Lea Wierød Borčak

The sound of nonsense
on the function of nonsense words in pop songs

Abstract

Nonsense words in songs challenge the common assumption that song meaning resides in song texts. Songs containing verbal nonsense thus make evident that meaning cannot be deduced from one element (e.g. text), but rather emerges as a constant negotiation between the different medialities involved: music, text, the visual, the aural etc. It has been pointed out by several musicologists that content analysis of texts, despite having had a long historical tradition, is nonetheless insufficient or even downright misleading as a methodological approach to interpreting songs. The extensive use of nonsense words in pop songs affirms this stance, as verbal sense is simply stripped away, forcing the analyst to look for other kinds of sense. Researchers from various fields have dealt with nonsense, and quite a few of their insights are very similar – although this theoretical convergence is often not explicated, probably due to disciplinary borders. This article juxtaposes different observations about nonsense for the purpose of illuminating their mutual concordance and contributing to a systematic and comprehensible framework for understanding types and functions of verbal nonsense in songs.

Nonsense words in songs challenge the common assumption that song meaning resides in song texts. Songs containing verbal nonsense thus make evident that meaning cannot be deduced from one element (e.g. text), but rather emerges as a constant negotiation between the different medialities involved: music, text, the visual, the aural etc. It has been pointed out by several musicologists that content analysis of texts, despite having had a long historical tradition, is nonetheless insufficient or even downright misleading as a methodological approach to interpreting songs. The extensive use of nonsense words in pop songs affirms this stance, as verbal sense is simply stripped away, forcing the analyst to look for other kinds of sense. Researchers from various fields have dealt with nonsense, and quite a few of their insights are very similar – although this theoretical convergence is often not explicated, probably due to disciplinary borders. This article juxtaposes different observations about nonsense for the purpose of illuminating their mutual concordance and contributing to a systematic and comprehensible framework for understanding types and functions of verbal nonsense in songs.

The choice of the pop song among other song genres is motivated by two factors. First, several academic (Appel, 2014; Ventzislavov, 2014) and popular journalism (de Lisle, 2005) sources have made the observation that nonsense seems to be especially prevalent in pop songs. Second, whereas other types of nonsense lyrics are designed to display the virtuosity of the performer (such as scat singing in jazz, cf. Goldblatt, 2013, p. 105) or to grant the text a poetic quality, pop nonsense is often simpler and seems to exist primarily as a part of the auditory structure of the song. I will argue

that the main purpose of this specific kind of nonsense is to be auditorily and bodily pleasurable rather than artistically interesting or challenging.
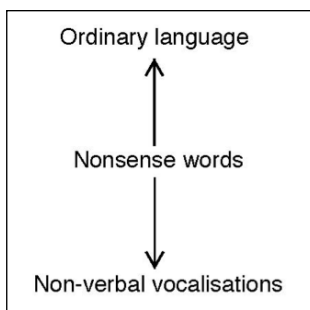
Between sense and sound

In a philosophical investigation Rossen Ventzislavov distinguishes between two nonsense types: *syllabic* and *propositional* nonsense (2014, p. 509). The former consists of sounds or cut-up units of words (such as 'la-la', 'eh-eh' etc.), the latter of phrases ('propositions') that seem to be meaningful, but really are not. If we consider nonsense a kind of language that is located somewhere between the verbal and the musical, it would seem that syllabic nonsense is closest to the musical pole, since this type, unlike propositional nonsense, carries no trace of a referential function. The interesting thing is that while verbally meaningless sound is puzzling from an academic point of view and therefore often understood as rebellious or subversive (cf. Appel, 2014, 95), nonsense sounds do not present a problem to *listeners.* On the contrary. Nonsense singing seems to be motivated by a particular feeling of frictionless pleasure, or, as pointed out by Keith Salley in a phonological study of alliteration in song text, certain syllables are appreciated simply because of the way they 'roll off the tongue' (2011, p. 411). This indicates that the analytical focus when dealing with nonsense in songs should be on the experience of the recipient. Richard Middleton points out that the perception of meaning in song words as either verbally or musically meaningful depends on the 'listener's situation and interpretation' (1990, p. 231). Similarly, Simon Frith observes that song words may be *made* meaningful when placed in certain contexts (1996, p. 173), though the most distinctly reception-oriented view is presented by Johan Fornäs who centralises the listener's position by stating that, at least with respect to pop music, reception is more essential than production (2003, p. 40).

