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THE USES AND GRATIFICATIONS THEORY (IN THE CASE OF HOUSE MUSIC)

Abstract: The paper pays particular attention to teaching of Denis McQuail who considered that people are accessing the mass media with their needs, and focusing themselves in observing, listening, or reading, by complex of expectations or pursued gratifications. According to McQuail, the most important gratifications that are provided by media are: diversion, personal relationships, personal Identity and surveillance.

In the paper we will expose these effects, ie. uses and gratifications that music provides, in the case of house music. House music fits perfectly in the uses and gratifications theory which insists on the activity of creators, emitters and the recipients of the messages (the audience).

Keywords: mass media, human gratifications, the uses and gratifications theory, music, House music

People approach the mass media from the perspective of their own needs and orient themselves in observing, listening, or reading by means of an aggregate of expectations or pleasures they seek; these needs are generated in one's personality and social circumstances. Therefore, in any analysis of the impact of mass media, it makes sense to pay attention to the needs of the audience and the pleasures afforded to it by the media.

In his main work, *Mass Communication Theory*, Denis McQuail asserts that the idea that a potential audience member's media use pattern depends on the pleasures, needs, desires, and motives that are familiar to them is almost as old as media research itself.¹ Namely, audiences often form on the basis of similar-

¹ Denis McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, London, Sage Publications, 2005, 423–424.

ties between individuals' needs, interests, or tastes. Many of those needs have social or psychological origins. Typical needs include those for information, relaxing, socializing, diversion, and "escape".

The kinds of pleasures that typically emerge in many different studies of mass-media use usually include the following: acquiring information and news about one's immediate or wider environment; alleviating tedium, loneliness, tension, personal difficulties, and finding escape paths usually leading to a world of fantasy, often using the mechanism of identifying with a hero or heroine; providing support, security, and enhancing one's self-esteem; contributing to social interaction by offering subjects for conversation; supplying ritual performances of daily activities that make the day special, contributing to the mood, supporting family environment. In other words, the basic pleasures afforded by the media include the following: information and education, guidance and advice, entertainment and relaxation, social contacts, value-system reinforcement, cultural satisfaction, emotional release, forming and affirming identity, expressing one's lifestyle, forming and strengthening the sense of safety, sexual arousal, and filling time.²

Generally speaking, the majority of media content may be classified as "entertainment" and that is the main reason why the media are so popular.³ Producers and the audience alike seek entertainment. Entertainment is difficult to define, but the main idea appears to be diversion or preoccupation with a narrative or spectacle. More specifically, it means to entertain oneself with something; to experience emotional arousal in order to feel sorrow, happiness, rage, relief, excitement, fear, etc.; to get rid of anxiety; etc. Likewise related to this is the so-called distractive function of mass-communication media, which "allows the individual a moment of 'respite', so that they may continue to expose themselves to information, interpretations, and prescriptions that are so vital to them in contemporary world".⁴

The Uses and Gratifications Theory

This way of thinking belongs to the school of research known as "the uses and gratifications approach", whose origin lies in attempting to explain why people pay so much attention to certain media contents.⁵ Research performed

² Denis McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, *op. cit.*, 428.

³ *Ibid.*, 500–501.

⁴ Miroljub Radojković and Mirko Miletić, *Komuniciranje, mediji i društvo*, Belgrade, Učiteljski fakultet, 2008, 177.

⁵ Denis McQuail, *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, *op. cit.*, 423–424.

in this theoretical tradition has shed light on the nature of basic audience requirements and the way they are structured. Therefore, the uses and gratifications theory differs from traditional research in media effects by virtue of trying to explain what people do with the media rather than how media messages affect them. It emphasizes the notion of an active audience, whose members use the media to fulfil their own needs.

The main questions that the uses and gratifications theory seeks to answer are the following:

1. What do people do with the media?
2. Why do they choose certain media, i.e. what do they use them for?
3. What is the impact of their media use?

