## Conceptual Tools for the Analysis of Popular Music

There are little to no established concepts and criteria for a comprehensive scholarly analysis of popular music. Those concepts and criteria that are used are often, if not always, borrowed from the scholarly analysis of classical music or from the scholarly analysis of poetry. In some cases these criteria can be adapted to an analysis of popular music, in others they cannot.

The analysis of popular music from a Cultural Studies perspective aims at describing the relations between
- the genre/style of the song,
- the contexts of production and consumption, and
- the lyrics, the music, as well as the artist's performance.

To find a scholarly access to popular music, the following guiding categories and questions might be helpful.

Context
a) Production
b) Performance / Distribution
c) Consumption

Genre

Song

Lyrical Level

Musical Level
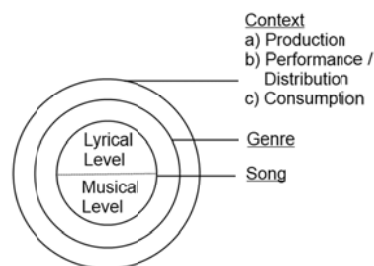
(Adapted from David Machin)

I.) Genre / Style
- There are a number of 'major' / well-established genres (e.g. Rock, Pop, Folk, Metal, Blues, Rap, R'n'B, Electro) as well as numerous subdivisions (e.g. EmoCore, Gothic, Irish Folk, Gangsta Rap, Dubstep). However, songs will nearly always transgress these categories which is why it is much more important what function the genre-labels have in the setting they are used.
- There are a number of different settings in which genre categories are used (e.g. journalistic and academic criticism, record labels, record stores, online portals).

II.) Context
a) *Production*
  - In what cultural / historical context was the song produced?
  - Does the song address this context?
  - In what medium is the song delivered
    (CD, mp3, radio, television, concert, …)?
  - Who composed the song, who wrote the lyrics, who performs it?
  (e.g. a composer, the singer himself/herself, a star persona, …)
b) *Performance*
  - How do the artists present themselves and how do they behave?
  - What is the setting they speak / perform in?
  (e.g. in live performances, reviews, official PR photos, music videos, record sleeves and CD covers, artist's website, poster…)?
c) *Consumption*
  - How and where is the song consumed?
    By whom? In private? With others? For which purpose(s)?

III.) Song
1. *Lyrical Level*
   - What is the song about? What does it deal with?
   - Who can you identify as the speaker in the song lyrics?
   (e.g. the artist, a fictitious persona, …)
   - Is there an addressee?
   - What intertextual references are used?
   - What register is used (e.g. romantic love song vs. gangsta rap)?
2. *Musical Level*
   - How would you describe the vocal style of the singer(s) (e.g. soft, aggressive, impassionate, …)?
   - What is the instrumental arrangement like (what instruments are used, how many, …)?
   - What rhythm / beat is used (slow, upbeat, offbeat, …)?
   - Are there limited or large pitch ranges?
   - Are there rising or descending melodic phrases?

IV.) Emotional Level / Identitficatory Dimension
   - What affective offers does the song make to an audience?
   - What identity effects can you describe?
   (e.g. on the lyrical level, in a music video, during a live performance of the song, within an interview with the artist, …)
   - In how far can a particular taste in music be related to the construction of personal identity?

IV.) Basic Song Units
- *Verse*
  The main part of a song which can roughly be compared to a stanza in poetry. Usually, each verse has the same music but different lyrics.
- *Chorus*
  The recurring element of a song that usually has both the same music and the same lyrics every time it is used. Often, the verse contains the main 'message' of the song and is the most memorable element for the audience.
- *Bridge*
  This optional element usually occurs only once towards the end of the song. Both the lyrics and the music differ from the verse and the chorus.

Further Reading:
Machin, David. *Analysing Popular Music: Image, Sound, Text*. London: SAGE, 2010.