The second kind of nonsense proposed by Ventzislavov, propositional nonsense, is text that appears to have referential meaning, yet breaks with the rules of ordinary language with respect to grammatical, narrative and/or logical order (2014, p. 513). An illustrative example of this is 'Surf's up' by The Beach Boys, which consistently commits all three infractions of ordinary language pertaining to propositional nonsense (i.e. it breaks with grammatical, logical and narrative order), as evident in this excerpt:

> Surf's Up, mm mm mm
> Aboard a tidal wave
> Come about hard and join
> The young and often spring you gave
> I heard the word
> Wonderful thing
> A children's song

Child, child, child, child, child
A child is the father of the man
Child, child, child, child, child
A child is the father of the man
A children's song
Have you listened as they played
Their song is love
And the children know the way
That's why the child is the father to the man
Child, child, child, child, child
Child, child, child, child, child
Na na na na na na na na
Child, child, child, child, child
That's why the child is the father to the man
Child, child, child, child, child

Logic and narrative are obstructed by the fragmentary sentence structure and lack of cohesion, and grammatical order is disregarded (e.g. the adverbial 'often' is placed at a position that would require another adjective like the preceding word 'young'). Incidentally, while 'Surf's up' in my view most clearly exemplifies propositional nonsense, it also displays other kinds of nonsense, thus showing that the identified nonsense types are in no way mutually exclusive. Syllabic nonsense is present at the very end of the song with the repetition of the typical pop nonsense syllables 'na-na' etc. Also, the multiple repetition of the word 'child' towards the end can be interpreted as syllabic nonsense, partly because it is as much employed as a percussive musical element as a word, and partly because repetition can be construed as a kind of verbal nonsense (I return to the issue of repetition as nonsense below). Moreover, the humming of 'mm' after 'surf's up' raises the question of the 'lower limit' of what can be defined as nonsense words. While Ventzislavov's distinctions help demarcate nonsense 'upwards', that is from ordinary speech, not all non-referential vocal sounds can be understood as nonsense – we do after all consider nonsense lyrics to be words in some respect, as is evident from the term 'nonsense word'. In phonetics nonsense words may be categorised according to whether or not they follow the phonotactic and orthographic rules of a given language – in short, to what extent they resemble ordinary words (Goswami, 1999, pp. 67-68). By extension to song, this distinction can help demarcate the definition of nonsense 'downwards', i.e. to distinguish nonsense words from nonverbal vocalisations (fig. 1).

Figure 1

In this view, nonsense words comprise something of a middle position between sense and sound: They sound and look like 'real' words, yet have no referential meaning. Looking like a word means being able to be rendered visually (in writing). Again the importance of the recipient comes to the fore, since whether or not nonsense words should be included in transcription depends on perspective. Consider for example the rendition of the 'Surf's up' lyrics on the lyrics site *AZ Lyrics*, which includes the 'na-na', but excludes the 'mm mm', apparently considering the latter more a part of the music than of the lyrics.[1] The transmediation of a nonsense word from sound into writing affirms its verbality: Written song lyrics show which sounds count as words in the eyes of a certain beholder. As Fornäs states, words do not have a more stable kind of meaning than music, since verbality is no constant quality in sounds, but rather depends on the recipient. Thus, 'having meaning is not enough to define words' (2003, p. 46), and this is again what makes a term like 'nonsense word' meaningful.

In song lyrics words have other conditions than in speech, because they are modified by their musical framing. Song words, whether meaningful or nonsensical, provide a base for music by being structured in metre and rhyme. Indeed, syllables often appear to serve no other purpose than this, as in these lines from Lady Gaga's 'Telephone', in which the last 'word' does little more than complete the rhyme and metre of the first line:

> Just a second, it's my favorite song they're gonna play
> And I cannot text you with a drink in my hand, **eh**

Between poetry and music

A content analysis of the very opaque text to 'Surf's up' demonstrates the epistemological potential of treating this text as a poem (see Lambert, 2007, p. 274 ff.). There are, however, certain aspects of the text which do not emerge from a literary focus. One such aspect is the use of puns based on homophone, but not homographic relations that cannot be rendered in writing: The line 'the music hall a cost- [-ly bow]' plays on the alternative meaning 'the music holocaust', and such a meaningful ambiguity exists only ephemerally (in sound). It seizes to be meaningful the moment it is transferred to the page. As pointed out by Jakob Schweppenhäuser (with respect to rap song), certain lyrics are 'so closely linked to their auditory material, so founded on solely audible wordplay' that they become intranscribable (2014, p. 131; my translation).

