



Pixies and Sexuality: The (Literary) Analysis of the Lyrics of an Alternative Rock Band

Pixies y la sexualidad: análisis (literario) de las letras de una banda de *rock* alternativo

David Boza Méndez

Escuela de Lenguas Modernas

Universidad de Costa Rica

Carrera de Enseñanza del Inglés

Universidad Estatal a Distancia

ORCID: [0000-0003-3460-0744](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3460-0744)

boza.braindamage@gmail.com



Abstract

This study focuses on the lyrics of three songs by the North American band *Pixies*. The lyrics explore the subject sexuality, but they present a series of non-standard or traditionally accepted sexual practices related to sexual taboos, otherness and sexual objectification, and sexual violence and the body. Literary analysis constitutes the approach to examining the lyrics and subjects explored by the band. Due to the fact that the center of the analysis is rock lyrics, a non-traditional subject of literary analysis, the study also deals with essential questions related to the nature of literature and literary manifestations. In this sense, this article aims to show the value of rock lyrics as literary texts which have a connection to poetry, both of them having music as the base of their form.

Keywords: Literary analysis, song, poetry, music, popular music, *Pixies*



Resumen

El siguiente estudio representa un acercamiento a las letras de tres canciones de la banda de *rock* estadounidense *Pixies*. Dichas letras se centran en el discurso de la sexualidad; sin embargo, lo abordan desde un punto de vista diferente, lejano a lo que es considerado normal en las prácticas sexuales; dichos temas están relacionados con los tabúes, la otredad y la objetivación del otro en la sexualidad y la violencia sexual y su conexión con el cuerpo humano. Aún más, el análisis semántico y literario constituye la base metodológica de este estudio. Debido a que este artículo se centra en letras de canciones de música rock, trata además con cuestionamientos fundamentales sobre la naturaleza de la literatura y de los géneros literarios, de esta manera se busca demostrar el valor artístico de las letras de canciones de música popular y su conexión con la poesía.

Palabras claves: análisis literario, canción, poesía, música, música popular, *Pixies*

Introduction

The 80s were the era of the synthesizer; major radio hits following a fixed formula to songwriting, with excessive amounts of layers of premature digital sounds and drum machines, crowded most popular radio stations all over western world. Easy-listening pop dominated the charts with fun lyrics that repeatedly praised a somehow idealized image of romantic relations; either innocent love or over-sexualized narratives were told over and over again with each new release from the most popular music icons. Music became a conspicuous product for mass consumption.

It is in this context that several alternative acts emerged and attempted to present a different type of music. Bands such as *The Cure*, *The Smith*, *Sonic Youth*, and *R.E.M.* among others were pushing with each of their releases the boundaries of the popular song, musically and lyrically speaking. However, there was a band that would appear in the alternative scene of the North-East of The US with a fresher and odder proposal. *Pixies* released their first full-length album in 1988: *Surfer Rosa*, a record too loud to be pop, too smooth to be punk, too weird to be overlooked. The blatant guitar sound of Joy Santiago along with the outlandish singing of Black Francis served

as the ideal canvas for Francis's lyrics, encrypted narratives with surreal tints crafted through fragmented grammar.

Surfer Rosa, as an ode to approaching the subject of popular music from a different perspective, explores fairly distinct subjects in its lyrics, being sexuality one of the most prominent themes. In fact, Black Francis throws a series of references and images that depict a different sexuality: not the naive and romantic *happily ever after* song or the over-sexualized pleasure-centered danceable club hit but brush-strokes of complex characters exercising their not-so-ordinary sexuality. In this sense, the album includes several songs with references to this subject, but there are three that present relevant descriptions of alternative sexual practices: "Bone Machine," "Broken Face," and "Break my Body."

Analyzing Francis' lyrics from a literary perspective stands for a vindicating exercise in order to highlight the value of sung music as a product with an artistic and literary value. Furthermore, the analysis of the already mentioned songs aims to show complex subjects such as sexual taboos, sexual otherness and objectification, and sexual violence and the body as elements that characterize sexuality.

