

IASPM 2005 Proposal
Reading Meaning's stream

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English Title :

Is the French word « chanson » equivalent to the English term « popular music » ?

English Abstract :

Social sciences have proven that different traditions and cultures can generate different ways of naming music, and these names influence both perception and classification.

In France, the word « chanson » has been used since the 19th century with a meaning close to « popular music ». Ideal-typically, the French *chanson* features songs with words as well as melodies that are only few minutes long, in contrast to classical or art music. *Chanson* also bears artistic and social meanings, and is part of French culture. However, popularity of music originating from African-American culture (jazz, rock'n'roll, hip-hop or techno...) in France brings into question the use of the word « *chanson* » to characterize these new styles, which may use other languages, different relations between voice and music, different length of composition, as well as improvisation.

For example, progressive rock in the seventies or techno in the nineties brought longer, instrumental pieces that did completely meet [basically] the definition and field of *chanson*.

What does the word « *chanson* » mean in French and how did its definition evolve ? Why is France different from most countries that adopted the expression « popular music » ? Which words are being used in France to name foreign popular music? These questions are crucial for understanding popular music and its hybridization in a time of globalization.

French Title and Abstract :

Peut-on dire que le terme « chanson » en France équivaut au terme anglo-saxon de « popular music » ?

Les sciences sociales ont montré que des traditions culturelles hétérogènes pouvaient générer autant de façons différentes de nommer la musique, et que ces taxinomies influençaient les catégories de perceptions, comme les analyses du fait musical. Contrairement aux pays anglophones où l'expression « popular music » s'est imposée, en France, le terme « chanson » est utilisé depuis la fin du XIXème siècle pour qualifier le répertoire des musiques non savantes. Idéal-typiquement, la chanson recouvre des pièces musicales alliant texte et mélodie qui sont interprétées dans le cadre d'un format musical de quelques minutes, s'opposant ainsi aux compositions écrites (et le plus souvent instrumentales) des musiques classiques et contemporaines. A cette perspective musicologique s'ajoute une dimension artistique et sociale, la chanson était considérée comme révélateur d'une tradition française.

Mais l'implantation successive des musiques d'origine afro-américaines (jazz, puis rock'n'roll, hip-hop ou techno) en France ont amené à questionner le signifié « chanson » concernant notamment la langue utilisée, la place de la voix par rapport à la musique, la durée des compositions ou la part d'improvisation. On peut citer à cet égard l'exemple du rock progressif qui, au cours des années 70, allait donner lieu à l'étirement temporel des

compositions et le développement des morceaux instrumentaux, annulant a priori la possibilité de parler de « chanson » pour une partie des musiques rock.

Où commence et où s'arrête la dénomination « chanson » dans la perspective française, et comment le signifiant a-t-il évolué ? Pourquoi le terme « musiques populaires » ne s'est-il pas imposé dans ce pays comme dans de nombreux autres ? Comment le monde de la musique en France qualifie-t-il aujourd'hui les répertoires en provenance des pays « anglo-saxons » ? Autant de questions qui s'avèrent décisive lorsqu'on cherche à comprendre le fonctionnement des musiques populaires et leurs hybridations à l'époque de la mondialisation.

Text :

« Week-end à Rome », from Etienne Daho. I choose to have you listen to this track because it is at a crossroads, and it can illustrate the French controversy surrounding this word, *chanson*. Etienne Daho released this record in the early eighties, at a time when he was mostly listening to English post-punk and new-wave music. Does this work belong to the French category *chanson* ?

A typical example of what can be said about this word in France was to be found in a debate that took place at the University of Manchester in June 2003, during a symposium dealing with “French popular music”¹. The choice of the English title didn’t seem to have troubled any conscience whereas its translation suddenly confronted the French contributors with a major problem.

One side, stating they were working on the *chanson* considered that the title of the congress was to be understood as *chanson française* and their contributions were dealing with topics such as “*chanson réaliste*” or “the songs of Jacques Brel”.

On the other side, contributors working on music originating from African-American culture (reggae, rock, hip-hop or techno...) did not consider *chanson* as a culture but simply as a musical form. They understood the English meaning of the term “popular music” in the title “French popular music”.

I will therefore deal with the signifier of the word *chanson* and “popular music” [*musiques populaires*] from the French point of view, insofar as *chanson* expresses notions which are hardly considered by Anglophone research fields of “cultural studies”. For instance, Andy Bennet’s book on “Cultures of popular music”², does not dedicate a chapter to *chanson* when presenting the different musical styles.

