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Rethinking Creative Genius

Michael Pickering and Keith Negus

We pick up a newspaper in September 2003, and read a review of Christopher Ricks’s book on Bob Dylan (Ricks, 2003). The reviewer is Andrew Motion, the English poet laureate. As he gets into the stride of his discussion of the book, he makes the only slightly hesitant assertion: ‘These days no one would think – would they? – that it’s doubtfully transgressive or suspiciously cool to call Dylan a genius’ (Motion, 2003: 10).

This is an interesting statement for several reasons. For a start, it acknowledges from a present standpoint that it was once doubtful to claim that as a poet or songwriter Dylan possesses the qualities of greatness conventionally extolled in highbrow aesthetics. Motion suggests that previously anyone who had proclaimed Dylan’s genius would have been regarded with suspicion. They would have been considered as affecting a pose (being provocative or pretentious rather than conventionally straight about questions of artistic greatness). This is no longer the case. In referring to past controversies, Motion now accepts that a significant change of judgement has occurred, though he does remain rather cautious in his recognition of this. The question that is sandwiched in the middle of Motion’s aesthetically loaded sentence could be taken as either rhetorical or expressive of genuine uncertainty that the days of doubt are past – perhaps we are still in a transitional phase. But Motion goes on in his review to dispel any further doubt. He writes that what is exciting about Ricks’s book is its air of vindication, for in the past Ricks has, in the face of both highbrow antagonism and disbelief, long championed Dylan as an artist of genius – albeit one he recognises mainly through his lyrics rather than these in combination with the expressive flights of Dylan’s idiosyncratic, word-transforming vocal ability, and his continual risk-taking in reinventing his songs in their musical and vocal delivery.

We need hardly labour the irony of a reverse shift in literary and cultural theory over the past quarter century. Questions of genius are now regarded as hopelessly out of touch with the approaches adopted by contemporary cultural theorists and sociologists. They are denounced as naïve, as inherently mystifying and elitist. Genius is now almost a taboo category, and not least because it is seen as epitomising bourgeois individualism and masking the collective relations of cultural production and consumption. The critical opposition to ideas of greatness or genius
is now orthodox. Popular music studies has fallen into line with this orthodoxy. If you look through the index of any academic book on popular music over the past twenty years, you’ll find a broad range of issues covered, but it will prove very difficult to locate any discussion of genius, at least beyond that of suspicion and critical dismissal. Search through past issues of this journal – the category remains elusive. Its general absence in popular music studies as in cultural studies is because it is seen as riddled with reactionary values, with illusion, misconception and myth. To discuss the category of genius with any seriousness is now regarded as a highly dubious business.

In a book we have recently completed, we found ourselves continually returning to this issue and arriving, towards the end of the book, with a strong sense of the need to challenge this orthodoxy (Negus and Pickering, 2004). The book deals with the question of creativity. In pursuing this question across various arts and cultural media, we have found that many of the key moments in our discussion have direct bearings on our more specialist work in popular music studies. This is especially the case with the category of genius. In the book as a whole, we consider how certain types of creativity are recognised and rewarded by the cultural industries, how creative artists operate in relation to convention and tradition, and how they have been constrained or oppressed by divisions of class, gender and race. Yet as we moved from these considerations, we found ourselves having to confront the fact that many singers, songwriters and musicians – as with many painters, novelists and dramatists – are esteemed for their creative exceptionality, or at least for the exceptionality of some of what they produce. The special character of these cases of creative exceptionality led us on to the category of genius, the category that has been abandoned by cultural theory.

Having spent most of our academic careers to date working on various areas of popular culture, we neither broach the issue of exceptionality solely in relation to high culture, nor support a conception of high culture constructed in polar opposition to popular culture or the popular arts. We share in and endorse the movement away from exclusive conceptions of creative practice towards a more inclusive consideration of creativity in its more pervasive forms. But such movement doesn’t mean that we can forget about creative exceptionality, not least because exceptionality continues to figure in most people’s everyday judgement and appreciation of what they take to be creative. It is not only poet laureates who talk of exceptionality, transcendence, genius and the like. To echo, but also to extend a point made by Simon
Frith in *Performing Rites* (1996), in practice all sorts of people – including cultural theorists, at least when they’re away from the lectern or seminar room – operate in some way with an aesthetic value of exceptionality, in popular music as much as anywhere else. In everyday conversations about popular music, there is often mention of key moments of genre emergence and development, significant shifts of musical pattern and possibility, landmark albums, outstanding artists. If these judgements about any particular musical genre, tradition or artist have always to be given careful critical consideration, does this not apply also to more general questions of musical migrations and transgressive value? Is it not the case that the general question of exceptionality is central to how music is valued, how music changes, and how musical history is conceived? If we refuse to tackle the dilemma of dealing with both creative exceptionality and the ordinariness of culture, we may be left critically bereft in the face of those instances which produce major shifts in the way a musical genre, idiom or style is conceived, leading to a radical transformation in the artistic possibilities open to it. We may also simply vacate an important critical space and leave the stage open for yet another rehearsal of naïve, mystical, elitist or hyper-individualistic explanations.