Methodology

1) Literature review

In recent years, there have been attempts to write about popular music from academic and nonacademic standpoints. As cultural phenomena, rock and alternative rock have caught the attention of scholars

and critics because of their oddness, which includes the themes discussed in songs and the way these themes are expressed. Also, there is the historical value; it has been around 70 years since the first rock and roll artists shocked the general audiences with their subversive music and performances, and now we can talk about a history of rock music (and alternative rock) that can be subject of study. In this sense, there is a significant body of written material dealing with this music genre; these may include newspaper articles, magazine articles, history books, sociological and anthropological studies, cultural studies, musicology studies, among others. In the case of *Pixies*, the written material about the band can be divided in two main categories:

1a) Newspaper and magazine articles

Several magazines specialized in rock and alternative music have published throughout the years notes about the band; these are the cases of *Rolling Stone* magazine or *Pitchfork*. Other magazines which not only specialize in rock and alternative music have also written about the band, like the case of *Time.com*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Newsweek* and *Maclean's*. Many of these notes are really brief and deal with tour dates, new releases, album reviews, news of the band, etc.

1b) Studies about popular music that mention the band:

Many publications that focus on rock music and alternative music also mention *Pixies* and their songs and albums. In "Coachella Fans, Online and Translocal,"

Daniel Cormany (2015) analyzes the festival, its history, and *coachella.com* as a means of communication. He also examines the role of the festival as the place for the legendary reunion of bands such as *Rage Against the Machine* or *Pixies*.

In another case, Cassie Wagner and Elizabeth Stephan (2005) in their article “Left of the Dial: An Introduction to Underground Rock, 1980-2000” aimed to create a map of the most influential underground bands from the 1980s till the 2000s. They choose 21 bands which they consider are significantly important from the alternative rock scene of the end of twentieth century, among them, *Pixies*. Wagner and Stephan see *Pixies* as a band that ironically was more popular during the time they were separated (from 1993 to 2003). Also, they mention that even the way the band became popular was underground, calling it a distribution of music from “dorm to dorm” (their albums were shared through illegal cassette copies made by college students in their dorms) (p. 64).

Likewise, in their 2009 article “A guide to essential American indie rock (1980-2005),” Vincent Novara y Stephen Henry include *Pixies* in their list of the most important bands of indie rock of the last two decades of the twentieth century. They describe the style of the band as minimalistic, playing with the limits of pop and punk music but always trying to stay ahead (p. 821).

Ben Green (2016) in his article “‘I Always Remember that Moment’: Peak Music Experiences as Epiphanies” studies the impact of participating in concerts and live performances. He establishes that these

types of experiences can leave a lasting mark in the life of people. Regarding *Pixies*, the author uses the example of a young Australian musician that decided to follow a career in music after watching *Pixies* live (p. 341).

Interestingly enough, there isn’t much academic research analyzing the band and its lyrical content. Most of the writings talking about *Pixies* are the short notes from music magazines. Also, as seen above, in the last 20 years there have been attempts to write about the impact of the band but in a general sense as part of a new movement that seeks to formalize a history of alternative music. It is in this sense that this research aims to generate new knowledge and to see the work of the band from a new perspective; it intends to study their lyrics and use a methodology to understand how sexuality is present in the songs of *Pixies*.

2) Theoretical framework:

What is the value of the lyrics of a popular song? Let’s see an example:

In 1995, the British band *Pulp* released the single “Common People.” The song spoke about the struggle of a regular guy trying to seduce a lady from an upper class:

She told me that her dad was loaded
I said, “In that case I’ll have a rum and
Coca-Cola.”
She said, “Fine,”
And in thirty seconds time
She said,
“I want to live like common people.
(...)
I want to sleep with common people
like you.”