My purpose is not to give a definitive or objective definition of the *chanson* object but to examine how the signifier evolved, where it starts and ends and the limits of this denomination in the French perspective.

I. Chanson category

In France, thanks to its formal elements, people often call *chanson* the whole repertory of compositions that is presented as the union of words and a melody both arranged in a chorus/verses pattern and lasting for about 3 minutes using a modal or tonal scale and a medium range (This kind of piece is called “song” in English which translates to “chanson” in French, but the aesthetic category “la chanson” to name the whole repertory doesn’t exist in English).

In his book *Vocabulary of Aesthetics* [Vocabulaire d’esthétique] published in 1990, Etienne Souriau defines seven characteristics making up songs, and *chanson* as a category. We will use his work as an illustration of the way the French language apprehends *chanson* and its limits. To him :

“(1) A song always contains lyrics meant to be sung, and a tune on which to sing. The lyrics may be considered as a poem by itself and are sometimes even published as such.

(2) A song always keeps a very simple pattern and is within the reach of everyone whereas more intellectual musical experiences tend to be the privilege of a few initiates.

¹ www.art.man.ac.uk/FRENCH/research/conferences/musicabstr

² BENNET Andy, *Cultures of Popular Music*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 2001

(3) it is arranged in a regular pattern of verses and chorus.

(4) Thanks to this accessible pattern, *chanson* is meant to be played everywhere, to become widespread. This is an essential feature, with the “right” melody as a deciding factor.

(5) A song remains open to aesthetic variety. If *chanson* is a proper genre by its features, this genre can still be divided into a great variety of species, each having its own characteristics: tragic, comical, satirical or tender songs for example.

(6) Nevertheless, the aesthetic category is not the only difference between songs. A song can be aimed at many different things such as working, dancing or getting to sleep. There are moralizing or devotional songs. Some others songs are written to create a special atmosphere on some particular occasions such as the drinking songs.”

However, according to Souriau “there is a real danger that the song may lose its specificity, losing itself in its external function. It could become no more than the mere accompaniment of an activity, its lyrics and tune then reduced to their simplest terms.” He says “this phenomenon can be observed in some rock or disco songs in which lyrics only consist of a few incoherent words hammered, indeed even yelled on a basic tune.”

From these general statements, which can be found in numerous publications on *chanson* in France (such as Vernillat and Charpentrau’s *La chanson française*, Paris, PUF, 1991 or, Paul Arapon’s “La métamorphose de la chanson française”, in the French peer review *Esprit*, July 1999) we can make some remarks.

First of all, *chanson* is presented on a linear time line, an historic continuation, from the way it was under the Ancien Regime until now. From *chanson traditionnelle* (routine songs or functional songs – work, holidays – relating to its national heritage and orally transmitted) to today’s songs broadcast recordings, without forgetting *chanson réaliste* sung in the *cafés-concerts* at the end of the 19th century.

In the history of *chanson*, the aesthetic analyses have often remained determining, taking the songs out of their social context, only to keep what they had in common. But this type of analysis which is shared by a lot of people in France, usually fails to take two cultural variables into account.

- The first one stems from the centralist Republican policy of the French government and the role played by the French language under this policy. Indeed, from this point of view, *chanson* has been one the major axis helping to establish a national language, mainly in the 19th century. Contrary to the United States I suppose, where the different kinds of popular music developed in a quite uncontrolled manner, in part because of segregation and the strong contrast between cities and countryside, France distinguished itself by its centralized policy as well as by its transmission of common values through “Education populaire” – schools and federations of popular education (similar to clubs or community centres in the UK).

Thus, the popular songs collected in the 19th century have very often been “corrected”, that is rephrased, and a number have then been transmitted to the people through the teaching of songs at school. The simple layout of *chanson* made it an easy way to convey messages, and as the Republican state was much concerned with the nation unity, it left little space for regional singularities in popular music.

- Besides, economic, organizational and technological changes which have deeply influenced 20th century music have often been minimized in French analyses. Such has been the case for

-The specialization of tasks, with the creation of SACEM (the official French performing rights society) and the consequential emergence of both serial songwriter and singer songwriter (“auteur-compositeur-interprète”).

- The merchandizing of musical shows, notably through “cafés-concerts” and “music-hall”.
- The birth of phonographic recording, radio and the whole mass media and their effects.

