Music with a Message:
U2’s Rock Concerts as Spectacular Spaces of Politics

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Abstract
The music of Irish rock band U2 is often heavily loaded with idealistic and political connotations, but is at the same time abstract enough to allow for broad (re)interpretation. This combination has proven to create a profound representational discourse in the dramatic and sensuous staging of live concerts. Live U2 performances are all-encompassing spectacles that use sound, images, props, and the sheer magnitude of the event to create a fresh approach to the texts (songs) that are both temporally and locationally specific. The U2 concert space is consciously constructed for the purpose of producing a concert experience that has the potential to transform the audience’s perceptions of the world beyond the horizons of the concert arena. This article will explore how U2 manipulates the space of a concert arena to evoke its socially conscious messages. This study will unveil the vast range of processes and devices employed to create the overwhelming experience that is a live U2 concert. In particular we will discuss the Elevation tour, which spanned the pre and post 9/11/2001 time frame, and the Vertigo Tour undertaken in 2005. Both tours had deeply embedded themes relating to (trans)nationalism, tolerance, and social justice, but were heavily influenced by the politics and social issues of the time including the Good Friday Agreement in Ireland, the events of 9/11, and the conduct of the Iraq War.

Politics is always about the establishment, the reproduction, or the deconstruction of a hegemony, one that is always in relation to a potentially counter-hegemonic order... Every form of art has a political dimension, because artistic practice either reproduces a common-sense or contributes to the destruction of it (Mouffe 2001, 99-100).
Introduction

The geographical relevance of popular culture is masked by its very ordinariness and pervasiveness within everyday life. Popular music in particular has remained an unexplored territory (Connell and Gibson 2003; Kong 1995a). Music has a long history of being used for political ends (Kong 1995b; Van Sickel 2005), yet the implications of this are often overlooked because the political power wielded by pop-culture icons, such as the rock band U2, is a “soft power” of persuasion and passion (Nye 2004). Rock ‘n’ roll is made to be played loud, made to sing (or scream) to, and made to dance to by its passionate fans. As an art form and medium of communication, a rock music concert is an auditory, visual, and kinetic event. While a rock concert may seem an unlikely site for politics, as we select our personal musical preferences and pay for entrance to a stadium concert, we are taking an implicit stand regarding the competing values of taste espoused by the artists we support. As “we explore musical culture, we often discover ourselves occupying local expressions of larger trends” (Real 1996, 3).

Political communication is fundamentally about persuasion (Mutz et al. 1996). Political thinkers, rulers and social commentators have recognized the persuasive power of music as far back as the Greeks. Music, both instrumental and lyrical, has the ability to foster desirable social and political attitudes and behaviors, hence the popularity of national anthems. In other words, music can convey particular ideologies and popular music can convey these (often unspoken) assumptions about the “proper” structure of the world and society to the masses (Van Sickel 2005; Ball and Dagger 2008). Popular culture can reinforce nationalist ideologies, specifically nationally based geopolitical scripts (Dodds 2007). Whether the point is to build patriotic fervor in country-western music (T uathail 2003), define and exoticize the “other” through film (Dodds 2003), or provide a sense of historical and ideological continuity through our monthly magazines (Sharpe 1993), the scale for popular culture is national. This has been true in music (Kong 1995a), even when the music itself is questioning the actions of a particular nation-state as was the case with the Vietnam era protest music (Perone 2004).

Popular culture has become a repository for the ideas, representations, and ideologies that feed public opinion. However, as globalization has integrated more and more of the world, political debates and their accompanying popular culture have expanded to the global scale. Accordingly, global communication networks are fast becoming the space of these new political debates (Castells 2008; see also Adams 2005). The literature on globalization stresses the emergence of a global “imagined community”, yet how could this form when most popular culture still glorifies the importance of nation-states? We will argue that the rock band U2 offers a counter-hegemonic geopolitical script, one that stresses global civil society (Anheier et al. 2001). This study aims to show how the band U2 uses its music and concerts to convey a globally relevant geopolitical message. Our basic argument is that U2’s rock concerts, and the movies of U2’s concerts (such as U23D) are sites of political communication that happen on a global
scale. U2 uses its music, and more specifically the spaces where that music is shared with their fans, as a place to impart a political message that is not strictly “national” because they are actively attempting to jump scales and link the individuals within very different nation-states to similar causes: human rights, militarism, and social justice.