We discuss various examples of what have been accepted as instances of creative exceptionality in the book, and not only in relation to music and musical history. The cultural analysis of such instances is never easy, and certainly doesn’t benefit from abrupt and simplified summary in short pieces like this. Our point here is a more general one. It bears on the way in which cultural analysis today fights shy of the question of creative exceptionality. It is as if it doesn’t exist, or cannot be recognised as anything other than an ideological chimera. This considerably reduces the explanatory power of such analysis. It is of course the case that a great deal of creative development within a cultural form or practice is gradual, cumulative and closely entwined within the broader pattern in which it participates. Examples of creative exceptionality which arise out of and are given immediate significance within this pattern may be relatively scarce, and how they become publicly recognised is conditioned by a whole range of variable historical factors and contingencies. Whether and to what degree such examples in any particular case are innovative is also a complex matter that cannot be easily decided, which is one reason we go to considerable lengths in the book to distinguish between the different shades of meaning that exist in the semantics of newness. But such cases do occur and cannot be ignored.
The problem of the neglect of issues concerning exceptionality or genius seems in some ways to have arisen because of a continual elision of the activity of creating and judgements about that activity. There is no denying that judgements of genius have often been ideologically loaded, carrying various unhelpful assumptions about gender, ethnicity and social class that have been and continue to be oppressive. But these judgements shouldn’t be simply or entirely run together with the activity and practice involved in path-breaking moments of innovation, or in what are taken by artists as well as by fans to be exceptional cases of music production or performance above and beyond other examples within the same genre or tradition. If we try to keep the activity and judgement distinct, at least for analytical purposes, we may begin to avoid associating cases of exceptionality with the tendency to view genius only through the lens of exclusivity.

The ideological coupling of genius and exclusivity has been present in the European tradition of high art since the late eighteenth century and the category of genius has contributed to the legitimation of various types of social divisions, particularly those associated with issues of race, class and gender. The exclusivist attributions of genius are legion, in both obvious and not so obvious ways. But this raises the important question as to whether such attributions render exceptionality null and void as aesthetic quality. Current models of the creative process in cultural theory remain either silent or shifty about this sort of question. Jason Toynbee’s (2000) radius model of creativity, for example, seems entirely appropriate for relatively small shifts sideways within a musical genre or form, but cannot handle those moments of creative exceptionality, leading to huge steps forwards, which a broad public remain happy to refer to by the critically unhappy epithet ‘genius’. The purpose of Toynbee’s model lies in its attempt to demystify exceptional forms of creativity in the same way in which Bourdieu sought to demystify the Kantian notion of a disinterested aesthetic by always placing artistic production within its particular field of interest. Toynbee’s model has closely followed the prevailing attention in cultural sociology to the structural determinants of social reproduction, in ways strongly influenced by Bourdieu. While this is always a necessary attention, its shadow side is a compulsive anxiety about individualism and Romanticism, as if cultural theory has to keep up its guard by insistently disavowing them. At the same time they are simply used as boo-words that conceal a lack of attention to their legacy in our ideas about subjectivity, selfhood and self-expression. It is then often difficult to find where the individual has disappeared to or why the power of creative expression goes virtually unacknowledged. Both are lost to the
ideological ‘construction’ of selfhood, exceptional or otherwise. They glimmer only faintly amid the mechanics of the ‘radius’ or ‘the field’.

So is genius really just an ideological construct, as Tia De Nora (1997) argues in her study of the political, economic and social context within which Beethoven’s work was recognised and his reputation ‘constructed’? Or is this again the consequence of seeing the acts and attributions of genius as one and the same, and so irremediably steeped in suspect values and interests? In the case of De Nora, the methodological strategy is quite explicit: aesthetic value (the sound of Beethoven’s music) is fused with, collapsed into and reduced to socio-political value (the attribution of various beliefs concerning Beethoven’s greatness and the use of these within various discourses of privilege and exclusivity).

The praise and celebration of genius may have served dominant values and interests in the past, and may continue to do so, but this doesn’t necessarily mean that exceptional or highly innovative creative acts are simply equivalent to them. As Peter Kivy has argued in a rare attempt to retain a notion of genius in the study of music, to say that genius is nothing other than a social and political construct makes it an empty concept – there are no geniuses, only the politics of genius. DeNora, following Bourdieu, deconstructs genius and the appreciation of genius not by contesting value, but by contesting motive, as if musical appreciation is only and entirely a matter of self-interest – or in Kivy’s lampooning take on this: ‘Scratch a music lover and you will, inevitably, find a status seeker or social climber beneath’ (2001: 208). This reduces all musical aesthetics, including the aesthetics of popular music, to acts of bad faith. Yet it is surely crucial to distinguish between artistic and cultural production on the one hand, and its critical acceptance and celebration on the other. They cannot simply be conflated. In Beethoven’s case, this is an impoverishment of the historical imagination. It fails to address the question as to why his music endures beyond the time and place in which he lived, or how it connects with huge numbers of people. Is this only due to a social and political construction of belief in his genius which serves elites, and nothing to do with the popular appeal of the music?