Its **basic precepts** are the following:

1. The audience is conceived as active.⁶
2. The initiative in associating the gratification of needs with the choice of media belongs to the audience.
3. The media must compete with other sources of needs gratification.
4. People have enough awareness of their media use, interests, and motives, which allows them to provide researchers with a clear picture of that (Uses and gratifications theory).

The first studies of this kind date from the 1940s, with focus on the sources of popularity of various radio shows, especially radio soap operas and quiz shows, as well as on reading daily papers. Interviews conducted with readers of daily paper revealed that newspapers were more than just a source of useful information – they were also important in terms of supplying their readers with a sense of security as well as common topics for conversation, and informing the structure of their everyday routine.

Elihu Katz was the first to give an account of the uses and gratifications theory, in his 1959 response to Bernard Berelson's position. Namely, Berelson had argued that the field of communication research was dead. In his response, Katz argued that the really dying field was that of studying mass communications from the perspective of their function of persuasion. Instead, he proposed that the field of communication studies should focus on responding to the ques-

⁶ Media users are not passive or unconscious but active participants, who generate meaning and make informed choices of certain media contents (Laura K. Hahn and Scott T. Paynton, "Chapter 8 – Mass Communication", in *Survey of Communication Study*, https://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Survey_of_Communication_Study/Chapter_8_-_Mass_Communication, accessed 4 November 2016.).

tion concerning what people do with media.⁷ Audience requirements are therefore considered a major intervening factor in studying media effects; “media researchers ought to be studying human needs to discover how much the media do or do not contribute to their creation or satisfaction”.⁸ Writing in 1963, Wilbur Schramm likewise asserted that people make their media choices on the basis of how satisfied they are likely to be by using a specific type of media.⁹

According to McQuail, when the uses and gratifications approach was re-discovered and reformulated, twenty years after its first, pioneering studies, its basic precepts were the following:

1. In general, the selection of media and media contents is rational and driven by specific aims and pleasures (the audience is active and its formation may be logically explained).

2. Audience members are aware of their media-related needs emerging in their personal (individual) and social (shared) circumstances and are able to express them in terms of motives.

3. Broadly speaking, personal gain is a more significant determining factor in audience formation than are aesthetic or cultural factors.

4. All or most of important factors in audience formation (motives, imagined or accomplished pleasures, media-related choices, etc.) are, in principle, measurable.

Therefore, in his 1972 study “The Televised Audience: A Revised Perspective”, having examined a large number of radio and television programmes in Britain, McQuail proposed a typology of media-personal interactions, comprising the most important types of media pleasures:

Diversion: escape from everyday routine or problems; emotional release.

Personal relationships: companionship; social utility.

Personal identity: self-reference (self-understanding, self-persuasion, etc.); reality exploration; value reinforcement.

Surveillance (forms of information seeking about events and states of affairs).¹⁰

Summarizing the meaning and significance of the uses and gratifications theory, we may say that it constituted a major breakthrough in mass communica-

⁷ Rozanne Kotzee, “The Uses and Gratifications of Music, by Personality Type, of a Central South African Radio Station’s Audience”, *Communitas* 2013, 18, 78.

⁸ Elihu Katz, quoted in Dan Laughey, *Key Themes in Media Theory*, London, Open University Press, 2007, 26.

⁹ Laura K. Hahn and Scott T. Paynton, *op. cit.*

¹⁰ Denis McQuail, *McQuail’s Mass Communication Theory, op. cit.*, 425.

tion studies because it was the first theory to posit the audience not as passive and subject to easy manipulation but as an active recipient of mass-media messages. It moved from the classical approach of Harold Lasswell, Paul Lazarsfeld, Carl Rogers, and Pamela Shoemaker, whose main focus was on discussing what the media do with the audience, toward discussing what people do with the media. This theory thereby advocates functionalism from the perspective of the audience, rather than, as before, from that of the media.¹¹

Music and Pleasure

Mass communication studies and theory have paid relatively little attention to music as a mass medium.¹² That constitutes a major deficiency and problem, because music has an exceptionally high number of effects, especially in terms of moods or excitement. Thus Alan P. Merriam, a major American ethnomusicologist, claimed that “there is probably no other human cultural activity which is so all-pervasive and which reaches into, shapes, and often controls so much of human behavior”.¹³ The significance and presence of music in people’s lives may also be illustrated by the following piece of data. In 2000, the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) found that music, as a universal means of global communication, affects every human being on the planet, generating a hefty sum of 40 billion dollars every year.