**The U2 Concert Environns**

One of the most influential and successful rock ‘n’ roll bands ever, U2 has sold over 170 million albums worldwide, has 22 Grammy awards, and was inducted into the Rock ‘n’ Roll Hall of Fame on their first year of eligibility (Vallely 2006). Since 1976, the four original band members, Adam Clayton (bass), Bono (lead vocals, guitar, harmonica), Edge (electric guitar and backing vocals), and Larry Mullins Junior (drums and backing vocals), have created a socially conscious voice within popular culture. Music moves us, but it can also inform us. As icons of popular culture the rock band U2 uses the power of its celebrity to expose its audiences to some of the most pressing political issues of the day. The band, and in particular its lead singer Bono, have been associated with a variety of issues. Two of the most prominent of these causes are debt relief for African countries that earned Bono Time magazine’s Person of the Year (Time Magazine 1995), and a stand against militarism that goes back to the group's first album. In fact, U2’s lead singer Bono is likely the only individual to be nominated for an Academy Award, a Golden Globe, a Grammy, and the Nobel Peace Prize (Vallely 2006). In this article we will analyze how the rock band U2 uses the reinterpretation of their own texts (songs) through spectacular live performances to articulate their political message to their concert-going fans.

For this study we chose to examine the Elevation and Vertigo tours on the basis that they are the two most recent tours, which allows for greater accuracy on the accounts of the events given by the 16 individuals questioned. Initially the questionnaire candidates were selected from friends of the researchers and people who were known to have attended a concert. That number grew to sixteen via snowball sampling. 75 percent of the participants were between sixteen and twenty years old at the time that they attended the concert, and all had experienced a show in Ireland. These individuals were asked open-ended questions like “since the concert experience do you now view any aspects of the world differently?” and if they recalled any “particular aspect of the dramatic spectacle performed by Bono.” From the responses received at this stage, some key themes such as “intimacy with the audience,” “the importance of local issues to wider message,” and “emotionally charged” emerged. We then analyzed the media reviews and fan commentaries available online for these same themes. The concert dates and venues that were selected for this portion of the study were done so on the basis that it would incorporate the first and last dates of the tours, the Irish dates, and those that were released commercially on DVD. Furthermore, there was a conscious decision made to incorporate the last concert that occurred in the United States before the 9/11 terrorist
attacks and the band’s first return to New York after the attacks. The remainder were chosen on the basis that media reviews were accessible, all the while trying to ensure a good geographic range and time scale by having each month represented. The intent of the discourse analysis was to validate that the themes discovered during the questionnaires were not unique to the Irish context.

Music mediates our understanding of place and “is involved in the social, cultural, economic and sensual production of place” (Cohen 2002, 267). It is important to understand the context of a musical performance when analyzing the reception and reinterpretation of a piece of music. Somdahl-Sands (2007, 1) has argued that artistic performances, including music, are able to “manipulate space in such a way that social processes can be illuminated.” By altering the perceptions of spectators through physical elements such as the stage, lighting, or graphic demonstrations, or through affective means such as building empathy, alienation, or desire, a performance is able to change people’s sense of place. The music of U2 in particular has proved to be a profound representational discourse, capable of transforming its follower’s perceptions of the world beyond the horizons of the concert arena.

The music of U2 is often heavily loaded with idealistic, yet political connotations that are broadly open to the individual interpretation of any given listener. The music receives yet another conceptual dimension when performed live. The live performance of a song can offer an alternative, or perhaps reinforcing interpretation for the spectator. The preconceptions of the dominant theme of a song, or how this theme relates to the “outside” world, can be challenged and changed by performance. The success of the manipulation of meaning through the act of live performance (how songs are communicated and consequently interpreted) obviously can vary greatly, even within a single audience. Despite this, a U2 concert serves as a platform from which inspiration and notions of idealism flourish (Cogan 2006). Political and social issues unique to a performance’s time and place directly influence the concepts that the band evokes and that the audience perceive (Martin 1995). Consequently, a band can consciously altered a performance in order to address locationally or temporally specific issues. According to Edge, “[t]here are no two nights which could be said to be the same - the set may be the same, but the audience is different and our approach to each audience varies” (Clayton-Lea 2007, 99).

A concert environs is an ephemeral space. If a change in perspectives is to take place the concert must maximize its ability to impact its audience. The U2 concert space is artificially constructed explicitly for the purpose of the band’s live performances. The set and stage design are the result of meticulous collaborations between the professional designers and the band for months before a tour is set to travel. They work together to create the perfect backdrop for the concert experience: one that overwhelms and encapsulates the audience without detracting from the essence of the music and the live spectacle performed (Bracewell 2004). A conscious decision is made by the design team,
in conjunction with the band, as to what images, backdrops, and lighting should be used during particular songs. These visual props can frame the songs, or series of songs, in a particular manner that intentionally stimulates a particular interpretation. Bono even uses simple visual devices such as clothing or stage placement to highlight the intended meaning. Furthermore, the use of intentionally provocative and/or mentally challenging props and images accentuate the strategic nature of such communication and the interpretations by the audience (Goffman 1969; Lacey 1998).

