

ROMANTICISM TODAY: THE SINGER/SONGWRITER-PARADIGM

Lecture 6: Satire/Irony/Politics

- 1) It's Great to Be an American: Randy Newman
- 2) A New England: Billy Bragg
- 3) The State of the West

1) It's Great to Be an American: Randy Newman

Jesus Christ it stinks here high and low
The rich are getting richer I should know
While we're going up you're going down
And no one gives a shit but Jackson Browne

Jesus Christ it stinks here low and high
Some get rich and others just get by
Bono's off in Africa - he's never around
The country turns it's lonely eyes to who? Jackson Browne

(Randy Newman, "A Piece of the Pie", *Harp and Angels*, 2008)

Background:

The professional (and musically 'trained') songwriter
(cf. Barber 2016 and Borshuk 2016)

Bob Dylan: "Now Randy knows music. He knows music." (Zollo 1997, 74)

Randy Newman: "Rock has the power of the beat. Rock is only five percent literature.
That's why I have been so unsuccessful." (Zollo 1997, 284)

Randy Newman, “Sail Away”

Sail Away (1972)

In America you'll get food to eat
Won't have to run through the jungle
And scuff up your feet
You'll just sing about Jesus and drink wine all day
It's great to be an American

Ain't no lions or tigers – ain't no mamba snake
Just the sweet watermelon and the buckwheat cake
Ev'rybody is as happy as a man can be
Climb aboard, little wog – sail away with me

Sail away – sail away
We will cross the mighty ocean into Charleston Bay
Sail away – sail away
We will cross the mighty ocean into Charleston Bay

In America every man is free
To take care of his home and his family
You'll be as happy as a monkey on a monkey tree
You're all gonna be an American

Sail away – sail away
We will cross the mighty ocean into Charleston Bay
Sail away – sail away
We will cross the mighty ocean into Charleston Bay

1) Placing the Song

- Title song of Randy Newman's third album, marking his full establishment in the singer/songwriter paradigm

2) Voice/Lyrics and Subject Position

- Dramatic monologue: the captain of a slave ship addressing his quarry on the west coast of Africa + present day American self-descriptions > double coding, irony
- 'Sail Away' instead of 'Come with me' deflects from reality?

3) Style and Form

- Generic influences: the “Barbershop Connection” (harmony), the “Gospel-Blues Connection” (vocals), the “Parlour Music Connection” and the “Hollywood connection” (composition) (Winkler 2000)
- Prelude verse – verse (prosaic) – chorus (lure) – verse – chorus
- The words in the verses embody present day American attitudes

4) Reference

- The music embodies the lure of America, then and now:

He begins to sing, in a voice that combines the lazy drawl of the black man [...] with the gentle assurance of the holiest rabbi. The music [...] is awesomely beautiful. [...] 'Sail Away' moves on one of the most seductive melodies ever to grace a popular song.

(Marcus 1976, 126f.)

This peaceful, quiet song is more outrageous than anything the Rolling Stones have ever done [...] Scary, astonishing, Newman has presented an American temptation – tempting not only the Africans, who became Negroes, and went on to create the music that finally tossed up Elvis Presley, rock'n'roll, Newman, and his audience, but tempting America to believe that this image of itself might just be true. [...] The power of the song is in the simple, perfectly accomplished idea that something as horrible and charged with guilt as slavery could take on such real beauty. The focus is not on those who are to be enslaved, but on the singer, the confidence man. Of course he is lying. He has seen babies thrown into the sea, smelled the death and the excrement in the hold, watched the brand burn into the flesh. [...] But for a moment, he believes himself. A secret ambivalence of four hundred years of American life finds a voice in this song. It is not particularly liberating; too strange for that, it is like a vision of heaven superimposed on hell.

Y'all gonna be an American

(Marcus, 127f.)

It has virtually nothing to do with 'rock'n'roll' as a musical form (save that Newman's singing owes so much to the blues) and everything to do with the rock'n'roll audience.