The song spoke with honesty; it not only presented a character that many people could relate to, with the flaws and desires that made him human, but it also portrayed the circumstances of many people in Great Britain:

But still you'll never get it right
'Cause when you're laid in bed at night
Watching 'roaches climb the wall
If you called your dad he could stop it all.
You'll never live like common people
You'll never do whatever common people do
You'll never fail like common people
You'll never watch your life slide out of view,
And dance and drink and screw
Because there's nothing else to do.

The song exposed the cruel reality of a working class forced to live with a sense of failure and stagnation as part of their everyday existence. The song became an instant hit, and part of the reason: the lyrics cleverly crafted by band leader Jarvis Cocker. "Common People" constitutes one of those examples in which the lyrics of a song can stand as an effective narrative that catches the attention of a person. It shows the relevance and artistry of the lyrics of a popular song. In this sense, in order to properly analyze the lyrics of a song, like in the case of the songs by *Pixies* (which is our aim here), one must understand the value and the aesthetics of them.

When one starts doing research to build a methodology for the analysis of alternative rock lyrics, one understands a categorical truth: according to [J.R. Valdés Miyares \(2016\)](#), there is no theoretical framework for the analysis of lyrics from a literary,

cultural studies or musicological perspective (p. 162). However, examples of the literary value of rock lyrics are vast. The Danish band *Kashmir*, for instance, writes in its song "Melpomene":

Now I can't close my eyes when she's
around
And she is around
Passing like the wind that shapes the
clouds

These alt rock lyrics demonstrate how bands can use literary elements for their writing, in this case, a simile, and the way the band uses the simile is so effective and overpowering that it recalls some of the brief and let's-get-down-to-the-business comparisons in Ezra Pound's imagist poetry. It is ironic how lyrics in rock and alt rock music have elements that deserve the attention of literary critics, but there is no formal methodology for doing so.

2a) Annotations on rock music

[Račić \(1981\)](#) affirms that the studies of rock music have been more from a sociological standpoint than from an aesthetic one (p. 199), which makes sense; rock music emerged as a cultural phenomenon forged by youths without any artistic training, neither in music nor in literature. In this sense, [Wicke and Deveson \(1982\)](#) state that rock music in general is not rational like traditional European (classical) music; rock music is more connected to the body and to its movement (p. 231). It is irrational because it appeals to the core rhythm of humanity, and this creates a problem: art and classical music are rational and can be analyzed while rock music is irrational and is seen like a tribal ritual

that should be studied as an anthropological phenomenon.

However, music and literature were one in the beginning, even before the concept of art was created (Brown, 1970, p. 97). Before written language, stories were sung and accompanied by musical instruments; this musical influence gave shape to the poetry and the verse we know today (therefore the use of words such as meter and rhythm to describe poetry). Poetry, traditionally speaking, has a sonic element, and music is the arrangement of sounds; therefore, poetry is musical in its essence because it does not only deal with meaning of words but also with their sounds.

2b) The problem: differences between music and literature

Nevertheless, history had its course and the arts were divided; music and poetry became two different concepts. After that, the mere juxtaposition of the two would create problems. According to Brown (1970), the debate regarding vocal music can be summarized as: “Is a poem merely the raw material for a song, or is the music merely an accompaniment for a stylized recitation of the poem?” (p. 102). The author continues and gives the example of the opera and the issues related to the concept of the libretto. In opera stagings, a literary work needs to be adapted for singing, which sometimes requires drastic modifications of the original text so that the new format can have a sonic effect on the audience (p. 103). Brown affirms:

Insofar as the literary text usually comes first and the musical setting later,

we might say that the problem is that of translating a literary text into musical terms, but there is the important difference that the musical translation is not substituted for the original, but added to it. (p. 104, 105)

Not only that, Brown (1970) also states that the way poets deal with music is completely different from the way musicians deal with the same subject (p. 107) (is the author suggesting that there is the possibility of having two types of music?).