The Elevation tour, promoting the album All That You Can’t Leave Behind, saw a re-invention of the band’s concert space and has been commonly referred to as the “back to basics” approach to their live performance. They made a conscious effort to avoid the extravagance and irony featured in the preceding PopMart tour, which had distracted and distorted the authenticity of the concert experience (McCormick 2006). Instead the band opted to reveal “the power of U2 ‘raw’” (Williams 2004, 154). The stage for the Elevation tour was minimal in terms of its use of props, but had a revolutionary feature: a heart-shaped B-stage, which jutted out into the crowd encircling approximately 300 audience members. Their set architect Mark Fisher described the significance of the new design by stating that “[t]hey [U2] deliver a more honest piece of entertainment… it is much more consistent with their brand. They are more accessible to the audience, and the show delivers a far more emotional experience” (Scrimgeour 2004, 235). The tour itself consisted of three legs, covering much of Northern America and Europe, and running March 24 though December 2, 2001. The sensitivity and awareness of the band toward their audiences was particularly noticeable on this tour as the band played dates in the United States both prior to and following the terrorist attacks of 2001.

The Vertigo tour, promoting U2’s album How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb, was significantly longer than the Elevation tour with concert dates from March 26, 2005 to December 9, 2006. The tour consisted of five legs and visited not only the Americas and Europe but also Australia and Asia. Like the Elevation tour, the Vertigo tour had the B-stage feature, but this time it varied between a horseshoe-like shape (two semi-circular peninsulas jutting out into the audience) or a fully enclosed shape (similar to that of distorted triangle with its tip protruding into the audience) depending on the performance venue.¹ The Vertigo tour continued to utilize some of the minimalist qualities from the Elevation tour, again essentially steering clear of the flamboyance of the previous Zooropa and PopMart tours. However, it must be acknowledged that whilst the Vertigo stage design was free of obtrusive props, it did have tremendously tall panels that back-dropped the stage, creating an overwhelming visual presence.

**Popular music/popular geopolitics: Music with a Message**

People use constructed narratives of common geopolitical scripts to create order out of the complexity of global events (Dittmer 2005). On many scales U2 plays a pivotal role in the construction of popular geopolitical narratives whether through their activism,
their live performances, or simply in their song content. Cultural artifacts (like a song or a concert) can “become a matter of political strategy” (Schudson 1989, 163) through the manipulation of performative elements (Somdahl-Sands 2008). Kershaw (1999, 149) argues that “the politics of performance can have an important place in the drive for equality, justice, and freedom...[and that ]... a celebration of difference and pluralism within an always provisional unity [of the concert community] may become politically democratic in almost the fullest sense of the term.” The “celebration of difference and pluralism” is something that U2 have consistently adopted in their performance strategies, most prominently in the recent Vertigo tour where they promoted awareness and tolerance for the many worldly religions, expressed through the “coexist” spectacle discussed in greater detail below. In the case of U2’s concert space and their live performances then, it is quite evident that the band has indeed embraced such a notion and has rallied to encourage social and political action from their followers for many causes. Furthermore, Bono has even explained the Vertigo tour as “[p]art political rally, part gospel, part Las Vegas” (Clayton-Lea 2007, 108).