(Marcus 1976, 128)

During playbacks [of Newman's song "Guilty"], [producer] Lenny [Waronker] used to pretend he was dancing with someone – enjoying it – until the woodwind-and-organ dissonance comes in on the second verse, after which he'd stop dancing – and look puzzled and confused. It is sort of a groove killer.

(Newman 1998, 52)

Randy Newman, "Guilty"

Good Old Boys (1974)

Yes, baby, I been drinkin'
And I shouldn't come by I know
But I found myself in trouble, darlin'
And I had nowhere else to go

Got some whisky from the barman
Got some cocaine from a friend
I just had to keep on movin'
Till I was back in your arms again

I'm guilty, baby I'm guilty
And I'll be guilty all the rest of my life
How come I never do what I'm supposed to do
How come nothin' that I try to do ever turns out right?

You know, you know how it is with me baby
You know, you know I just can't stand myself
And it takes a whole lot of medicine
For me to pretend that I'm somebody else

Randy Newman, "It's Money That Matters"

Land of Dreams (1988)

Of all of the people that I used to know
Most never adjusted to the great big world
I see them lurking in book stores
Working for the Public Radio
Carrying their babies around in a sack on their back
Moving careful and slow

It's money that matters
Hear what I say
It's money that matters
In the USA

All of these people are much brighter than I
In any fair system they would flourish and thrive
But they barely survive
They eke out a living and they barely survive

When I was a young boy, maybe thirteen
I took a hard look around me and asked what does it mean?
So I talked to my father, and he didn't know
And I talked to my friend and he didn't know
And I talked to my brother and he didn't know
And I talked to everybody that I knew

It's money that matters
Now you know that it's true
It's money that matters
Whatever you do

Then I talked to a man lived up on the county line
I was washing his car with a friend of mine
He was a little fat guy in a red jumpsuit
I said "You look kind of funny"
He said "I know that I do"

"But I got a great big house on the hill here
And a great big blonde wife inside it
And a great big pool in my backyard and another great big pool beside it
Sonny it's money that matters, hear what I say
It's money that matters in the USA
It's money that matters
Now you know that it's true
It's money that matters whatever you do"

1) Placing the Song

- *Land of Dreams* starts as Randy Newman's most obviously autobiographical album and then gradually transforms itself into his usual dramatic monologue mode full of irony > final songs: "It's Money That Matters" and "I Want You to Hurt Like I Do" full of nasty American characters

2) Voice/Lyrics and Subject Position

- Dramatic monologue: typical, materialistic American revelling in his ignorance and selling it as insight
- Singer introduces a second speaker who shares his sentiment

3) Style and Form

- One of the most obvious 'rock' tracks in Newman's oeuvre
- Whole album influences by Mark Knopfler's (Dire Straits) production and guitar playing

4) Reference

- One of Newman's best known songs, combining the lure of well-made commercial pop music with a critique of the system which brings it about

Randy Newman, "My Country"

Bad Love (1999)

Let's go back to yesterday
When a phone call cost a dime
In New Orleans, just a nickel
Turn back the hands of time
Turn back the hands of time

Picture a room
With a window
A sofa and some chairs
A television turned on for the night
Picture a woman, two children seated
A man lying there
Their faces softly glowing in the light

This is my country
These are my people
This is the world I understand
This is my country
These are my people
And I know 'em like the back of my own hand

If we had something to say
We'd bounce it off the screen
We were watching and we couldn't look away
We all know what we look like
You know what I mean
We wouldn't have had it any other way

We got comedy, tragedy
Everything from A to B
Watching other people living
Seeing other people play
Having other people's voices fill our minds
Thank you Jesus

Feelings might go unexpressed
I think that's probably for the best
Dig too deep who knows what you will find

This is my country
Those were my people
Theirs was a world I understand

Picture a room, no window
A door that leads outside
A man lying on a blanket on the floor
Picture his three grown boys behind him
Bouncing words off of a screen
Of a television big as all outdoors

Now your children are your children
Even when they're grown
When they speak to you
You got to listen to what they have to say
But they all live alone now
They have TVs of their own
But they keep on coming over anyway
And much as I love them
I'm always kind of glad when they go away

