

THINGS THEY SAID YESTERDAY¹

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In 2000 I took part in the IVth International English Culture Conference, organized by the University of Lisbon Centre of English Studies (ULICES), with a paper on *Robin Hood and His Crew of Souldiers*, a short anonymous play performed in Nottingham on 23rd April 1661, Charles II's coronation day. As stated in the abstract,

"What I will try to do (...) is (...) to suggest how in the early 1660s (...) literature and (...) propaganda have joined forces offering through the Robin Hood legend an apology for the need to replace revolution with restoration, thus healing a nation deeply divided in the previous decades."

One may wonder what connections can possibly be established between a play from the **1660s** and the most iconic British band of the **1960s**. The answer lies in the message of (re)conciliation (although admittedly an ambiguous and controversial one...)³ patent in the opening I chose all those years ago: The Beatles, "Revolution" (1968).⁴

Having said that, my present purpose is basically to suggest, through other videos available in YouTube, how some issues, features and feelings, whether personal or social, of today's world --- indifference, insensibility, alienation, exclusion, isolation, loneliness, frustration, suffering, grief and pain, etc. --- were, so to speak, musically **and verbally** 'translated' by the Beatles in(to) their songs, which I will be using visually as clickable primary sources. After all, as Kenneth Womack and Todd F. Davis remind us,

¹ Paper presented at the International Conference "It Was Fifty Years Ago Today. An Academic Tribute to The Beatles", organized by CETAPS and held at UNIV. NOVA (17th-18th June 2021). Our title is obviously inspired by, and based upon, "Things We Said Today" (1964).

² CIÊNCIA ID 3913-2142-7ª5F; ORCID 0000-0002-0831-1941; RESEARCHER ID M-1052-2016.

³ See MacDonald, pp. 280-286, pp. 287-291 and pp. 295-296 and Philo, pp. 136-138.

⁴ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BGLGzRXY5Bw>.

“(...) their [The Beatles’] songs (...) concern themselves with the human condition and the dilemmas (...) regarding the interpersonal relationships that mark our lives.” (p. 2)

Notwithstanding the subjective nature of every selection,⁵ the first piece we have selected for comment is “The Fool on the Hill” (*Magical Mystery Tour*, 1967):

<https://vimeo.com/249450727>

This song, with its rising melody, has already been described as

“(...) an airy creation, poised peacefully above the world in a place where time and haste are suspended. (...) The timeless appeal of THE FOOL ON THE HILL lies in its paradoxical air of childlike wisdom and unworldliness, an effect created by a (...) revolving harmony in which the world turns in cycles of struggle and rest, shadowed by clouds drifting (...) across the sky.” (MacDonald, p. 271)⁶

An interesting dialogical exercise might perhaps correlate this “(...) man with the foolish grin (...)”, whom “(...) nobody wants to know (...)”, “(...) nobody ever hears (...)” and “(...) nobody seems to like (...)”, with William Wordsworth’s characters somehow connected with idiocy or lunacy,⁷ not to mention the attraction of the English romantic poets and painters towards mountains and clouds as literary and artistic tropes,⁸ as well as some oil paintings by Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), namely “Morning Fog in Mountains” (1808),⁹ “Morning in the Mountains” (c.1822-23)¹⁰ and “The Wanderer above the Mists” (c.1818):¹¹

⁵ Thus we will not be discussing, for instance, “Nowhere Man” (*Rubber Soul*, 1965), whose protagonist, “(...) sitting in his nowhere land,/making all his nowhere plans/for nobody.”, might easily recall many elderly and marginalized people of today’s societies.

⁶ According to Hunter Davies, “(...) it’s about (...) an apparent foolish person who is in fact pretty wise, a notion that has appeared in literature down the centuries.” (p. 238), whereas Sean Egan adds that “Paul (...) posits the question of whether it’s society or the title character that is foolish.” (p. 153)

⁷ For example, “The Idiot Boy” in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798).

⁸ See, for instance, Brennan, Nicolson, and Watson.

⁹ Rudolstadt, Staatliche Museen, Heidecksburg Castle (Wolf, p. 27).