A music industry was born. The musical sector professionalized. In France it is called “music hall” from the “belle époque” (1910’s, the term will usually be replaced by “show business” in the 60’s). As far as contents is concerned, the musical industry is then organised around two main poles : “classical music” and “*chanson*”.

Music and its practices have been deeply transformed by these elements, but all the same the term *chanson* endured. As the centre of gravity of music, switched from a music written by the people to a music specifically elaborated for the people, the term used to describe it was not called into question. According to the critic reviews of both live and recorded music, and either to normative analyses of theoreticians of humanities, the lyrics still had the same importance in the songs, which has often been considered as a form of poetry. The voice, expressivity and performance of the singers were also crucial to the audience.

In the early 20th century music-hall, the formal characteristics of *chanson* evolved under the influence of other components of the “revue à grand spectacle”. In this new form of live entertainment, *chanson* met different kinds of music and performances such as striptease, trained animals or illusionists. Jazz music emerged in France in this music-hall context, leading to an increase in the number of instruments used, notably adding the drums in popular music. What came out of it is that, gradually, the word *chanson* evolved with two different meanings:

-A specific sense meaning “*la vraie chanson*” (true *chanson*), that is a song whose role was to highlight the lyrics, and which was generally characterized by a minimal orchestration.

-A general sense, meaning to include all types of popular music, with a symbolic connotation of “poor quality”, low grade art. This connotation can be approached of the French word *variété*, originating from the principles of the music hall, and belong to the field of entertainment whereas “real *chanson*” would belong to the arts.

It seems that, at least until the sixties, and sometimes later on, music originating from African-American culture, in which rhythm and music dominated more and more, remained considered as *variété*, or low grade *chanson*. This is all the more true than, with the emergence of rock music in the 50s, French artists would only perform basic French versions of American standards whereas, at the very same time a new movement of singer-songwriters offered *chanson à textes* on a minimal accompaniment, in the tradition of quality lyrics.

From this symbolic point of view, the *variété* producers strategically tried to characterize their production as *chanson*. So did the local departments of major companies such as RCA or Phonogram in the late seventies when they defined a new generation of artists produced with “charts” arrangements as the *nouvelle chanson française*.

If jazz music has gained autonomy as a proper aesthetic genre between classical music and *chanson*, this has proved much more difficult for rock music even its specificity has been increasingly, progressively defended by the new generations. But from the fifties, rock music is often classified in *variété*. When the quality of the lyrics is acknowledged, then it will be

described as *chanson rock* (B. Lavilliers, J. Higelin or Renaud). Even if artists like Johnny Hallyday or Noir Désir may have people's respect in France, this will only be to a certain extent, as they differ too much from real *chanson* as a weberian Ideal-type.

II. Popular music

Why the expression "popular music" didn't impose in France as it did in many other countries? As far back as the eighties, arose the problem of how to name rock music and how to define its relation to *chanson*. Indeed, there are too many differences between rock music and *chanson*, notably in the process of creation and performing: a band is supposed to play rock music whereas a singer is supposed to be alone, playing *chanson*.

Moreover, the use of the electric guitar, then of the keyboards and more generally of a great number of instruments, sounds and tones typical of rock music made the situation even more ambiguous.

Thus, from the early eighties, as the cultural French government policy gets interested in cultural practices, it refers not to *chanson* but to *rock et chanson*.

At that time, the emergence of African American music in French practices is confirmed by an explosion of the musical forms touching length and construction of the tracks (we can think about some psychedelic or progressive rock music pieces lasting up to the whole length of a vinyl side) and their nature, songs and lyrics becoming unnecessary elements (progressive music, techno, post-rock...). Adding further to these particularities is the growing number of people contributing to the rock phenomenon and refusing to swear allegiance to the term *chanson*.

For all these reasons, rock music can now, in many circumstances, call itself a proper genre, with no reference whatsoever to any subspecies of the *chanson*. The incapacity of the term *chanson* to be used as a musical genre including (we could even say engulfing) others, was also confirmed, in the early nineties with the emergence of hip-hop, electronic music and world music.

What about "popular music"? It may mean three different things.

- Music *by* the people
- Music *for* the people
- Music being quite popular

As the notion of "popularity" is traditionally the one associated with the adjective "popular" by the Anglophones, a "popular music" is a music whose recording, broadcasting and listening is associated with the concepts of mass culture and mass production, not necessarily from a criticizing point of view. This led, in English speaking countries, to dialectical interpretations like the one by P. Tagg³ or C. Cutler.