What are the connections between us and music? The pleasure gained from listening; the warmth and friendship from being part of a group making music; the stimulus and satisfaction from regular practice and rehearsal; the intellectual delight from exploring the intricacies of musical forms and structures; the physical energy released within us by both playing and listening to music, inspiring us often to move and dance.¹⁴

The “Big Three” of music listening, i.e. the main reasons why people listen to music, are the following: people listen to music to achieve self-awareness, social relatedness, and arousal and mood regulation.¹⁵ A. J. Lonsdale and A.

¹¹ Bernice Agyekwena, “The Uses and Gratification Theory in Relation to Television”, licentiate degree dissertation, Rome, Pontifical Gregorian University, 2006, 2–3.

¹² Denis McQuail, *McQuail’s Mass Communication Theory*, *op. cit.*, 36.

¹³ Quoted in James D. Belcher, “An Examination of the Influence of Individual Differences, Music-Listening Motives, and Music Selection on Post-Listening Music Discussion”, doctoral dissertation, Kent State University, 2010, 1.

¹⁴ Durgesh K. Upadhyay, “Music Preferences, Music Engagement and Healing”, *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity*, 2013, 3, 3, 287.

¹⁵ Thomas Schäfer, Peter Sedlmeier, Christine Städtler, and David Huron, “The Psychological Functions of Music Listening”, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2013, 4, 511.

C. North emphasize eight dimensions of music: identity, positive and negative mood management, reminiscing (memories), diversion, arousal, surveillance, and social interaction. Earlier studies stressed the following: social functions of music (expressing one's own identity and personality); emotional functions (inducing positive feelings); cognitive or self-referential functions (such as escapism); and functions related to arousal (such as relaxation or spending time).

All of these insights, made in studying music as a means of communication, affirm the basic precepts of the uses and gratifications theory, above all that a given type of media or media content attracts our attention because it satisfies certain important needs in our life.

The Technological Basis of House Music

In order to understand the phenomenon of house music, one must set out from the basic social and communication framework wherein it emerged and is still produced, which was decisively marked by the processes of growing (electronic) technologization and (computer) digitalization of all spheres of contemporary human practice. As electronically produced music, house is closely associated with the (digital) machine and its "soul", much more so than any style or genre of music before.

Ralf Hütter, of the cult German band Kraftwerk, the pioneers of electronic music, has said: "The soul of the machines has always been a part of our music. Trance always belongs to repetition, and everybody is looking for trance in life... in sex, in the emotional, in pleasure, in anything... so, the machines produce an absolutely perfect trance" (Electronic Dance Music).¹⁶

House music likewise produces trance by means of music machines and that is what defines it to a considerable degree. It was the first totally technological form of popular music. In house, there is an intimate personal relationship with the energies of one's technological environment, as well as a huge number of sub-styles, which keep emerging and proliferating on the basis of (new) technology. Ravers, belonging to a major house genre, therefore like to say that the music incessantly keeps reinventing itself.¹⁷

Therefore, "the performer and the composer – two fundamental categories in Western music – in digital worlds are no longer privy to an exclusive status: the machine is a partner, co-author, an indispensable prosthetic extension of hu-

¹⁶ *Electronic Dance Music*, <http://www.enovine.net/muzika/i25/05iv01muz/05iv011112muz/em.html>, accessed 4 November 2016.