Whether song lyrics should be considered poetry is an intricate question. Frith explicitly states that 'songs aren't poems' (1996, p. 169), just as Allan Moore warns against confusing lyrics with poetry (2012, p. 113), while Ventzislavov conversely

conceives the identity of poetry and song lyrics to be 'an undeniable fact' (2014, p. 514), as both oscillate between the literal and the literary – both are 'free to *not* be meant in a literal way' (2014, p. 515; emphasis in original). Research history has seen a fear of intimacy between poetics and musicology. Thus, Dai Griffiths deplores the fact that poetry is a 'dirty word' in the study of song (2013, p. 40), just as the absence of song texts from literary research has also been criticised (Buelens, 2011; Schweppenhäuser, 2015). While there is, in the words of Lawrence Kramer (with respect to art song), an aspiration 'towards the condition of the other' between music and poetry (1984, p. 3), it would appear that this mutual 'nostalgic' longing has not been able to infiltrate the borders of the material medium: Poetic research has been more inclined to emphasise the *metaphorically* 'musical' properties of poetic language than to pay attention to language that actually entails *real* music (i.e. song texts, cf. Ventzislavov, 2014, p. 517; Buelens, 2011, p. 498), just as musicology's anxiety of the impure medium has led to an insistence on 'music alone' (Cook, 1998). The generic range between my choice of song to exemplify propositional nonsense (Beach Boys) and that of Ventzislavov (Aqua's 'Barbie Girl') itself demonstrates that nonsense lyrics are equally apt to make a pop song catchy as to make an art song deep (Ventzislavov, 2014, p. 516). Indeed, intricate lyrics may be enjoyed as pleasing sounds, just like random nonsensical song lyrics may be interpreted as complex poetry. The (potential) meaning of sounds emerges not in the production, but in the reception of songs (Fornäs, 2003, p. 40).

To me, the difficulty of determining the status of song lyrics in relation to poetry resides in the material differences between the art forms. Viewing song texts as poetry – i.e. a literary genre – neglects the significance of the musical medium. A musical medium entails performance. This is especially true of the pop song genre, in which songs are inseparable from their performer. A classical art song may be performed by various singers across time without losing its essence, but a pop song can only be sung by its proper performer lest it changes status to a cover version. Frith argues strongly in favour of viewing the words of pop songs as words *in performance*, which leads him to conclude that 'a song doesn't exist to convey the meaning of the words; rather, the words exist to convey the meaning of the song' (1996, p. 166).

We have, then, at least two possible and rather contrasting perspectives on the role of nonsense in songs:

1. nonsense as a poetic effect that deconstructs ordinary language to create artistic equivocality and convey a subversive message.
2. nonsense as a musical effect that is 'pleasing to hear and fun to sing along with' (Salley, 2011, p. 411).

Frith lists some of the characteristics of pop song language, which include a low level of communicative function and a high level of phatic expression (1996, p. 168). This connects to Roman Jakobson's classifications of the different functions of language (Jakobson, 1987, p. 66ff). One may thus understand nonsense words in song as an instance of Jakobson's renowned 'poetic function', i.e. a type of message that points 'inwards' to itself rather than 'outwards' to the context of the message, like referential language (cf. Middleton, 1990, p. 183). However, with Frith's perspective in mind, a better description of the function of song nonsense may be the phatic function, i.e. language that serves to create and maintain contact with the recipient without necessarily conveying much information (Jakobson, 1987, p. 68). Obviously, Jakobson is speaking about language specifically, but by extension to song music can be seen as the reference point of words in pop song. Thus, the primary function of language in pop song texts is neither to refer to a concrete content (referential function) nor to point to itself as verbal art (poetic function), but to sustain the musical structure and the auditory logic of the song (fig. 2).
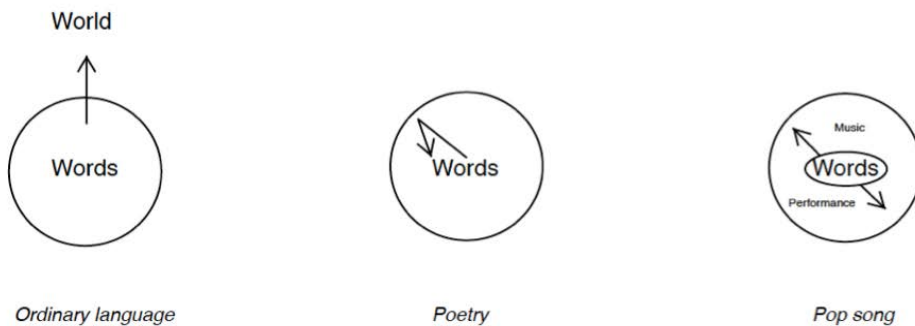