This is my country
These are my people
This is the world I understand
This is my country
These are my people
And I know 'em like the back of my own hand
I know 'em like the back of my own hand

2) A New England: Billy Bragg

Billy Bragg, "A New England"

Life's a Riot with Spy vs. Spy (1983)

I was twenty-one years when I wrote this song
I'm twenty-two now, but I won't be for long
People ask when will you grow up to be a man
But all the girls I loved at school are already pushing prams

I loved you then as I love you still
Though I put you on a pedestal, they put you on the pill
I don't feel bad about letting you go
I just feel sad about letting you know

I don't want to change the world
I'm not looking for a new England
I'm just looking for another girl

I loved the words you wrote to me
But that was bloody yesterday
I can't survive on what you send
Every time you need a friend

I saw two shooting stars last night
I wished on them but they were only satellites
Is it wrong to wish on space hardware
I wish, I wish, I wish you'd care

I don't want to change the world
I'm not looking for a new England
I'm just looking for another girl

1) Placing the Song

- Billy Bragg's Clash-influenced starting point
- Became a hit when covered by Kirsty McColl in 1984

2) Voice/Lyrics and Subject Position

- Singer addresses the problem of growing up in its public and private dimensions and seems to retreat into the private sphere
- Typical pop sentiment
- But somehow the notion of a 'New England' sticks anyway

3) Style and Form

- Enthusiastic DIY styling (electric guitar plus vocals only)
- Verse – verse – chorus – verse – verse – chorus, no solo passage

4) Reference

- Remains a signature tune for Bragg's early career, played to this day
- Somewhat at odds with Bragg's political activism

Billy Bragg, “England, Half English”

England, Half English (2002)

My mother was half English and I'm half English too
I'm a great big bundle of culture tied up in the red white and blue
I'm a fine example of your Essex man
And I'm well familiar with the Hindustan
Cos my neighbours are half English and I'm half English too

My breakfast was half English and so am I you know
I had a plate of Marmite soldiers washed down with a cappuccino
And I have a veggie curry about once a week
The next day I fry it up as bubble and squeak
Cos my appetite's half English and I'm half English too

Dance with me to this very English melody
From Morris dancing to Morrissey,
all that stuff came from across the sea

Britannia, she's half English, she speaks Latin at home
St George was born in the Lebanon, how he got here I don't know
And those three lions on your shirt,
They never sprang from England's dirt
Them lions are half English and I'm half English too

Le-li Umma le-li-ya, le-li Umma le-li-ya,
Le-li Umma le-li-ya, bledi g'desh akh! le-li-ya

Oh my country, what a beautiful country you are

Billy Bragg:

The music for the song 'England, Half English', for example, is an old Arabic folk song, the song of the exiles. In the original song [there are the] line[s] 'Le-li-li-ya Umma le, le-li-li-ya Umma le, Le-li-li-ya Umma le comes bledi g'desh akh! le-li-ya ! (in English: 'Oh my country, what a beautiful country you are'), which we have taken over because they testified exactly what I wanted to convey with the song. In addition, this is probably the most provocative thing I since long have said on a plate. On my website thereupon some fans have questioned whether this was meant ironically. Of course it is not ironic! I love my country and its diversity. England is currently the most multicultural country in Europe. Well, not everything is perfect, but still lies in a beauty that is both physically and emotionally. I do not want that someone says he is proud of England, that's bullshit, but they should accept England as what they see when they look out the window. If England is a circle, then it is so that everything that happens within this circle is 'Englishness'. It is not where your parents or grandparents came from, but where you are at this moment. Paradoxically, it is precisely the difference that makes England so unmistakable. In Wales or Scotland it is different. There is for example no blacks in the Scottish football team. That's not their fault, it is quite simply that not many blacks live in Scotland. (<http://tinyurl.com/yxcb64cb>, original interview text in German)

Billy Bragg, "Take Down The Union Jack" (original title: "Millennium Song")