The information dispensed through the narratives of popular geopolitics can help shape and mould the perceptions of those who are exposed to them (Sharpe 1993; Dodds 2003; Power and Crampton 2005). Individuals make associations, accept some arguments while rejecting others, and usually make their decisions with a limited subset of all available information. In effect, popular culture can focus attention on certain beliefs that produce common frames of reference, priming individuals to interpret political information in a particular manner (Chong 1996). Writing about the geopolitical ramifications of Captain America comic books, Dittmer (2005, 627) claims that “the producers of comic books view their products as more than just lowbrow entertainment; they view their works as opportunities to educate and socialize” their target audience by presenting them with constructions of knowledge and realities. Similarly, U2 have the “ability to interconnect national and international culture, and to extend the boundaries of ‘Irishness’ beyond those inherited from a relatively recent model of cultural production based on the primacy of the nation-state” (Smyth 2001, 170). This is exactly the kind of social construction and the shaping of collective national and transnational imaginings described by O’Tuathail (1999) as the foundation of popular geopolitics. The impact of these presentations “of (geo)political attitudes is heightened because they reach their young audience at a developmental moment when sociospatial frameworks are being formulated” (Dijink 1996, cited in Dittmer 2005, 628). The same could be said for U2, their concert space, and their audiences. The concepts evoked in the music itself, and those highlighted and integrated throughout the live concert experience are thus relevant to how perceptions are shaped, formed and reinvented by those experiencing the show. Since many of the concepts evoked are of a political nature, it could be suggested that an experience of this magnitude has the ability to shape and form a political ideology of the future. Larry Mullins Junior (drums) has stated that
“U2’s music has many different elements. If someone comes along to a concert and is inspired to join Amnesty that’s one part of it, but someone else may feel emotionally overwhelmed by the music, and someone else again may just come along to jump up and down and bop. They’re all intertwined…” (quoted in Scrimgeour 2004, 38). One of the strengths of U2’s popular geopolitics is that even if an audience member “just wants to bop” through the dramatic spectacle that is a U2 concert, she is exposed to a cosmopolitan political sensibility.

A rock concert communicates via music, lighting, and spectacle with vast audiences, particularly young people, and importantly those audiences have paid for the opportunity to hear that communication. Political messages conveyed during concerts reach out to the hearts, minds, feelings, and attitudes of those who attend. The incredible influence of celebrities on young people is unchallenged by more formal forms of politics or politicians. Through their entire careers U2 have agitated and advocated for various causes using “their celebrityhood and star power to try to inform, inspire and influence people” (Andersson 2007, 52). The type of charismatic authority wielded by pop-culture icons like U2 creates the potential for politically democratic action by raising awareness, building opinions, and mobilizing millions of people. U2 uses their concert spaces to create opportunities for civic participation outside of formal political circles. They do not advocate minimizing the nation-state, but rather increasing the responsiveness of political institutions through mass organizing that can put pressure on state and global non-state organizations. During the 2005 Vertigo tour, Bono often called upon his audiences to take out their cell phones and join them in the fight to end extreme poverty. Stating that they were “not looking for your money, [we’re] looking for your voice”, Bono asked the audience to tell President Bush, Prime Minister Blair and other world leaders to “put mankind back on Earth” through involvement in the ONE campaign. U2’s involvement with development issues and Africa has had tangible, real-world effects. Bono readily admits that he is not the world’s foremost expert on debt relief or AIDS prevention in Africa, yet he is also acutely aware that “his visibility gave the cause visibility” (Johnson 2004, 96). When Bono and Bob Geldof (and their media entourage) attended the 2005 G8 with, as Bono told President Bush, “3.8 billion people [from 75 countries] in our back pockets," 157 million of whom had signed up with the international non-governmental organization Global Action Against Poverty, the resulting aid package was better than anyone would have predicted (Vallely 2006). They were able to garner so much support within their concerts because our response to music is not entirely rational. A musical performance “evokes and organizes collective memories and present experiences… with an intensity, power and simplicity unmatched by any other social activity” (Stokes 1994, 3). By using music to ferment public debate surrounding political questions U2 is addressing its audience at a level that is more than just rational; they are mobilizing our passions, too. Political theorist Chantal Mouffe (2001) argues that the mobilizing of passion is why artistic practices
have such an important role to play in the public sphere, including an international public sphere. Emotional responses can be kindled by many different kinds of media (Wood and Smith 2004). Tuan (1977, 148) stated over 30 years ago that “[a]rt makes images of feeling so that feeling is accessible to contemplation and thought…. By the light of their art we are privileged to savour experiences that would otherwise have faded beyond recall.” Music is able to problematize received spatial discourses and affective associations, and thus the “political” (Smyth 2001). Music evokes feelings, enabling musical artists to play a significant role within society as they bring to the fore the “comprehendability” of those emotions. Rock music concerts are performance spaces where “people come to experience themselves and others in ‘different’ and emotionally intensive ways…. [They] make a space in which emotional relations are played up not down” (Wood and Smith 2004, 539).