2c) Value of lyrics

Brown focuses on certain types of musical products which are adaptations or translations of literary texts. Nevertheless, he does not deal with songs that are actually conceived as musical texts with original lyrics and that are created to stand alone by themselves, not as a reference or reflection of a literary text. Those songs are a whole: music and lyrics working for the same purpose. Furthermore, Pete Astor (2010) believes that, in the world of popular music, there is a type of serious listener that expects the lyrics to be a foregrounding element of a song (p. 143). The author continues and establishes that at the beginning rock lyrics were “formulaic,” but lyrics changed; they had a new purpose: “having the spiritual and emotional muscle to express wider and deeper needs in an audience” (2010, p. 146). Astor (2010) gives the example of Bob Dylan’s involvement with folk music, a movement “where the lyric was always foregrounded... [and where] the words carry a narrative meaning, requiring them to be heard and understood on some level in order to communicate” (p. 146, 147). For Astor,

“when folk lyrics exhibited fractured, symbolic and non-contiguous meanings, the movement of the words is key” (*ibid*). Finally, [Astor \(2010\)](#) expresses that words are more effective to portray feelings:

Many times I’ve witnessed performances where the singer/guitarist stops singing and explores the composition on his instrument -at this point there is a distance created from the audience-. A closeness is re-established when the words begin again. (p. 147)

The human voice stands as a powerful tool to connect with other human beings, and language in the case of sung music can become an immensely important part of a musical text; it carries meaning; it tells stories; it expresses emotions. Language and words speak directly to the listener, and people’s connection with a song depends on the way the singer speaks directly to them through their lyrics ([Astor, 2010, p. 148](#)).

2d) Relation between music and literature

When one studies the relationship between music and literature, one finds that there is actually a pre-twentieth-century poetry which was meant to be spoken out. For instance, according to [Astor \(2010\)](#), old recordings of poets such as Robert Browning, Alfred Lord Tennyson or W.B. Yeats reading their texts have a musicality reminiscent of this ancient oratory tradition (p. 148) in which the sound of words was important as well. Furthermore, this relationship, between music and poetry, has been studied in the past by critics; [Brown \(1970\)](#) gives two examples. In *Observations on the Art of English Poesie*

published in 1602, author Thomas Campion establishes that “poetry is like music in that it requires the observance of due metrical proportion” (p. 98). Also, in the article published in 1775 “An Essay Towards Establishing the Melody and Measure of Speech to be Expressed and Perpetuated by Peculiar Symbols,” Joshua Steele tries to adapt musical metric notation and pitch designation to the reading of poetry ([Brown, 1970, p. 99](#)), that way pointing out the similarities between the two arts.

Besides the structural similarities between music and poetry, these two arts also share a common element: language. Since language has been analyzed in depth throughout history, the lyrics in vocal music can be analyzed as well. [Barthes \(1970\)](#) uses the semiology of language to go deeper into the analysis of it:

Semiology therefore aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification. (p. 9)

Once one understands these systems of signification and the way they work, one can analyze meanings and their means. In the case of vocal music, the language and its logic, which is similar to poetry and literature, must be taken into account to give meaning to these types of texts. In other words, in alt rock lyrics, not only words and syntax, but also figures of speech, rhyme, symbols, and other poetic elements should be taken into account for the analysis.

Another possible tool for analysis could be narrative theory that, according to [Nichols \(2007\)](#), is “in essence a relatively simple tool that can aid us in the analytical interpretation of a variety of texted materials” and can be useful for the interpretation of popular songs, for instance” (p. 300). It seems that a vital practice for understanding and analyzing vocal music is focusing on language as well, in its meaning, traits and means.

If one cannot deny the effect that the words have on the listener in vocal music, that means that lyrics have a value. They are artistic, and semantic interpretation stands as a fairly useful tool for their analysis.

Discussion

Black Francis, singer and songwriter of *Pixies*, stands as one of the most original lyricists of his generation. His experimental writing gave his lyrics a surrealist and avant-garde tone. Moreover, his writing is full of implied narratives and themes related to sexuality, religion, racism, and lack of identity. In the album *Surfer Rosa*, Francis focuses to a great extent on these topics; the discussion below will center on three songs from the album: “Bone Machine,” “Break My Body,” and “Broken Face.” These songs deal with the subject of sexuality. In fact, the songs show sexuality in relation to taboos, otherness and objectification, and the body and violence.