¹⁰ Sampetersburg, Hermitage Museum (*Ibidem*, p. 72).

¹¹ Hamburg, Hamburger Kunsthalle (*Ibidem*, p. 58).





Curiously enough, João Garcia, the first Portuguese alpinist to climb the Everest, entitled his book *A Mais Alta Solidão* (2002).¹²

The next song, from the album *Revolver* (1966) and released as a single on the B side of *Yellow Submarine*, was described by A. S. Byatt as having “(...) the minimalist quality of a Beckett story.” (*Apud* Egan, p. 117)

“Eleanor Rigby”;

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HuS5NuXRb5Y>

This image of the rice, scattered through the church floor after a wedding and swept by a lonely woman, who, presumably, not only lacks love in her life but “lives in a dream”, is a powerful and disturbing one, much like Father McKenzie’s behaviour,

¹² In English, *The Highest Loneliness (or Solitude)*. On mountains, mountain-climbing and romantic geography, see Tuan, pp. 41-49 and Dora.

“wiping the dirt from his hands as he walks from the grave”, after Eleanor’s funeral. To Ian MacDonald,

“Eleanor Rigby dies alone because unable to tell anyone how she felt. McKenzie’s sermon won’t be heard --- not that he cares very much about his parishioners --- because religious faith has perished along with communal spirit. (...). Often represented as purveyors of escapist fantasy, The Beatles were, at their best, more poignantly realistic about their society than any other popular artists of their time.” (p. 204)

Finally, the implicit lack of intergenerational dialogue, negotiation and understanding, probably due to very different sets of values and changing(ed) ways of life since the end of the Second World War, underlies this slow waltz inspired by Melanie Coe, a 17 year old British girl, reported in the *Daily Mirror* (27th February 1967):

“She’s Leaving Home” (*Sgt Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, 1967);

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dlc8TnrC9tQ>

However, in MacDonald’s words, “(...) where Eleanor’s tragedy is stark and final, the failure of the (...) parents to understand their child (...) is at least recoverable, rendering the track’s heart-tugging sentiment entirely apt. Indeed, for some, this is the single most moving song in The Beatles’ catalogue.” (p. 245)¹³ In both compositions, the lyrical mode is conveyed and enhanced by stringed instruments (mostly violins and cellos, besides the harp in *She’s Leaving Home*), but perhaps we may also read Paul’s performance in the Red Square, Moscow (May 2003), as a subtle political statement and message on (the right to) democracy and dissent. If so, this is something that Vladimir Putin, sitting on the front row, has notoriously failed to listen and attend to...

More than half a century on, many of the issues artistically dealt with by the Beatles remain with us and, needless to say, there are no swift, ready-made solutions to the

¹³ “The Greek chorus in the background of the wailing parents, as sung by Paul and John, (...) is especially poignant.” (Davies, p. 234) Rob Sheffield draws attention to a crucial point in the evolving history of the band, claiming that “(...) There is pathos in the overlapping John/Paul dialogue. (...) Paul speaks for the girl, John for the parents, neither really hearing the other --- two men staring at each other, lifelong friends who want to communicate but aren’t sure how anymore.” (p. 167).

problems they still (re)present to contemporary societies.¹⁴ However, taking up utopianism as a “structure of feeling” so deeply characteristic of the Sixties,¹⁵ may I add that, prior to John Lennon’s “Imagine” (1971), the band as a whole did show us a way in “All You Need is Love” (*Magical Mystery Tour*, 1967).¹⁶ To say nothing of the pacifism expressed by Lennon and the Plastic Ono Band in “Give Peace a Chance” (1969), George Harrison’s philosophical, existential, and mystical leanings and beliefs, Ringo Starr’s “Peace and Love” slogan and gestures or Paul McCartney’s waving of the Ukrainian flag in concerts held as part of his 2022 world tour.

I will conclude, endorsing David Charles’s question (and answer):

“Why, out of all the Liverpool groups, all the British groups, all the artists in the world even, why would The Beatles be the most successful and sell the most records and, even after all these years, still be selling (...)?”