Figure 2

Genre questions become crucial here. The research field of classical art song faces quite different issues when dealing with the status of song texts as poems, and the implication of figure 2 would probably fit few songs in the classical repertoire, since in this genre it would be inadequate to reduce text to a musical factor. Most art song texts have an independent status as poetry outside their musical environment. Thus, in art song two complete works of art must coexist in one medium. This circumstance has yielded very diverging answers to the question of power between the arts, ranging from logocentric (words determine music) to melocentric views (music swallows words) (see Agawu, 1992 for a summary of these positions). In pop song the text rarely has to exist as a work of art outside music, and in any case the text does not figure as an independent entity in the mind of the typical consumer. Most pop song texts have a strong rhythmic and metric structure, but this structure is fully determined by the musical rhythm and metre and cannot be deduced

from the text alone, as becomes evident in any attempt to conduct a metric scansion of a transcription of a typical pop song text.

It is important to note that the division art versus pop is notoriously artificial, and there are many crossover phenomena. A very poignant example is Ira and George Gerschwin's song 'Blah blah blah' from 1931, which not only relies on syllabic nonsense, but delivers a palpable meta-comment of this kind of nonsensical song text by demonstratively placing a romantic cliché word at the end of each line:

> Blah blah blah blah moon
> Blah blah blah above
> Blah blah blah blah croon
> Blah blah blah above.

If nonsense is more prevalent in pop song than in art song, it is probably a result of a difference in media hierarchy: Pop song texts are not independent media with their own communicative and/or artistic integrity. So pop song texts are free to not convey verbal meaning, simply because verbal meaning is not primary to the genre. The pop song is among the few verbal genres in which verbal meaning is subsidiary to other types of meaning such as the musical.

Defining nonsense in pop songs

Keith Salley's phonological research into the sound of song words is a more tangible approach than the abstract level of a philosophical investigation like Ventzislavov's. This disciplinary difference does more than demonstrate the broad interest of the subject. It points to the topicality of the specific medium that is subject to enquiry: Is it music or text? Sound or writing? The necessary precondition for a study like Salley's is that the voice and body of the performer are at the core of the pop song. Salley even points to the importance of the physical engagement of listeners and infers that not only speaking but also speech perception involves bodily gesture (Salley, 2011, p. 410). This insistence on performed (recorded or live) vocal sound as the core of the pop song is in no way controversial. It is among the key points in Frith, and it is expressed with poignancy by Allan Moore, who declares that 'in a recorded medium the sounds take precedence, and song depends on its actualization of the human voice' (2012, p. 101). This primacy of the sounding voice entails amplifying the parameters of the voice that do not pertain to verbal referentiality, such as the very physical 'feeling' of the utterance of a word or a syllable. From such a perspective, nonsense words become especially important as part of the aesthetic appeal of the song. Salley states that 'the interaction of phonetic and rhythmic patterns is especially useful to consider in those pop songs whose lyrics make little or no literal sense' (2011, p. 411). The case of nonsense words in songs, then, illuminates

the fact that what we enjoy when listening to a pop song is often the way this particular performer utters these particular words – not for their verbal content, but for their physical sound. Frith refers to the Crash Test Dummies' song 'Mmm Mmm Mmm Mmm' and states that the main factor that made this song a hit was the pleasantly deep humming of the nonverbal chorus (1996, p. 194). Incidentally, this is the same vowel ('mmm') that triggered my earlier discussion of the 'lower' limit of nonsense words. In this example the humming becomes irrefutably a part of the song text by its significant structural position (it comprises the whole of the chorus) as well as its paratextual presence (it constitutes the title of the song). Another similar example is Hanson's hit song 'Mmmbop', whose entire chorus consists of humming combined with syllabic nonsense:

> Mmmbop, ba duba dop
> Ba du bop, ba duba dop
> Ba du bop, ba duba dop
> Ba du
> Yeah

Both 'Mmm Mmm Mmm Mmm' and 'Mmmbop' are typical in their structuring of the nonsensical content: While pop songs rarely consist solely of nonsense words, they do however often place them at a significant position such as the chorus or a hook (Ventzislavov, 2014, p. 510; Appel, 2014, p. 96). Moore observes that the role of the chorus is to create stasis to the narrative in a pop song (2012, p. 110). There may be a considerable amount of narrative content in pop song texts, but the crucial part of the song often suspends narrative progression in favour of a stagnant phatic expression and pure aesthetic enjoyment.

Richard Middleton notes that nonsense language in pop song indicates that verbal denotation has been 'completely subordinated to musical effects'. As a typical kind of pop song nonsense he identifies 'musical parallelisms', i.e. verbal phrases put together seemingly for no other reason than their rhyme (Middleton, 1990, p. 228). Take for instance this line from the chorus of a Vengaboys song with the same name: 'Boom Boom Boom Boom, I want you in my room'. Building on Jakobson, Middleton advances the view that while language tends towards differentiation (maximum information), music tends towards sameness or repetition (maximum redundancy) (Middleton, 1990, p. 215). According to Appel, repetition is a device that transforms words from sense into nonsense. Repetition shakes meaning out of words (2014, p. 91), and we may as such view verbal repetition as the musicalisation of words. While the word 'yeah' has (at least some) verbal meaning, the phrase 'yeah-yeah-yeah' is just as nonsensical and hence musical as 'na-na-na'. Here, though, we need to take into account that intertextual practice is one of the main resources for meaning-making in pop song (cf. Middleton, 2000). 'Yeah-yeah-yeah' may for instance recall

a certain Beatles song. Repetition as a meaning-producing factor is thus not only important on the internal level of particular songs, but also on the level of the whole intertextual history of songs and the practice of listening. The compelling aspect of pop songs is to a large extent their endlessly duplicated performance in which predictability is more essential than semantics (cf. Margulis, 2014).

Middleton distinguishes between musematic and discursive repetition in music (1990, p. 269). The latter refers to repetition of complete phrases, while the former is the repeating of 'musemes', i.e. the 'basic musical element divisible without destruction of meaning' (1990, p. 189). Middleton points out that repetition has a high profile in pop (1990, p. 267) – repetition even seems to be a common type of nonsense in pop songs. Rihanna's 2007 hit song 'Umbrella' may illustrate this: In the chorus the title word is divided right by the accented syllable and chopped up into smaller and smaller parts ('ella-ella-eh-eh-eh'). Rather than keeping the sentence or even the word intact, this device deconstructs the referential meaning of the songs' key word. Another example is Katy Perry's 'This is how we do', where the last part of the chorus goes: 'This is how we do, do do do do, this is how we do'. This excerpt shows how repetition, in Appel's sense, is shaken out of the word 'do', which is repeated to stretch over a whole musical phrase (with catchy syncopation), thereby assuming status of syllabic nonsense (also reinforced by the traditional status of 'do(o)' as a commonly employed nonsense syllable in song).

Musematic repetition has no teleological function in the temporal logic of the song (unlike tonally varied repetition like sequence); rather, it weakens the propulsion of time (Middleton, 1990, p. 275). This is very similar to the effect of syllabic nonsense words: The chopping up of the flow of verbal meaning brakes time in its tracks. In fact, the similarity between Middleton's types of repetition and Ventzislavov's types of nonsense is profound: Syllabic nonsense and musematic repetition both chop up their material (speech and music) into small fractions, whereas propositional nonsense and discursive repetition retain intact phrases (verbal or musical). Indeed, even the terminologies correspond; the similarity between terms such as 'syllables' and 'musemes' and between 'propositions' and 'discourse' is obvious. What Middleton says about his own classification can easily be transferred to Ventzislavov's: The two parameters differ primarily in 'the amount of self-contained "sense"' (1990, p. 269). That is, discursive/propositional repetition/nonsense holds a greater amount of complete meaning than musematic/syllabic repetition/nonsense. The line between repetition and nonsense seems to be blurred. David Goldblatt observes that in Doo-Wop song – a genre notorious for (and even named after) its nonsense words – even the words that actually do make sense assume a nonsense quality due to 'the aesthetic power of repetition' (2013, p. 106). Similarly, Frith argues that performers of pop songs are 'driven by the physical logic of the

words rather than by their semantic meaning' and finds the most 'obvious device' in this respect to be repetition (1996, p. 193).