To Cutler for example⁴, we have to keep in mind the specificities of the "popular music" which bring in a new way to consider dialectically music, halfway between folk and art music:

The use of hearing, the oral passing on, and collective practice characterize not folk music, nor art music. So, "popular music" is a new field which began with technological changes.

³ TAGG Philip, *Kojak - 50 Seconds of Television Music*, New York, Mass Media Music Scholars' Press, 2000

⁴ CUTLER Chris, *File Under Popular. Theoretical and Critical Writings on Music*, London/New York, Rer Megacorp/Semiotext(e)-Automeia, 1985

In France, not only was the role played by technological progress underestimated in analyses, but the importance of the Marxist and Bourdieusian paradigms analysing society as a conflict between dominating and dominated made the term “popular” hard to use in the realm of social sciences analyses.

Indeed, in this perspective, the music the people listen to is a music for the people, which thus perpetuates the ideology conveyed by the dominating classes ; it is alienating ; it is Adorno’s “industrial music”, the one of the culture industry, it is a mere commercial good [produit marchand].

Theses thesis defending a lack of autonomy of the “popular culture” have thus often qualified the users of the expression “popular music” as “populists”. Many pro-workers or pro-peasants intellectuals were indeed labelled as such. One can assume this to be the reason why continuators of the thoughts of Richard Hoggart (Especially D. Hedbigé, but also a lot of specialists belonging to the CCCM⁵ or near it) did not have a great influence on French research. They were criticised for not taking into account the fact that popular classes were no longer the creators of the music they listened to.

It seems like there was then in France an implicit agreement making of “popular music” a synonym of “variety” [*variété*]. That is to say a music *for* the people coming from higher classes strategies, from the music industry. In Marxist terms, it would be an ideological element of the capitalist superstructure.

The term “popular” being perceived only as relating to a class struggle, the only music from the people (*by* the people) that could be called “popular” in France was the one dating from before the capitalism and industrialisation - what may corresponds to the Anglophone’s “folk music”. This is the reason why in France, many professionals specialized in traditional music use the expression “popular music” to talk about the patrimonial field.

In the second half of the eighties, the radical use of the paradigms related to the domination in sociology was often denounced, in particular by hip-hop or rock specialists. In response to the “populist” critics, the Bourdieusian deterministic researchers were sometimes called “*misérabilistes*” (from misery) because they left not autonomy enough when they consider popular music.

This calls into question the idea that the term “popular” could be use to qualify “music *for* the people”. However, this did not result in the expression “popular music” being more used by French people...

For those who fight against the “*misérabilisme*” indeed, using the word “popular” was recognizing that there was an art, erudite music and thus, in a certain manner, to perpetuate a domination in a performative way.

In addition, whereas researchers and research teams started to work on the “traditional” music and the “song” format, those who were studying rock culture were not taken seriously by the institution and were marginalized. They also claimed their originality of research field... For those who lived the rock’n’roll, the expression “popular music” appeared outdated, just like “electronic music” fans later found many terms belonging to the rock’n’roll world outdated.

According to A. Hennion, polemics about the word “popular” brought the review of French research *Vibrations* to change its subtitle. Labelled “popular music” from 85 to 86, the review later changed this subtitle to “music – media – society”.

⁵ Birmingham’s Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies

III. How to qualify music in France ?

Gradually, French music has absorbed the musical uses and attitudes originating from African American cultures. Since the French word *chanson* fails to engulf different types of musical genres, and considering that the term popular has such a past, other denominations have come to light in France.

Following a study on the rehearsals practices of musical bands carried out in the early nineties, the sociologist Marc Touché suggested the expression “amplified music” [*musiques amplifiées*] which was inspired by their technical habits. As for Ministry of Culture and the official institutions, they chose the term “current music” [*musiques actuelles*].

As these terms are not entirely satisfactory, the use of the word *chanson* has remained constant. The French people have reached a dead end in this issue about how to qualify what the Anglophones call “popular music”.

Some elements can however lead us to think that the use of the term “popular music” could make some progress.

- The first element is the opening to English written works about music
- The second element is the growing knowledge of the roots of rock'n'roll and African American music, which tends to emphasize what the different types of music have in common in their evolutionary process
- Another element could be the opening of a European French-speaking department within the IASPM.

As far as this “Week end à Rome” is concerned, it's up to you!