The answer is simple. They wrote and performed *great* songs.

Yes, they also made cracking records, they had a brilliant producer, a highly competent manager, a superb road crew, they looked cute, played as well as anyone else in the land, and were (...) very professional. But all of this would have been meaningless if they didn’t have great songs for their foundation. They certainly (...) wouldn’t be selling records today in the volumes they do, because of fashion, or coolness, or clever marketing. When was the last time you saw an advertisement for a Beatles record? But people, old and young, still react to the phenomenal body of work which they left and it will, I believe, serve as their testament for ever after – and a bit more.” (p. 50)¹⁷

¹⁴ “The sixties unleashed conflicts within (...) new areas of concern --- over affirmative action, abortion, homosexuality, drugs, rock lyrics, [and] air pollution, many of which still preoccupy us today.” (Stark, p. 4)

¹⁵ “The Beatles celebrate love and peace and freedom, the pursuit of spiritual fulfillment, self-expression, and sex, drugs and rock’n’roll, and decry war and violence, materialism, conformity, hierarchy, and authority. One would be hard put to find a song that is not consistent with these values, and of course they were adopted as the values of the 1960s, and a large portion of the generation who came of age during that era.” (Ian Marshall in Womack e Davis, eds., p. 26)

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=csyHN3LoRJ4>. “It was probably more of a chant than a song, but a very infectious chant and one with a message. A message which if, had it been taken to heart, would have made the world a much better place.” (Charles, p. 67)

¹⁷ According to Shawn Levy, “(...) there was nothing, truly, ever like the Beatles: the personalities, the songwriting, the freshness of their look and sound, the palpable exuberance they radiated on stage, on record or simply talking off the cuff. Pop music had not known the like since (...) Elvis Presley. And no British act had ever come remotely close to generating the same degree of heat, hysteria and pan-cultural recognition.” (p. 89) Likewise, Stephen Stark argues that “The Beatles became historical forces for reasons that transcended their songs. (...) To understand

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this group, one has to grasp the larger cultural forces they triggered and came to represent that enabled them to make their mark." (p. 2)

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BIONOTE

Miguel Alarcão (1959-) holds a BA in Portuguese and English Studies (1981), a MA in Anglo-Portuguese Studies (1986) and a PhD in English Culture (1996), awarded by NOVA - New University of Lisbon, where he lectures as Associate Professor. He was also Colloquial Assistant in Portuguese at the University of Birmingham (Late 1980s), Director of the Central Library (2001-2009) and Co-Coordinator of the Faculty's earliest research group on Medieval Studies (1999-2004). Author of *Príncipe dos Ladrões: Robin Hood na Cultura Inglesa (c. 1377-1837)*. 2001 (out of print) and *This royal Throne of Kings, this sceptred lisle': breve roteiro histórico-cultural da Idade Média inglesa (Séculos V-XV)*, 2014, plus 5 co-editions and around 80 articles in Festschriften, proceedings and academic journals.

ABSTRACT

My purpose is to illustrate, through videos available in YouTube, how some issues, features and feelings, whether personal or social, of today's world --- indifference, insensibility, alienation, exclusion, isolation, loneliness, frustration, suffering, grief and pain, etc. --- were musically and verbally translated by the Beatles in their songs, which I will therefore be using visually as primary sources.

KEYWORDS

The Beatles; Social awareness and concerns; “The Fool on the Hill”; “Eleanor Rigby”; “She’s Leaving Home”.

RESUMO

O meu objectivo é o de ilustrar, através/a partir de vídeos disponíveis no YouTube, como questões, traços e sentimentos, pessoais e/ou sociais, do mundo actual --- indiferença, insensibilidade, exclusão, isolamento, solidão, frustração, sofrimento, dor, etc. --- foram musical e verbalmente traduzidos pelos Beatles nas suas composições, que usaremos aqui como fontes primárias.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Os Beatles; Consciência e preocupações sociais; “The Fool on the Hill”; “Eleanor Rigby”; “She’s Leaving Home”.