Peter Stacey, who gives a thorough historical account of the historic development of the word-music relationship in song, proposes a song text typology in four categories (1989, p. 19):

- poetic text
- prose text
- paralinguistic text
- phonetic text

Figure 3

Prosaic text and poetic text are fairly self-explanatory. Paralinguistic text[2] and phonetic text are similar in that both privilege their auditory dimension, but whereas paralinguistic text also possesses verbal meaning, phonetic text is sound with no verbal meaning. The horizontal line in figure 3 (added by me) indicates a point also explicated by Stacey himself: There is a fundamental difference between the first two and the last two categories on the level of mediality. Where both poetic text and prosaic text exist as 'fully coherent artistic medi[a]' (1989, p. 24), paralinguistic text and phonetic text are 'unlikely to exist as [...] separate entit[ies] prior to the composer's intervention' (1989, p. 23). The poetic text type is typical of classical art song, and prosaic text may be a characteristic feature of the pop song in general, since its language is that of the ordinary or the everyday (Middleton, 1990, p. 229; Lacasse, 2010, p. 226). But with respect to nonsense song words specifically, only the last two text types are relevant, since pop nonsense can hardly be viewed as prose, and as argued earlier, it does not seem to have poetic motivations either. Further, nonsense words in pop song make it clear that the lyrics are not 'separate entities' or a 'fully coherent medium'; they are there merely as a part of the song. The line dividing prose and poetic text from paralinguistic and phonetic thus divides song text types into two distinct categories: one that entails a meeting and possible contest between media and one that does not, because text is fully determined by music.

Stacey's typology then functions as an intermedial correlate to the dual concepts of syllabic/musematic versus propositional/discursive nonsense: Syllabic/musematic nonsense is a type of phonetic song text, since meaning is absent in favour of sound, and propositional/discursive nonsense may be termed paralinguistic, since some trace of meaning is retained, even if it is dominated by sound. This similarity between the three typologies becomes even more striking when considering that they were developed with respect to two different media: words and music. As discussed earlier, however, it remains a question whether words should even be

considered an independent medium in this genre. Moore, with his usual authority, states that since in ordinary conversation only seven per cent of a message is verbal (the rest is vocal tone and body language, i.e. paralinguistic aspects), we may transfer this insight and assume that the message in songs is seven per cent verbal and 93 per cent musical (Moore, 2012, p. 109). However, as Moore also points out, the matter is more complicated, and this complexity stems not least from the fact that words and music in song have several possible modes of perception. It is, after all, possible to 'consume' a pop song text in written form, even if this form is secondary to the song and usually not the first form of encounter (Moser, 2007, p. 297).

Verbal nonsense as musical sense

Sybille Moser (2007) has provided an empirical study of the difference of reading lyrics and hearing songs. She states that 'many interviewees emphasize the non-verbal experience of lyrics' (2007, p. 295). This resonates with all of the literature previously consulted in this paper stating that in the pop song genre music absorbs words. Moser provides a media-specific answer to the question 'why do so many people listen to pop songs' (2007, p. 279). In many cases they do so for chiefly or solely auditory reasons: for the pleasure of the sound. One of the major differences that Moser points out between reading and hearing a song text is that in the former case there is a higher degree of control, leading to a 'forced interpretation'. Sung lyrics are less dependent on verbal meaning; pop song nonsense may well be an effect of this circumstance.

Appel shows how the interpretation of Blur's 1994 hit song 'Girls & Boys' differs depending on wether the analysis focuses on pure text or text as it is situated in music. Viewed solely as text, the song 'celebrates the dissolution of sexual differences', but heard as music, the song becomes a 'playful, ritualistic, hypnotic chanting' in which boys and girls are an 'ungendered potentiality' (Appel, 2014, p. 103). This amounts to a comparative media-specific analysis which is very much supported by Moser's findings: There is a substantial difference between the aural and visual modes of song perception. From this perspective it also becomes clearer that the breakdown of verbal meaning in pop song nonsense does not have to be rebellious or subversive; rather, it is about pleasure or 'affect' (Appel, 2014, p. 98).