The category of genius may carry a lot of baggage, but it isn’t reducible to that baggage. Thinking critically about genius doesn’t mean we shall inevitably succumb to cultural snobbery or hero worship. We can be anti-elitist and still recognise and discuss cases of creative exceptionality in popular music or any other sphere of cultural production and performance. We can critically engage with the difficulties the
concept of genius raises for feminist theory while also acknowledging female geniuses. Surely it is in the interests of such theory to do so? And surely it is in everyone’s interests not to see what is valued in creative exceptionality flattened out into mere variation and insignificance?

In our extended engagement with these issues, we argue against an absolute conception of genius, of genius as ontology – treating the entire person/subject as genius – and move instead towards an understanding of genius as involving an interflow of artist and theme that produces moments of innovation or instances of exceptional production over time that change a cultural tradition through the lasting value and significance they come to have. How such value and significance is assessed is always a difficult question – and sometimes such judgements are clouded by naïve biological determinism, patriarchalism and racism – but it always involves moving beyond existing limits, and achieving communicative value in an interaction of play and convention. This clearly occurs in relation to a social and historical context without being confined to it. The value of what is communicated is such that it finds a resonance as it is re-created, re-lived, re-embedded into different lives by others in other contrasting contexts across both space and time. This is, for instance, why Handel’s Messiah can still move and be intensely enjoyed by present-day atheists in ways which have nothing immediately to do with cultural stratifications, any more indeed than it did when the Larks of Dean – Lancashire handloom weavers – delighted in such music in the period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (Elbourne, 1980).

It is through such considerations that we argue for a reconceptualisation of creativity as at once ordinary and exceptional, involving the links people make between an everyday conception of creative acts and an apprehension of exceptional creative acts. Genius may often be narrated in terms of exceptional moments of musical insight or breakthrough, but these are always firmly embedded in an extended process of arduous toil and preparation before a musician is able to become at one with their art and synthesise from a range of existing cultural elements. In popular music as in other fields of culture, the ordinary is not so much at odds with the exceptional as continually open to the possibility of becoming exceptional. Across the route to such possibility are lapses, mistakes, moments of failure and mediocrity, or mere repetitions of what is aesthetically commonplace. As the music hall performer Dan Leno is reported to have once said: ‘Only mediocrity can be trusted to be always at its best. Genius must always have lapses proportionate to its triumphs’. Against the idea of genius as natural
endowment or individualist uniqueness, of genius as a rarefied and reified state of being, we need to conceive of creativity as embracing both the ordinary and exceptional in terms of their productive tension. From this tension, genius may be realised.

In the same edition of the newspaper we referred to at the outset, we find in the reviews section Steven Poole referring to J.S. Bach as ‘one of those apparently transhistorical, godlike figures (Shakespeare was another) whom it seems hard to believe was ever a real human being at all’ (Guardian Review, 27 September 2003: 31). This is not only a travesty of Bach’s actual practice in musical composition. It is also an example of the absolute sense of genius we want to move beyond in trying to rehabilitate the concept within the broad range of creative processes, embracing both the mundane and the marvellous. In proposing this, we argue for an approach to creativity as the communication of experience and the attainment of communicative value that allows us to grasp the dynamic, and often paradoxical – even dialectical – connections that link the ordinariness and exceptionality of creativity.

It is because of this relation that forms of popular music move between specifically local contexts of production and recognition to broader patterns of reception and assimilation. This is where song or music come to have enduring value, however fraught the critical assessments associated with this may be. Such value is not necessarily the imposition of power or privilege even if it may come to bear their imprint. It is also about the movements which bring connections between different bodies of experience, which allow some form of sharing – although not simply of meaning – and the value of song and music to be continually appreciated as they move across time and space. To understand creative exceptionality in popular music in this way means that we cannot separate the exceptional from ordinary social and cultural life since such life constitutes the set of circumstances from which it takes its bearing. To see it as separated (as psychological quiddity, mystical visitation, moment of divine inspiration, madness or drug-induced insight) is to see only monumental greatness, ethereally abstracted from its contingent temporal and spatial settings. Creative exceptionality has never been part of our understanding of the ‘popular’ in popular music studies. It is high time this changed, for in neglecting it we’re missing some very significant issues in musical analysis and history.

References