Creating “a feeling of intimacy” between performers and audience was the basis of how U2 defined if a particular show succeeded or not (Edge, quoted in Smyth 2001, 167). Despite the vast scale of U2’s stadium venue performances, “their entire performance [is] geared towards creating a one-to-one experience between the band and every individual member of the audience. They don’t want anyone to feel left out of the experience…. U2 are a band who pursue a particular visceral intimacy with their audience” (Bracewell 2004, 9). This feeling of intimacy is established through many performative devices employed by the band creating the illusion that one’s proximity to the stage is irrelevant in this intimate environment and communal atmosphere. The desire to bring everyone into the experience has fueled the release of many live performance DVDs, the most spectacular being U2 3D. Bono in particular is continuously striving to break down the physical distance between the audience and the band. He insists that for him, “a rock ’n’ roll concert is 3D. It’s a physical thing—it’s rhythm for the body. It’s a mental thing in that it should be intellectually challenging. But it’s also a spiritual thing, because it’s a community” (Scrimgeour 2004, 50). This feeling of intimacy has the ability to overwhelm an audience and sway their perceptions and their attitudes on many scales. Thus, it is that the band themselves, and the front man Bono in particular, are aware not only of their roles as the performers, but also as the mediators of their idealistic artistic vision calling himself a “travelling salesman” (Assayas 2005, 17).

One of the band’s consistent themes has been a stance against violence and militarism, both in a local Irish context and globally. They use the emotional resonance of their music and performances to express this conviction. One of the most dramatic expressions of this message was the Coexist spectacle performed by Bono throughout the Vertigo tour. This spectacle was performed most frequently across the span of three intertwining songs on the set list: “Love and Peace or Else,” “Sunday Bloody Sunday,” and “Bullet the Blue Sky.” At a concert in Dallas, Bono explained the origins of this image as “a piece of graffiti by Piotr Mlodozeniec… in red, the C in the shape of a crescent moon, symbolizing Islam, the X in the shape of the Star of David, symbolizing
Judaism, and the T in the shape of a cross, symbolizing Christianity” (Cogan 2006, 149).

The actions on stage included Bono taking on the role of a prisoner, being blindfolded with a scarf that had the word Coexist written upon it, and crawling on one of the jutting arms of the stage to light a (controlled) fire. At one point, as the military drum beat for “Sunday Bloody Sunday” resounds Bono frantically beats a single drum that has been placed on the ramp, before singing “Jesus, Jew, Mohammad it’s true, all son’s of Abraham... Abraham talk to your sons, tell them No More, NO More, NO More,” before plaintively wailing the ending chorus “How long must we sing this song, How long…” As Neil Murphy of Hotpress magazine recalls his experience of the performance in Dublin on June 24, 2005, “[a]s ‘Love and Peace or Else’ gives way to ‘Sunday Bloody Sunday’, and a bloodshot ‘Bullet the Blue Sky’, you start wondering about [a] Baghdad bunker and Abu Ghraib allegories (Bono on his knees, blindfolded, muttering off-mic and slipping in snatches of please)” (Murphy 2005, 1). In other versions, Bono also adds in snippets of “These are the Hands That Built America” and “Johnny Comes Marching Home,” both of which could be pointing toward a critique and/or conciliation of the American public and policies. The primary image during the final portion of this three-song set is that of a fighter plane tearing across the sky with a city skyline in the background. The immediate interpretation of this image might recall that of the September 11th terrorist attacks. However, the interpretation becomes more nuanced as the commentary, the spectacle performed, and the lyrics are taken into consideration. Greg Kot of the Chicago Tribune reflected upon the new insight he had perceived from the song claiming it was “a civil war anthem” (2005, 1), while one of our interviewees explicitly called it anti-war.

The fans also recognized the narratives being displayed. The experience was recounted by a fan on an online blog that stated Bono “slips his rock messiah bandana over his eyes and gets down on his knees with his hands over his head” (Seales 2006, 1). This same fan continues the account stating “I think he’s trying to make a point about Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay.” It is interesting to note here that when the questionnaire participants were asked to recall “dramatic” aspects of the concert over 30 percent specifically recalled the “Coexist” spectacle. Yet for each participant the meaning of the actions varied as some recalled vague concepts evoked but not the exact message. This is because memory is variable and tied to the positionality of each respondent. One female participant spoke negatively about Bono’s “rants,” and recalled that she “had just wished he would shut up and get on with the songs,” yet intriguingly she was able to give a detailed account of the actions by Bono on stage. She remembered “the headband with something written on it and a cross in the background as Bono acted like a hostage on his knees or something.” Clearly, despite her negative attitude to Bono’s verbal narratives and the dramatic spectacle that accompanied it, she had recognized and retained the political implications of the performance long after the experience itself. Although her recollections were rather selective (only recounting the familiar cross), it could be said
that they had left a lasting impression on her interpretation of the music's thematic content.