England, Half English (2002)

Take down the Union Jack, it clashes with the sunset
And put it in the attic with the emperors old clothes
When did it fall apart? Sometime in the 80s
When the Great and the Good gave way to the greedy and the mean
Britain isn't cool you know, its really not that great
It's not a proper country, it doesn't even have a patron saint
It's just an economic union that's passed its sell-by date

Take down the Union Jack, it clashes with the sunset
And ask our Scottish neighbours if independence looks any good
'Cos they just might understand how to take an abstract notion
Of personal identity and turn it into nationhood
Is this the 19th century that I'm watching on TV?
The dear old Queen of England handing out those MBEs
Member of the British Empire - that doesn't sound too good to me

Gilbert and George are taking the piss, aren't they?
Gilbert and George are taking the piss
What could be more British than here's a picture of me bum?
Gilbert and George are taking the piss

Take down the Union Jack, it clashes with the sunset
And pile up all those history books, but don't throw them away
They just might have some clues about what it really means
To be an Anglo hyphen Saxon in England.co.uk

3) The State of the West

Jackson Browne, "Looking East"

Looking East (1996) / Solo Acoustic (2005)

Standing in the ocean with the sun burning low in the west
Like a fire in the cavernous darkness at the heart of the beast
With my beliefs and possessions, stopped at the frontier in my chest
At the edge of my country, my back to the sea, looking east

Where the search for the truth is conducted with a wink and a nod
And where power and position are equated with the grace of God
These times are famine for the soul while for the senses it's a feast
From the edge of my country, as far as you I see, looking east

Hunger in the midnight, hunger at the stroke of noon
Hunger in the mansion, hunger in the rented room
Hunger on the TV, hunger on the printed page
And there's a God-sized hunger underneath the laughter and the rage
And an absence of light
In the deepening night
Where I wait for the sun
Looking east

How long have I left my mind to the powers that be?
How long will it take to find the higher power moving in me?

Power in the insect
Power in the sea
Power in the snow falling silently
Power in the blossom
Power in the stone
Power in the song being sung alone
Power in the wheat field
Power in the rain
Power in the sunlight and the hurricane
Power in the silence
Power in the flame
Power in the sound of the lover's name
The power of the sunrise and the power of a prayer released
On the edge of my country, I pray for the ones with the least

Hunger in the midnight, hunger at the stroke of noon
Hunger in the banquet, hunger in the bride and groom
Hunger on the TV, hunger on the printed page
And there's a God-sized hunger underneath the questions of the age
And an absence of light
In the deepening night
Where I wait for the sun
Looking east

1) Placing the Song

- Typical for the polished productions of 1990s Jackson Browne in its studio incarnation
- *Looking East* (1996) supplements the successful *I'm Alive* (1993) with a political and public focus

2) Voice/Lyrics and Subject Position

- Singer adopts the position of a seer or prophet with Blakean overtones and laments the lack of spirituality in a thoroughly materialistic world

3) Style and Form

- Originally recorded as a straight rock song, which somehow overshadowed the visionary intensity of the lyrics
- Verse – verse – chorus – bridge – interlude – chorus

4) Reference

- live recordings in acoustic settings are much more convincing

Loudon Wainwright, "Y2K"

Social Studies (1999)

A bunch of nerdy brainy guys a long way back
Invented a crazy little thing they called the Univac
For years now, they've been upgrading that thing
It can walk & talk & count & think & it can even sing
It can help you at school, church, business, and work
Makes you feel like a genius even though you're just a jerk
You get a computer, you sit it in your lap
It does a little bit of this it does a whole lotta that
It can boot you up, it can load you down
With that little bitty mouse you're gonna rule this town

But you're headed for trouble I do believe
It's coming your way on New Year's Eve now
Whoa what do you know
A few more measly more months to go
Hey what do you say, now here it comes now... Y2K

No it ain't a virus it's just a little glitch
It wan't done by some crazy hackin' son of a bitch
And Sadaam didn't do it, can't blame him
No it's a geek with the glasses and the stupid silly grin
Billionaire Bill that's the one you can hate
If you want to blame someone blame Bill Gates