A significant counterexample to this assumption about the non-subversiveness of pop nonsense is Scatman John's hit singles (notably the 1994 song 'Scatman (Ski-Ba-Bop-Ba-Dop-Bop)') in which the artist's stuttering is overcome by scatting nonsense syllables. Noting that scat differs from pop nonsense because the former is motivated by a wish to show off the singer's artistic mastery, it is striking that even though Scatman John is a pop star he places great emphasis on the fact that he is scatting and even includes it in his stage name. In this case, nonsense clearly serves

a provocative purpose, as is evident for example in this passage from the aforementioned song: 'Everybody's sayin' that the Scatman stutters but doesn't ever stutter when he sings. But what you don't know I'm gonna tell you right now: That the stutter and the scat is the same thing to you'. This meta-comment on his own use of nonsense leaves no doubt that this is no case of a verbal message being consumed by the auditory logic of the song. On the contrary. This nonsense is there to convey an important moral message about not being defeated by misfortunes such as a speech impediment. Even so, this message itself supports the same point as can be made about the purpose of pop nonsense in general: that relinquishing the supremacy of verbal sense may be liberating, whether from the societal demand to speak fluently or from the 'pressure to find meaning in text' (Moser, 2007, p. 293).

Affect as a theoretical notion is what Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle use to explain how pop songs with 'little semantic or symbolic content that could be appropriated as an expression of political dissent' can still function as protest songs (2013, p. 4). The thing is that semantic content is neither the only nor in many cases the central kind of 'sense' a song conveys. Thus, the equation is, in Frith's words, not 'meaning (words) versus absence of meaning (music), but the relationship between two different sorts of meaning' (1996, p. 187). In most songs we are confronted with a balance of 'sonic logic against semantic logic' (1998, p. 178) – but when the song text is a nonsense text, the semantic parameter vanishes. Middleton likewise points out that what music does in pop song is to endow language with 'affective force' (1990, p. 229). The problem is the in musicological research well-known puzzle of denotation: It is simply easier to speak of what a text is 'about'. This is one reason why 'the very sonic content of lyrics is rarely addressed' (Moore, 2012, p. 114). Moore responds to this issue by adopting from John Michell the concept of 'euphonics', the idea that vocal sounds may have inherent referential meaning (2012, p. 115). The notion is similar to the concept of 'phonaesthesia', by Lars Elleström described as 'auditory form miming meaning' (2010, p. 85). I suggest that euphonics, which can roughly be translated as 'pleasing sound', is a major force behind the prevalence and effect of pop song nonsense. In Lady Gaga's 2009 song 'Bad Romance' a characteristic nonsense intro and recurring hook goes like this:

> Rah-rah-ah-ah-ah-ah!
> Roma-roma-ma-ah!
> Ga-ga-ooh-la-la!
> Want your bad romance

Applying Michell's table of euphonics, this passage conveys notions such as openness (the letters 'A' and 'O'), careless speed and hardness ('R') and stickiness and disgust ('G'). This seems quite on point, considering the monster theme of the remaining song text and the video[3] (and Lady Gaga's image in general). Moreover, the syllable

'Rah' has connotations to an animal roar (hence 'openness'), further supported by the upwards-leaping fifth in the melody, while 'Ga-ga' is associated with baby babbling. Childlikeness and animal-likeness are typical effects of pop song nonsense (Appel, 2014, p. 91 and 97), which could ascribe these nonsense syllables to the overall controversial message of monstrosity and otherness of the song. I would hesitate to do so, though, since, as argued earlier, pop nonsense is not about artistic subtlety, but rather about affective, auditory appeal. In the words of Lise Dilling-Hansen, Lady Gaga lingers somewhere between the mainstream and the radical, using stereotypical elements as a 'Trojan horse' to communicate controversial messages (2015, p. 7). In terms of form and musical content, Gaga's songs are not very controversial. This includes these nonsense syllables, which I perceive as more of a catchy gimmick or, as aptly put by Goldblatt (about nonsense song text in general), a 'phonetic souvenir' (2013, p. 103).