¹⁷ Peter Rubin, "Let the Spirit Make You Move: Technological Restructuring and the Subculture", paper delivered at the Ars Digitalis conference at the Hochschule der Kunst, Berlin, 1996, 18–19.

manity and thus also of art. In some domains of culture, musical authorship is still associated with an artist who controls all aspects of the making and realization of the work, as well as with the techniques of an accomplished use of sound (samples, quotes, synthesized instrumental and vocal timbres), a nomadic moving across musical genres, histories, and cultures. Musical performance, in addition to the power to control the body, instrument, and voice, is increasingly reduced to instances where human presence is only a necessary addition to digitally generated sounds, or “live” presence is contextualized in such a way that it may no longer be realized outside of a technological environment”.¹⁸

House Music and Communication Theory

In the digital age, the consumer determines the choice of media, as well as the format in which she will consume their content.¹⁹ But in house, that applies not only to the consumer, but also, and even more so, to those who create music. That is why house music corresponds rather well with the uses and gratifications theory, which insists on the activity of the creator, emitter, and recipient (audience) of messages.

The role of the DJ (disc jockey) is vital in club culture, in which house music is performed. The club atmosphere, mood, or vibe is generated in the interaction between the DJ, the crowd, and their shared physical space.²⁰ The cult of the DJ is a central part of the clubbing scene, a star figure who deftly assesses the mood on the dance podium, reacting to it and directing it whilst blending tracks into a seamless whole.²¹ In that regard, Frankie Knuckles, one of the founders of house and a famous DJ from the earliest stages of house music, made the following statement: “House music is what you make of it. Purity and consistency can only dirty things up. [...] The main thing I wanted to make sure this album had is, for lack of a better description, flava”.²² “Flava” is a term meant to signify precisely that kind of originality, autonomy, and uniqueness of a track or a set of tracks and their sound, created by a DJ.

¹⁸ Iva Nenić, “Tehnologija i zvuk: od digitalizacije muzike ka muzikalnosti digitalnog”, *Evolucija*, 2006, 12.

¹⁹ Douglas Davidson, “Uses and Gratifications of Digital Media: The End of Physical Formats?”, master’s dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 2010, 4.

²⁰ Roy Shuker, *Popular Music: The Key Concepts*, London–New York, Routledge, 1998, 84.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

²² Rich Thomas, “My Philosophy: Frankie Knuckles”, *Magnetic Magazine*, 30 June 2011, <http://www.magneticmag.com/2011/06/my-philosophy-frankie-knuckles/>, accessed 4 November 2016.

The interaction between the DJ (emitter) and her audience (recipient) is an essential feature of house music. That is why analyzing house music is best suited to the ritual (expressive) model of communication: “In the ritual or expressive model of mass communication, the communicator aims at a kind of performance that uses signs and symbols to express her cognitive as well as emotional contents. The recipient consumes and shares the sender’s experience, and thereby participates in a ritual, game, or the production of cultural goods. Social control is not the top priority... Mass communication is a ritual, i.e. expressive, because it enables ritual self-affirmation in a specific socio-historical context, not only on the part of those sending messages, but also of those receiving them, allowing them to rely on the same or similar values and share and generate a common culture.”²³

This shared culture that house generates in (night) clubs brings us to some additional insights from communication theory. Club culture is a taste culture, because the clubbing crowd comes together on the basis of a musical taste shared by its members, on the basis of consuming the same media and, most importantly, of preferring people with similar tastes.²⁴ Incidentally, the concept of “taste culture” was coined by Herbert Gans in 1957 to describe a kind of audience created by the media on the basis of a convergence of interests, rather than a shared locality or social background. He defined it as the “aggregate of similar contents chosen by the same people”. Taste cultures are more like sets of similar media products than sets of people – an expression of a form, presentation style, or genre that capture the lifestyle of a segment of the audience.²⁵

Also, certain contemporary theories of popular culture, especially those of consumerism, may be fruitfully applied to the practice, that is, process of creating, emitting, and receiving house music. Thus John Fiske argues that “popular culture is made by the people, not produced by the culture industry”. The audience is “a fluid, heterogeneous formation of productive consumers who embody ‘a shifting set of allegiances that cross all social categories’”.²⁶ Henry Jenkins talks of a “participatory culture” – “participatory cultures of fandom ‘transform the experience of media consumption into the production of new texts, indeed of a new culture and a new community’”.²⁷ Roger Silverstone argues that “everyday consumer practices feed back to producer practices, which are in turn

²³ Miroljub Radojković and Mirko Miletić, *op. cit.*, 85–86.