1) Sexual Taboos

A first theme related to sexuality in these *Surfer Rosa*’s songs is sexual deviation or taboos. Specifically, in “Bone

Machine,” the following verses portray a case of pedophilia:

I was talking to preachy-preach about
kissy-kiss
He bought me a soda, he bought me a soda
and he tried to molest me in the parking lot
Yep yep, yep, yep!

Even though these lines also suggest sexual abuse (a topic that will be discussed later), these also refer to pedophilia. Francis uses everyday images to imply this sexual deviation. In the first verse, he introduces the characters: a persona telling the account and a preacher, known as *preachy-preach*. That priest talks to the persona about kissing, a subject that needs a clear context in order to find it natural in the speech of a clergyman. However, verse three shows that this priest has a sexual desire for the persona when Francis uses the verb “molest.” So far, these lines show a man of god trying to get sexual gratification from another human being, but where is the pedophilia? The lyricist suggests this theme in verse two with the use of the word “soda.” When an adult asks another adult out, common knowledge establishes that a grown man/woman is likely to buy the other one a drink, an alcoholic beverage, alcohol being the drink for seduction socially speaking. Nevertheless, soda has a different connotation; soda can be related to children because it is a drink highly consumed by this demographic group (not that adults don’t drink soda but again, in the context of romance that Francis creates, alcohol would be more related for a date between grownups). Consequently, these lines depict a priest talking about kissing and then making a move on a child

or a teenager, therefore, exposing a case of pedophilia. The fourth line (“yep yep, yep, yep!”) has two main purposes: repetition that can be used to emphasize this traumatic experience and informality due to the fact that *yep* stands as a colloquial form of the word *yes*, this, to reinforce the prematurity of the persona (taking into account that youngsters tend to be fairly informal in terms of speech).

A second instance of non-socially accepted sexual practices stands for incest; Francis states in “Broken Face”:

There was this boy who had two children with his sisters
Who were his daughters, who were his favorite lovers

Francis’ style, which can be considered direct and raw, works perfectly in these two verses to suggest sexual relations in the family sphere. First, the first verse establishes the incestuous relationship of the young man with his sister, having as a result two female offspring. The persona continues and affirms in the second verse that these two children were “his favorite lovers.” This second image also portrays a case of incest, and the syntactic analysis of the verse reinforces this. The use of relative clauses and the grammar used give details about the children; they were two things: his children and his lovers. In addition, the term lover is too conclusive. *Lovers* in this context cannot refer to non-romantic affection.

Going back to the term *boy*, perhaps the writer made this lexical choice to go further into the concept of youngsters experiencing sex by suggesting that this

character, the boy, does not have his mental abilities well developed as an adult; therefore, he cannot tell what is right or wrong and does not have full knowledge of what is considered proper or improper.

Regarding sexual abuse, the two songs already discussed also have references to this subject. In the case of “Bone Machine,” the persona affirms that this clergyman abused him/her when s/he states that this man “tried to molest [him/her] in the parking lot.” The word molest is fairly clear; the priest aims to have a sexual encounter without the approval of the other person, a contrasting behavior with the morals of a man of God but an accurate one when acknowledging the many recent scandals related to sexual abuses perpetrated by catholic priests. The setting of this attempt of sexual abuse also plays a significant role. They are in a parking lot, a lonely place with, perhaps, no cars around, the perfect place for the priest to make his move because he knows that what he is doing is morally wrong and should be orchestrated in solitude. Likewise, “Broken Face” also includes another instance of sexual abuse in the line “who were his daughters, who were his favorite lovers.” This verse shows the reader/listener a man who, besides having two children with his sister, abuses his daughters. However, Francis puts it in a fairly cruel and ironic way because these girls are his *favorite* lovers. Probably, the use of the word *favorite* implies not only that the man prefers having sexual intercourse with them rather than with the mother of those children, but also that he has had sexual intercourse with them several times. When one claims that something is one’s favorite practice,

thing, or person, that suggests repetition. A practice, thing or person achieves that quality after it has been revisited several times. In this sense, this man in the song has abused his daughters more than once so that he finally accepted they were his favorite. Also, this word demonstrates the superlative amount of pleasure that he gets from abusing and having sexual intercourse with his offspring, again, an atrocious way to describe such a wicked habit.