Another recurring dramatic spectacle involves the band acknowledging the direct costs of violent actions by naming the individuals who perished in particular attacks. This technique was used to great effect during the Slane Castle concert in Ireland filmed on the 1st of September 2001. At this show, the band performed *Sunday Bloody Sunday* as a prayer for peace in Northern Ireland. At one point Bono called out “Put your hands in the sky, put your hands in the air, if you’re the praying kind turn this song into a prayer... we’re not going back there!” One of our respondents who was at this concert felt “obliged to find out about *Sunday Bloody Sunday*” after hearing the song at the concert. Another respondent was particularly moved when Bono listed out all the names of those who lost their lives in the Omagh bombing [from memory], and shouted “No More” about many acts of violence that occurred during the sectarian violence and warfare up the north. [This] made the song *Sunday Bloody Sunday* seem more significant and relevant than it ever was to me before.

The context of the Slane Castle concerts, being so close to the signing of the Good Friday Agreement as well as the fresh memory of the Omagh bombing 3 years prior, made Bono's actions memorable and emotional for those who saw it. Fans have taken this concert footage and used it to also name those who perished in the original Bloody Sunday attack which was the inspiration for the song.

During the Superbowl Half-time Show in New Orleans in February 2002 U2 again named the names of people killed by violent militants (Martin 2002). This time the goal was to strike a balance between memorializing the past and hopeful sentiments about the future. U2 sang three songs, *Beautiful Day*, *MLK*, and their transnational anthem *Where the Streets have No Name*, during which a screen scrolled the names of those lost in the September 11th attacks (Martin 2002). This particular use of political props and imagery was first used at the Madison Square Garden concert in October 2001 during the band's first return to the venue in NYC following the 9/11 attacks. In this emotionally charged performance, band was subtle in its commentary about the 9/11 events and the possible solutions. For instance, Bono commended the IRA for their participation in the Good Friday Agreement as they had recently agreed to disarm (Wiederhorn 2001). This kind of dialog could be interpreted as a sign of hope for the American populace—after decades of war, a “terrorist” organization was choosing peace. In fact, at the concert in New York City they refrained from making any explicit comments upon the war on terror, but instead “let their songs do the work” (Wiederhorn 2001, 1) of helping heal the thousands of grieving New Yorkers who attended their show. The intense emotional impact inspired by the simple act of scrolling the names of those who lost their lives in the 9/11 attacks across the giant screen was commented upon in
both the media reviews and on fan sites alike. Furthermore, Bono, in an iconic gesture, removed his leather jacket during both the NYC and Superbowl performances to reveal that his jacket had an American flag lining. The political iconography of “the nation” was quite literally embedded into his clothing (Oppenheimer 2001).

During many of the concerts in the United States during this time period, Bono wrapped the US national flag around himself, or wiped his face with it during the song “Sunday Bloody Sunday”, while singing the line “wipe your tears away”. Bono’s interactions with the audience, his embracing of the flag, and his repeated dedications to the New York Police Department and New York Fire Department struck a real emotional chord with the American people. This same sensitivity was also seen in the Milan concert where Bono called for an end to terrorist attacks and war of all kinds (this was the week after the London bombings of 2005), this statement was followed by the symbolic gesture of putting on a London Underground t-shirt thrown at him from the audience. His ability to interact and connect with all of these audiences is an aspect of the experience that many individuals commented upon, and were assumedly affected by it.

The political actions taken within their concerts show that U2 appreciate the power and subtlety “of situational influences on attitudes and behaviors” (Munz et al. 1996, 6). The band members have often acknowledged that how they approach each audience differs as a direct result of the geographic region, along with the social, and political structures found at that site (Mc Cormick, 2006). U2’s concerts are thus very locationally (and temporally) specific and allow those in the audience to feel a deep connection to the band, believing the band actually cares about them, not just their money. The band’s integration of locationally specific references to a venue (whether they are of local and/or national relevance) with the live performances can and do affect the level of intimacy created and shared between the band and the audience. Two of the interviewees spoke about how Bono’s personal anecdotes about the region made them feel connected with him and the band. These same respondents also reflected upon Bono’s integration of topical issues that were specific to Ireland, which resulted in the band’s music from that point on being seen to have a connection with these issues (in this particular case it was the Northern Ireland Conflicts). Thus it could be suggested that adjustments to the shows’ line-up but also to Bono’s commentary, can serve to make the community effect more powerful and perhaps increase the chances of the political messages getting delivered effectively. This suggestion is reinforced by our findings that 87 percent of the audience members assessed (both by questionnaire or through online sources) had reflected upon the impact of “local” references to their overall concert experience. Perhaps it is a case of making the material and the thematic content more relatable when parallels are drawn. Highlighting these parallels allows the band to ask their audience to make an intellectual and emotional leap, to see their own lives in the lives of distant others. The locationally specific content builds a bridge from
a nationally particularistic sense of place to one that is more transnational in scope, a form of geopolitical jumping of scale.