If pop song is a genre in which music has primacy over words, this is also evident from the fact that pop songs seem to break with the inherent accent structure of the text to a larger extent than classical art songs (Salley, 2011, p. 415). The previously mentioned Gaga song 'Telephone' demonstrates how the linguistic and poetic accents are subverted by their musical setting, foregrounding trivial words like grammatical articles and prepositions: 'And **I** can**not** text **you** with **a** drink **in** my **hand, eh**'. An even more clear-cut example is Katy Perry's 'Unconditionally' in which the prosody of the key word is opposed in every way possible: The musical setting places two accents on the word, both falling between the prosodic accents of the word:

Un-con-di -**tio**-nal,   un-con-di-**tio**-nal-ly, I will love you un - **con**-di tio -nal-ly

Figure 4

Rhythmic and metric structure, then, is one area in which music trumps words in pop songs. In figure 4 the words are not nonsense in themselves, but musical structure certainly does its best to cover up their verbal sense. This in no way prevented the hit status of the song, indicating again that verbal clarity is not what consumers crave in pop songs. Appel points to Mannfred Mann's Earth Band's version of the Springsteen song 'Blinded by the Light' as an illustration of how alliteration and assonance overpower verbal sense. The chorus of this song is an accurate example of paralinguistic text in Stacey's terms: The pleasing sounds of the letters 'B', 'L', 'A' and 'I' seem to be the core point of the song, and thus phonetics trumps semantics

(this also explains why the words of the song appear in a context which does not make sense).

Frith points out that the only difference between hearing nonsensical babbling and hearing a foreign language is our own attitude: Do we assume that what we are hearing is meaningful? (1996, p. 220). As Lacasse points out, we tend to neglect the vast amount of pop song consumers who do not understand English (Lacasse, 2010, p. 246). The international success of someone like the rapper and songwriter Stromae, who exclusively performs in French, shows that verbal meaning cannot be central to this genre. Cece Cutler makes a similar point in an investigation of 'Yaourt', a French-based phenomenon of miming English pop song texts while only retaining their sound and not their meaning (Cutler, 2000, p. 117).

Thus, the nonsensicality of pop song texts is a matter of perspective. Dai Griffiths states that there can be 'little doubt that many songs are invented from babbling sounds' (2003, p. 48), and, we could add, some songs stay that way. In an empirical survey of the function of deictic pronouns in pop song texts Tim Murphey makes the central observation that what is appealing in pop song texts is the way they retain an openness to interpretation regarding time and place – so that listeners may put themselves in the place of the utterer of the song (1989, p. 185). The frequent presence of pronouns like 'me' and 'you' is of course a core example, but, as Appel observes, the frequent use of proper names in pop songs is also a device for escaping sense (2014, p. 101) – contrary to what one would think, considering the specificity of proper names. But as Appel points out, what makes thousands of people relate to a proper name like Simon and Garfunkel's 'Cecilia', is not that they all have a heart-breaking relation to someone named Cecilia. Rather, the use of a proper name provides a getaway for semantic specificity. This becomes especially clear in the many cases where several proper names are rattled off like Lou Bega's 'Mambo no. 5' or Lady Gaga's 'Allejandro', and even more so in the many pop songs that mix proper names with syllabic nonsense. Take as an example, again, The Beach Boys, who in the song 'Barbara Ann' deconstructs the name into singable syllables: 'A – Ba –Ba-Ba- Ba- Barbara Ann'. Similarly, in the song 'Geronimo' by the Danish singer Aura the name Geronimo is reduced and chopped up into syllables: 'Gee-gee-hee-jo-jo-ho-la-la-hm, let's go Geronimo'.

If taken literally, the term 'nonsense' is misleading in its narrow conception of 'sense'. What this survey hopes to show is that nonsense in pop song texts definitely make sense, but not a self-contained verbal sense (Ventzislavov, 2014, p. 515). Its sense is intermedial and emerges from a conglomerate of layers such as vocal sounds, musical framing, intertextual connotations in listeners etc. Pop song nonsense is not about poetic deconstruction of language, but about supporting and contributing to the complex utterance of the song as a whole. In the genre of the pop song (unlike, for example, in literary genres that employ nonsense words outside of

a musical framing), we accept the absence of verbal meaning only because of the presence of musical meaning. If one appreciates the equivocality of the word 'sense', nonsense words may paradoxically possess even more sense than ordinary words.

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Notes

1   http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/beachboys/surfsup.html
2   It must be noted that while 'paralinguistics' is a linguistic term, Stacey employs the term in a somewhat commodified sense, suited to his intermedial purpose.
3   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrO4YZeyl0I