2) Sexual Otherness

The songs from *Surfer Rosa* also explore sexuality in the context of the other, that individual outside the standards of normality or familiarity. Elizabeth Sosa (2009) affirms that the other creates its culture in the border of society (p. 360), therefore, its condition as an outsider. Everything it does is alien to social standards. In this sense, sexual behavior in relation to the other moves from normality and gets closer to the frontier of what is not socially accepted, but where is that frontier socially speaking and which are the instances in which the reader may see this otherness in sexuality in the songs? Francis faces this subject when he gets into the themes of migration, nationality, and racism. For instance, in “Broken Face,” there is a first person narrator that states:

The little thing who does my laundry
speaks no English
But if you saw her, you’d say “Hey,
isn’t she lovely?”

This first person states that he/she has a maid, and that maid is from another culture or country, which is the reason why she does not speak English. Moreover,

there is a sense of superiority when the persona calls this maid *little thing*. He/she is objectifying the housemaid and is also stating this superiority by using the term *little* to refer to her. Consequently, the origin of the maid as well as the jobs that she does justifies in the eyes of the persona the fact that he/she sees her from above, suggesting a possible way in which migrants that perform low-paid jobs are treated in the cultures to which they migrate; they are the *other* and they are below. Now where is sexuality in these verses and images? Again, language and word choice are key to conclude this. Francis is known for his labyrinth-like style of writing in which he uses ambiguous terms that open the door to having multiple meanings and readings. In the second verses, he uses the word *lovely* to refer to the maid. The most common meaning of this word is cute, pleasant, and friendly; however, Cambridge Dictionary (2022) also states that lovely means *enjoyable*, which is something that gives a person pleasure, *attractive*, and (in an old fashion way) *a sexually attractive woman*. If one takes these meanings into consideration, it is suggested that the persona can be feeling some sort of attraction or sexual desire when he/she sees the migrant maid. Moreover, if one takes into consideration the first meaning, lovely as enjoyable, one will see how there is a relation between otherness, objectification, and pleasure: The persona thinks of the maid as an object, a thing, which comes from another country and is in a lower position; she is not a full person; she is below, outside; she is an object. That object is lovely; consequently, this persona *enjoys* that object.

Another song from the album that suggests the topics of sexuality and otherness is “Break my Body”; the speaker states:

I'm a belly dancer
I'll shake forever and I'll never care

The lines hold another reference to otherness and sexuality when referring to belly dancing. First, dancing has a connection with sexuality because it refers to the rhythmic movement of the body, like the act of sex. Moreover, [Judith Lynne Hanna \(2010\)](#) states that “Dance and sex both use the same instrument -namely, the human body- and both involve the language of the body’s orientation toward pleasure. Thus, dance and sex may be conceived as inseparable even when sexual expression is unintended” (p. 212). Both acts depend on the body and the pleasure it can feel. Also, dancing is used as a tool for seduction. Dancing is the connection of two bodies, in which touching plays a vital role.

Second, and here is the connection with otherness, the persona is a belly dancer, the performer of a dance coming from a different latitude, an alien to western society. Belly dancing, in this sense, represents an exotic practice, the movement of the body, specifically, of the hips, a fairly sexual act. Furthermore, the fact that the persona states “I’ll shake forever and I’ll never care” hints how this persona is leaving western social conventions behind and, probably, accepts nonstandard sexual practices by saying *I’ll never care*. Otherness and sexuality in these verses is suggested. Again Francis brings these topics to the table to reinforce the meanings and themes analyzed in this article.