Bill said we'd make money, Bill said we'd have fun
But remember Hal the computer in 2001
We're in a time machine going back my friend
Doin' 1900 all over again, well

We're headed for trouble I do believe
It's coming your way on New Year's Eve
Whoa what do you know
A few more measly more months to go
Hey what do you say, now here it comes now... Y2K

We've been trucking down the information superhighway
But we'll be on a dirt road come Y2K
Call me old fashioned call me a fool
And you can call me a Luddite & you can call me uncool
But we used to imagine, question, and dream
And now all of our answers come up on some screen

We're headed for trouble I do believe
It's coming your way on New Year's Eve

Y 2 K

Breakdown... You better get ready, be very afraid
Because your money's no good & you'll never get paid
And the car won't start and the phone won't work
And the juice won't squeeze and the coffee won't perk
No more decaf latte baby...

You'll be doing the monkey, but there'll be a new twist
You'll still be alive but you will not exist
The stock market will crash, the air traffic will stop
You won't find a doctor, forget about a cop

There'll be a lot of lawyers with plenty to do
It's apocalypse now at a theatre near you

We're headed for trouble I do believe
It's coming your way on New Year's Eve

Meanwhile... Way over there in the old ancient Middle East
Them doomsday boys is having a feast
The end is at hand & they're down on their knees
They've been checking out all the bad-ass prophecies
This Y2K it's the latest craze
It's lock & load for the final days

Well I saw you on the plane playing solitaire
On that little laptop, with nary a care
Life's easy now, but it could get hard
Pretty soon you're gonna have to use a deck of real cards

We're headed for trouble I do believe
It's coming your way on New Year's Eve
Whoa what do you know
A few more measly more months to go
Hey what do you say, now here it comes now... Y2K

Well I hope everybody's stocking up put there
Getting in your provisions...

1) Placing the Song

- *Social Studies* collects songs originally written on topical themes for breakfast television, to be performed with acoustic guitar only

2) Voice/Lyrics and Subject Position

- I addressing listeners (you) on the topic of Y2K fears > shared perspective

3) Style and Form

- Intro: Auld Lang Syne (customarily played on New Year's Eve)
- Funk styling underpinning flexible and virtuosic lyrics, beats and breaks
- Intro – (verse) – chorus – (verse) – chorus – (verse) – (chorus > bridge) – (verse) – (chorus) – (verse) – chorus – coda

4) Reference

- Coda indicates that even a crisis like this is commercially exploited...

Billy Bragg, “Nobody Knows Nothing Anymore”

Tooth and Nail (2013)

> Bragg overcoming writer's block by shifting himself into the American singer/songwriter paradigm

Deep down in the underground,
Atoms spinning round and round
Scientists monitor readings
Searching for the Holy Grail,
The particle or at least the tale
Of the one who gives the universe its meaning

But what if there's nothing, no big answer to find?
What if we're just passing through time?

No one knows nothing anymore
Nobody really knows the score
Nobody knows anything
Let's break it down and start again

What happens when the markets drop,
If the numbers really don't add up?
Everyone seeks the safe haven.
And as they contemplate their ruin,
The self-proclaimed smartest people in the room
Are trying very hard not to sound craven

But what if there's nothing, no pot of gold to find?
Only the blind leading the blind

No one knows nothing anymore
Nobody really knows the score
Seems nobody knows anything
Let's break it down and start again

Let's stop pretending
We can manage our way out of here
Let's stop defending the indefensible
Let's stop relying on
The lecturing of the experts
Whose spin just makes our plight incomprehensible.

High up on a mountain top,
Somebody with a skinhead crop
Is thinking deep thoughts for us all
Serenity is all around,
But if you listen you can hear the sound
Of one head being banged against the wall

What if our ancestors had stayed up in the trees
Would we still be weighed down by these worries?

No one knows nothing anymore
Nobody really knows the score
Since nobody knows anything
Let's break it down and start again

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