teens in middle school or something". Possibly the only one to really consider the political intention of the music video, an angry fan complains that "What I've Done" is nothing but "Liberal and Anti-American BS".

No fan, it is important to see, uses any of the currently available academic discourses, whether they are Cultural Studies, Musicology, Masculinities Studies – quite apt to read the band's evolution from fierce rage to their current mellower stance– or Derridean Deconstructionism, which of course begs the question of our collective failure to teach these tools for the better appreciation of songs. This might be because the academic discourse itself is particularly imprecise as regards how lyrics, sound and image mix. If we apply, for instance, Björnberg's typology of the relationship between music and visuals (1994: 69) to "What I've Done" this turns out to be 'epic' visually and musically, which doesn't really explain much. Vernallis makes the problem of the instability of text and method even more apparent when she explains that whereas the typical editing of Hollywood films tends to "stabilize the meaning of an image" (which is no longer true), "In music video, the editing seems rather to help create the discontinuity and sense of lack" (2001: 32). Actually, in "What I've Done" the furious pace of editing seems to do just the opposite by filling to the brim the vague lyrics with apparently meaningful images, offering the proverbial straws for the fans to clutch. Neither they nor us are, in the end, remotely well equipped to explain why "What I've Done" fails or succeeds. It is all subjective and badly articulated.

### **Conclusions: Wondering (about) "What I've Done"**

It might well be that the academic study of contemporary popular songs within the Humanities can't really progress beyond the Rolling Stone's in-your-face assertion that "It's only rock'n'roll (but I like it)". It might well be that this is all we need: to detach popular songs from the pressure of the textual analysis usually applied to texts aiming at coherence in order to regard them from a different angle, one much closer, perhaps, to fashion than to Literature. In the end, asking whether "What I've Done" is a good song or an incoherent mess is probably as irrelevant as asking whether an Armani gown makes sense: both exist to give cool pleasure, though how they manage that and for whom is something we cannot explain well. Not right

now, not with our tools. Hopefully, in the near future we will come up with a new hermeneutics of pleasure and cool. In the meantime, let the music play.

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