Another instance in which the connection between sexuality and otherness is present in the album is when the persona states in *Bone Machine*:

I make you pray, you make me hard
Your island skin looks Mexican
Our love is rice and beans and horse’s lard

The verses start with a fairly direct image to sexuality and desire, specifically to male erection, but the whole image is taboo: *I make you pray* relates to religion, probably. Francis’ writing is ambiguous and open to many interpretations, as already discussed. The speaker continues and uses a poetic image to allude to the skin of the beloved: *your Island skin looks Mexican*. The fact that the skin of this person is related to an island implies that this person has a tan, which looks like the color of the skin of the people from Mexico (according to the song), something that, again, demonstrates how prejudicial and racist these personas in the songs are, but line of the song also reveals a vital trait of the persona speaking: for this speaker the exotic is sexually appealing, dark skin produces sexual arousal in him. The third verse reinforces this when stating that their love is like food stereotypically connected to the Latin American region. Francis creates a connection between desire and food, but again, exotic food.

3) Sexual violence and the body

When asked about the theme of the song “Bone Machine,” Francis said that it dealt with the peculiarity of the human body as a machine. The song includes a series of references to sexuality, which is only

logical since the human body has a reproductive system and sexual organs that are part of this whole biological machine Francis is talking about. In this sense, the second stanza and chorus say:

Your blistered lips
Have got a kiss
They taste a bit like everyone
Uh-oh, uh-oh, uh-oh, uh-oh
Your bones got a little machine
You're the bone machine

The first two lines present an image of the lips of a person which are full of wounds. The lips are full of blisters. It could be seen that their overuse for kissing has produced the injuries; the persona says sarcastically that they have a kiss; however, he mentions that they taste like everybody, meaning that that person he/she is singing about has been around kissing lots of people, not giving just one kiss. Nevertheless, what really calls the attention is the fact that it is through the excessive kissing that this person got the wounds. Blood and pain, in this sense, are related to sex and pleasure. In addition, if one focuses on the premise that the human body is a machine, the human body loses humanity; in other words, the human body works as an automatic machine, and that will include the sexual part. Instinct, in this sense, could play an important role because desire would drive the individual to exercise his/her sexuality automatically. In other words, this person described, with his or her mouth in the flesh, has this uncontrollable sexual desire because his or her instinct makes the exercise of his/her sexuality automatic, like a machine in a factory that repeats the same task again and again and which the

only purpose of existence is to repeat that task. In this regard, the song suggests that promiscuity is related to automation, automation that will bring wounds to the body due to excessive use.

Not only that, when the persona says “your bones got a little machine / you are the bone machine” one could read the word *bones* as a play on words in which, yes, the first bones mentioned in “your bones got a little machine” are the actual bones of the skeletal system, but also the same word can be read as a slang for the penis, which means that having a little machine for your bones can be seen as a machine for erections and sexual desire, by that, emphasizing on the previous stanza and its sexual references. The same occurs with the line “you are the bone machine” which would suggest that the subject is a machine with the purpose of exercising sexuality, but automatically, the automation of desire and promiscuity and the wearing out of the machine: physical wounds in the body (in this case, blistered lips).

Another reference to the human body in relation to sexuality and violence is present in the song “Break my Body” in which the persona states:

I'm the hard loser
You'll find me crashing through my
mother's door
I am the ugly lover
You'll find us rolling on the dirty floor
Break my body, hold my bones
Hold my bones

The fragmented way of writing by Francis makes it difficult to tell when one idea finishes and the other begins or whether one