The use of local and global geopolitical symbolism is evident in the repeated use of flags in U2 concert spaces. Many of the audience members questioned reflected on the display of African flags used to emphasize the Band’s transnational agenda of peace and prosperity.

The commentary by Bono that accompanies this visual display along the entire Vertigo tour derived from Martin Luther King Junior’s “I have a dream” speech. In the case of the footage from the Chicago concert, Bono asks the audience to “Sing for Dr. King, and for Dr. King’s dream, for a dream big enough to fit the whole world, a dream where everyone is created equal under the eyes of God, everyone, everyone, not just an American dream, or an Asian dream, or a European dream, also an African dream.” The musical introduction to “Where the Streets Have No Name” emerges at this time and Bono continues to express his convictions:

also an African dream, Africa, from the bridge of Zelma and the Mississippi to the mouth of the River Nile, [at this point the flags of all the African nations begin to scroll vertically down the visual backdrop] the swamp land of Louisiana, to the high peaks of Killamingaro, from Dr. King’s America to Nelson Mandela’s Africa, the journey of equality moves on.

The song title itself, Where the Streets Have no Name, suggests that the world Bono is alluding to is one without physical or geopolitical boundaries. U2 is using “rock music… [to encourage]...the imagination of new maps which cut across what have become increasingly defunct institutional boundaries” (Smyth 2001, 164). Furthermore, it presents the concept of a shared global community in which the people across the globe are interlinked. In his commentary Bono takes the American hero and civil rights activist Dr. King and makes him a universal hero. Bono takes the idealized vision of a perfect society and applies an “American” national dream to that of the world, emphasizing the human sameness that Buttimer (1982) so often refers to. Here again, Bono is invoking an “imagined community of mankind” that is the foundation of a global civil society (Anheier et al. 2001, 17). This performative element gives weight to Kershaw’s (1996, 86) speculation about the important role the politics of performance can play “in the drive for equality, justice, and freedom” but also in the “celebration of difference and pluralism within an always provisional unity [that of the concert community, which]—may become politically democratic in almost the fullest sense of the term.”

Connections

Messages are there, on all levels in all music…. Anything you hear is there. Ya know, its all there, either trivia or profound, whatever. It’s all there…. It just is. And if you look long enough all the answers are in it… Same with the music.

- John Lennon 1969
A *U2* concert experience must be acknowledged for its political and humanitarian groundings, yet the way in which such messages are displayed is the true essence of the band’s successful communication. *U2*’s live concerts have the ability to shape, promote, contest, and reinforce varied meanings of any given song as the visual and the emotional aspects of the performance add depth to the personally conceived soundscape. The concert environs are purpose-built for the live performance of the band’s music, yet the combination of features such as set design, lighting, visual imagery, and props, along with the spectacle of Bono’s performance, allow for a much more profound display and absorption of constructed knowledge (Ley 2004). Their music is abstract enough to allow for interpretation and re-interpretation on many levels, depending on the political, spatial, and social realities of the time. As stated by Edge “[i]t’s amazing how new political ideas connect with old songs and give the songs a new perspective” (McCormick 2006). What is crucial here is that the use of the concert space for the rallying of politics and humanistic movements is something that establishes *U2* and their live performances, as a profound representational discourse that has the ability to persuade mass audiences into campaigning against the injustices and inhumanities of the world.

Castells (2008) argues that the will of the people is shaped from the messages and debates that take place in the public sphere. *U2* is able to harness the power of the world’s public opinion through their live and mediated concerts. The dramatic spectacles performed by the band were highly influential to the experiences remembered by the audience members analyzed. When the questionnaire, the fan site, and media review sources were combined, it revealed that over 70 percent of these audience members directly reflected upon the dramatic actions by Bono. However, despite such a substantial number of recollections, in some cases the meaning of these actions were lost or forgotten, while in others (particularly in media reports) they were attacked for the explicit political content (Wener 2005). Many of these authors felt that such seriousness should not be mixed with the enjoyable entertainment of rock’n’roll (Murphy 2005). Yet, we suggest that it is precisely this seemingly uncomfortable combination that creates an experience not to be forgotten, even if its “true” meaning may be.