²⁴ Roy Shuker, *op. cit.*, 45.

²⁵ Denis McQuail, *McQuail’s Mass Communication Theory, op. cit.*, 409–410.

²⁶ Quoted in Dan Laughey, *op. cit.*, 170.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 178.

fed back to consumers”.²⁸ The process of encoding is shaped not only by the encoders, but also by the decoders, who also wield some influence in the matter. Consumption and production are not entirely separate processes, but function together.²⁹

Finally, the process of understanding house better may also include contemporary philosophy. The removal of any distance between the DJ (creator/performer) and the audience (listeners/dancers), as well as among audience members themselves, which is so amply demonstrated by house, may be explained by reference to the philosophy of Jean Baudrillard. Namely, Baudrillard claimed that the “ecstasy of communication abolishes the concept of the subject; the end result is a miniaturization and fractalization of the subject, fractured into a multitude of miniature egos that are all alike. The subject no longer recognizes herself in relation to others but only in relation to herself, while others no longer even exist, because for us, due to communication, nothing and no one is other anymore” (Maksimović 2006).³⁰

The Religious Character of House

That “dance” dimension of house, i.e. a large number of individuals dancing together in a club or outdoors, with bodies touching and permeating each other, pervaded by an energy flow connecting everybody and erasing all divisions to Me and Others, where everyone becomes Us, equal members of a community and consumers of a shared culture, constitutes an important and specific feature of house as opposed to other musical genres. In house, there are no longer differences or divisions based on race, class, nation, religion, sex, language, etc. “Dance is associated with the pleasures of physical expression rather than the intellectual, the body rather than the mind”.³¹ (Henry Torgue) The spectacle is no longer centred exclusively on the melody and harmony, but also on the rhythm, which governs spatial behaviour.³²

As a subgenre of techno-house music, rave highlights especially those moments of rituality, trance/ecstasy, “escapism” (escaping into another, different, “higher” reality), in a word, religiosity, taking the word “religion” in its origi-

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 179.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 181–182.

³⁰ Quoted in Irina Maksimović, “Tehno kao paradigma popularne elektronske muzike: prilog teorijskom utemeljenju koncepta”, *E-volucija*, 2006, 12.

³¹ Roy Shuker, *op. cit.*, 72.

³² Mirolava Lukić Krstanović, *Spektakli XX veka: muzika i moći*, Belgrade, Etnografski institut SANU, 2010, 97.

nal meaning, “to bind together, to (re-) connect”. Rave and religious practice in archaic communities share some important similarities. Thus the DJ may be viewed as a sort of medicine man (shaman), who directs the religious ritual, while the audience, who are listening and dancing at the same time, might be viewed as the community itself, which, by means of self-transcendence and reaching a “higher” spiritual reality in a state of trance, comes together, i.e. becomes integrated in the ritual (Émile Durkheim and other functionalists put special emphasis on the integrative function of religious rituals in primitive cultures). Besides, within techno-house music, “trance” does stand out as a radical subgenre. That is why one may say that rave culture is a hedonistic, “hectic culture” of escapism and striving for a transcendental, higher consciousness: “Rave is more than the music plus drugs; it’s a matrix of lifestyle, ritualized behaviour, and beliefs. To the participant, it feels like a religion”.³³

All of those essential features of house music find a clear illustration and confirmation in the thinking of its fans and followers themselves. Thus a Serbian connoisseur of house writes on his blog:

“House is a music of movement. It is a music one dances to, in addition to listening to it. If House doesn’t give you an opportunity to dance, then it’s not House... Sensibility in dancing brings you a deeper experience of life and overall pleasure.”