image connects to the next. However, at the same time, this fragmentation opens the possibility to interpretation and the connection of images. In this sense, whether the first of these images (the one about the hard looser) relates to the second (the one about the ugly lover) and are restated or commented on the chorus (break my body...) is debatable and fairly impossible to clearly conclude from analyzing the writing; nevertheless, it is impossible to deny the relationship neither. Consequently, one can link the sexual references of the first two images to the chorus. For instance, the second image that states "I am the ugly lover / You'll find us rolling in the dirty floor" presents the persona considering him/herself an ugly lover, which is fairly interesting. An ugly lover can be a person that does not exercise his/her sexuality in the standard way, the beautiful way, the one presented in movies and publicity, in which lovers have perfect bodies and outstanding sexual performances in accepted sexual positions, wild but conventional sex. The ugly lover is all about nonstandard sexual practices and dirty sex as stated in "you'll find us rolling on the dirty floor." Now the *rolling* can mean that the ugly lovers throw themselves to the ground to have dirty, rough sex; nevertheless, it can also be the preamble to the chorus and its explicit violence: "break my body, hold my bones." Rolling on the ground, in this sense, would allude to fighting. This means that there is a juxtaposition between sex and fighting. Francis portrays the sexual act as violent, using images of opening a body and, by that, exposing the bones, which can be seen as a phallic symbol also. Therefore, for the persona, violence generates sexual arousal.

The song "Broken Face," which was discussed before and which suggests an incestual relationship, holds another reference to sexuality, violence, and the human body. The song states:

There was this boy who had two
Children with his sisters
They were his daughters
They were his favorite lovers
I got no lips, I got no tongue
Whatever I say is only spit
I got no lips, I got no tongue
I got a broken face, uh-hu, uh-hu
I got a broken face

The first four lines, as explained before, show the image of a boy who has a relationship with his sisters and then abuses his daughters, which is an act of violence through the exercise of sexuality. After that, the persona establishes that he/she does not have lips or tongue and that instead of speech he/she spits. These images suggest deformity, perhaps physical malformation as a consequence of the incestual relationship. Therefore, one can assume that these verses present a polyphony of voices, having one the daughters speaking from lines five on and saying that she has a malformation due to the incestuous relation of her parents. In this sense, the song shows deformity of the body as a consequence of incest. In addition, having a broken face or no facial parts can be read as having no identity because one of the features that help the identification of a person is the face; no face equals no identity. Likewise, language is one of the most important features of a person; we human beings are believed to be the creatures that have developed the most complex manifestations of language on Earth. When the

speaker states that “whatever [she] say[s] is only spit,” she is affirming that she cannot talk; therefore, she has a language impairment as well. This impairment can be used by Francis to suggest that these daughters, as a consequence of an incestual relationship, lack humanity. The loss of human characteristics and physical deformity work as metaphors of loss of humanity related to the physical sexual abuse. The body, in this sense, and the symptoms it may present, works as a grotesque mirror of this sexual transgression.

Conclusion

The analysis of the lyrics of “Broken Face,” “Break my Body,” and “Bone Machine” demonstrate that the themes of sexual taboos, sexual otherness and objectification, and sexual violence and the body are relevant and recurrent subjects depicted in the songs. Francis uses grotesque images of sexual abuse, objectification, and violence to talk about a sexuality that is alternative and to show a side of it that was not discussed in mainstream musical productions of the 80s.

The mentally unstable characters created by Francis tell stories of power relations between individuals. They exercise power through sexuality, using the body of the other, invading the physical domain of the other; consequently, the songs talk about sexual practices related to sexual abuse and objectification. Sexuality in this sense is seen as an unbalanced relationship between individuals, which has a detrimental outcome for one of the parties involved, a perception that bottom line was and is still present in western society, therefore, the

value of a record like *Surfer Rosa* and its aim to exhibit this side of sexuality.

Moreover, this study aims not only to analyze the aforementioned subject, but also tries to bring to the spotlight an artistic production traditionally not seen as serious as other artistic products. Rock music and alternative music has evolved differently from pop music and music with the mere purpose of entertaining the masses; many acts of rock music have tried to achieve artistry, not only in terms of technical performance, but also in relation to the ideas explored. Therefore, they have developed an aesthetic quality, which deserves academic attention.

Many of the studies mentioned in this article demonstrate that there is still work to be done in order to create proper methodological tools to examine vocal music. It is ironic that rock music has displayed poetic attributes since the 1960s, nonetheless, most academic efforts discussing the subject focus on the social or historical impact of the songs and the albums, leaving aside their literary value.

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