The role of the set design and all that it encompasses (namely the magnitude of the stage, lighting, visual imagery, and props) is a pivotal one in the creation of an event that sends a powerful messages about our global responsibilities. Such devices allow for a deeper level of engagement with the experience, along with the music both during the concert and, in some cases, long after it has ended. The vast majority (80 percent) of audience reflections referred to the stage design and its features when giving an account of the concert experience. However, it must be noted that the detail given varied tremendously, in some cases simply noting the structures alone with no other significance to the music or their perception of it. Finally, we need to recognize that the interpretations of such features and the message they convey are influenced by the preconceptions carried forward by the individual. The chosen conclusion on any
perspective offered is greatly influenced by the flexibility of one’s attitudes and also their ability to adopt a different lens (Tompsett 1996). Thus while the concert space enables political narratives to be communicated to a vast number of people, some of them are more susceptible to these messages than others (Dittmer 2005). Consequently since the media reviewers included in this study were likely older with more political experiences than the 16-20 year olds we questioned, they appeared less susceptible to the overt educational goals of U2’s political messages.

It is through their music and concerts that U2 is able to influence their audience’s perceptions and foster social change. People are willing to pay a great deal of money to experience a live concert, and yet it is an experience they rarely actively contemplate beyond the realm of musical entertainment. While going to a U2 concert may appear to be an entertainment-based decision, it has far-reaching political implications that spill out far beyond the concert venue. Despite the fact that only 52 percent of all of the sources we looked at discussed a change in outlook toward the songs or the world, when directly asked in a questionnaire, 72 percent of the respondents reported a change in perceptions. Added to this is the fact that in the data gathered through the questionnaire, there was a clear correlation between the age of the audience member and the way in which they were affected by the concerts humanitarian and political content. When asked about “aspects of the world” viewed differently since the concert the younger respondents (16-20 years old at the time of the concert) responded that they personally should help “people in the Third World” [sic], “world hunger,” “war in the Middle East,” and “Northern Ireland politics.” It was clear that the respondents felt a need to act on the information they learned at the concert. This was reinforced within the concert as one audience member recalled being asked to “take out our mobile and text the campaign to make poverty history,” while another remembered Bono talking to the audience and “urg[ing] us to do something about the inequalities of the world.” While these responses may appear naïve, they also reinforce Dittmer’s (2005) argument that the narratives within mass culture shape the geopolitical attitudes of young people at the time when their geopolitical frameworks are being formed. Castells (2008, 90) argues that ultimately, the transformation of consciousness does have consequences on political behavior, on voting patterns, and on the decisions of governments.... While not very effective in terms of designing policy...[the media is] essential in fostering a global dialogue, in raising public awareness, and in providing the platform on which the global civil society could move to the forefront of the policy debate.

To our survey respondents, caring about the world beyond the Republic of Ireland’s borders has become a matter of importance. A concert changed their worldview. These are frames for understanding political issues that will continue to influence their
perceptions as they move into their political futures as citizens of the Irish state and the world.

As acknowledged by Edge, u2 has always been a band with a political conscience, and they have always expressed their convictions quite openly (Clayton-Lea 2007). u2 uses its music as a means to communicate its members’ personal convictions and passions with a wide audience. The three main themes of anti-militarism, belief in the power of individuals acting together to solve the world’s problems, and a sense of responsibility to a global community continually appeared on the video footage and in audience accounts. By being so involved in social issues and by inspiring others to do likewise, u2 is consciously rewriting the political landscape to include art, and the world of rock-n-roll to include politics. Political musical performances, such as those by u2, force us to acknowledge the power “of different ways of feeling, of being, empowered or disempowered” (Wood and Smith 2004, 536). The ambiguity of u2’s music, combined with the flexibility of the band toward their own material, is what allows for the interpretation and re-interpretation of the material according to the location where they perform and the audience that occupies that place.

A concert can be a liminal space, one where old identities are shed and new ones tried on. During their concerts, u2 is trying to persuade its audience of its utopian geopolitical vision of international relations. If Bono’s preaching of tolerance and his celebration of pluralism are to be absorbed by the youths of their audience, surely it could be assumed that such an aspect could hardly result in anything other than a more humane world. Yet, there is always the possibility that such teachings go either unnoticed or misinterpreted. But, as stated by Bono, u2’s “songs are the best bits from the past” and it was their music that they brought with them into the future, a future that they had faith in, and were excited about.

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Endnotes
1 To see images of both the Elevation and Vertigo tours stages from conception, construction and performance click here.

References