“House is the kind of music that’s supposed to bring you to your feet and put you in a mood for dancing and moving. If House fails to do that, then it’s failed its mission and *raison d’être*.”

“That is why House is sexy. It counts on your heart, not your head. It makes you get out of your skin and demolish the barriers erected by social dogma and false morality. Whilst settling the score with social prejudices ‘by force’, House music, a music of dance and movement, does it by seducing you... Therefore, give your body what it wants. Let it speak out in the language of movement. Because the world of sound and movement is your own world, too.”

“You’ve probably had a chance in your life to see ritual dances in travel shows from the remote rainforests of Amazonia or some such place. What were you able to notice there? In addition to the ritual colours and finery, there is also music, whose task is to help the ritual dancers fall into a state of trance. The drums keep holding the same rhythm, which has an evocative effect and intoxicates the dancers with its monotony. That is precisely the kind of thing you’ll experience here. A sort of rhythm that won’t relent. A sort of rhythm whose vibrations force you into a ‘trance-like’ state. It will surround you, cap-

³³ Roy Shuker, *op. cit.*, 223.

ture and hold you in its ‘clutches’ so tightly that you won’t be able to move a finger”.³⁴

On a foreign website dedicated to “the philosophy of house music”, “House” itself has the following to say:

“I will bind where cohesion seems most unlikely. I am the ultimate match-maker; for I see not color, creed or religion. I am pure vibration. Bring your masses, your gathering of souls and I will free you to ‘be’. I enlighten others so they may see the light in you is – the light. Hold a mirror to me and you will see love regardless of race, strength balanced among gender and spirit that soars beyond all human reason. In me you find support and healing from hurt.”

Whereas Lester K. Spence, assistant professor of political science at Johns Hopkins University and a longstanding passionate follower of house, argues the following, concerning house and its significance in his life:

“House is our release, house is our sanctuary...can you feel it like I feel it?”

The quote above is taken from a track that I play every now and again.

For those of us whose lives have been changed from exposure to house music, the quote captures a great deal. I am a father, a husband, a professor, a writer. But with the exception of the birth of my children, the closest I’ve come to God was on the dance floor.

Closer than jazz, closer than the finest art, closer than even the most powerful sermon.

When I need to work, I use house music to give me laser-like focus – most of my academic and non-academic production was accompanied by a driving DJ set. And its [*sic*] had this effect on me for almost thirty years.

Going back to the roots of the word ‘religion’ (religion refers to the act of binding or fastening together), house music is my religion.

[...]

House music...creates what could be called a ‘counterpublic’. One that is, in its own way, as aggressive as hip-hop, but one that aggressively promotes a loving other world. One where your ability to dance doesn’t matter. But more importantly, one where race and class doesn’t [*sic*] matter. One where gender and sexuality doesn’t [*sic*] matter.

What matters is love for the music, and the belief that another world is possible, even if only for a few hours.”³⁵

³⁴ Slobodan Simeunović, “House”, <http://mojsvetmuzike-video.blogspot.rs/2011/02/house.html>, accessed 4 November 2016.

³⁵ *The Philosophy of House*, <https://philosophyofhouse.wordpress.com/>, accessed 4 November 2016.

Conclusion

Based on the entire foregoing discussion, we may conclude that the uses and gratifications theory provides an excellent account of house music. House music certainly affords its consumers numerous pleasures otherwise afforded by the media: information, diversion and relaxation, social contacts, value-system reinforcement, cultural satisfaction, emotional release, identity formation and affirmation, expression of lifestyle, formation and strengthening of a sense of security, sexual arousal, and a way to spend time. At the same time, one should especially highlight the function of escapism, of escaping from an often tedious and negative reality into a better and happier world. Because, as DJ Jeff Mills put it: “In Detroit, techno performs the function that hard hip hop performs in LA or New York. It’s a sort of escape. For Christ’s sake, in Detroit you kill for fun!”³⁶

³⁶ *House Techno Music*, <https://sites.google.com/site/housetech>, accessed 4 November 2016.