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Creative Spark
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Rock Music and Creativity

As the reader may verify by looking at my name, I originate from Cyprus, a Greek island in the Mediterranean Sea. As I grew up in a Greek environment, Greek music predominated in my listenings with a glimpse of classical music added when my studies in the piano encouraged it. My short stay in the States has, apart from many other things, introduced me to rock music.

According to Google.com, “rock ‘n’ roll can be defined as a genre of popular music originating in the 1950s; a blend of Black rhythm-and-blues with White country-and-western; rock is a generic term that evolved out of rock ‘n’ roll.” The purpose of this essay is not, however, to provide an analysis on rock music. I know I have much to learn, many hours of listening to be able to be considered a ‘rock fan’. Nevertheless, rock provides a perfect example where Margaret Boden’s three domains of creativity appear explicitly.

Margaret Boden, Dean of School of Cognitive and Computing Sciences and professor of philosophy and psychology at the University of Sussex, has written many essays on creativity. In *The Creative Priority* she divides creativity into three main branches. The first involves ‘making unfamiliar combinations of familiar ideas’, new ways to join already existing ideas in order to generate a completely novel creation, be it a poem, a painting or a scientific invention. The ‘exploration of conceptual spaces’, searching for possibilities in an area that no one has thought about before and realizing

the potential those may have, entails the second branch. Finally, the third includes ‘transforming conceptual spaces in people’s minds’, pushing and altering the limits previously imposed to result in the triumph of creation. This classification provides a summary of what various authors have illustrated in their works on the creative process.

As the definition of rock music states, rock emerged from the combination of black rhythm-and-blues and white country-and-western. Those two kinds of music prevailed on the music scene since the beginning of the 20th century. Both were familiar to the audiences of the time. What Elvis did that shook the waves and initiated a revolution in music, was to combine those two familiar ideas in an unfamiliar way. The result was a new – for the time – music genre, which as such had a lot to offer and a lot to explore within. Time showed that were it not for this unfamiliar combination, the flow of the rest of the 20th century would not have been as we know it.

Boden asserts that “examples [for the first branch of creativity] include poetic imagery, collage in painting or textile arts, and analogy. In poetry, in particular, each word has been said before, however, the order and the link between words that a poem proposes is often unfamiliar and hence distinguishes the poem from the rest of written expression. This link is often directed towards one point the poet is trying to express, such as feelings of love, nostalgia and disappointment. The reader recognizes those feelings easily if he or she has felt them before. The link is not always obvious from verse to verse. Only when one reads the whole poem is able to “see” it and appreciate the poem’s value. Constantinos Montis, a Cypriot poet who died recently, speaks on behalf of poetry in his poem *Poetry explains*:

“I have other vowels,

Other consonants,

Other full stops, other exclamation marks, other question marks.”

Indeed, only a poet could capture the way poetry works in only a few words. Those other

letters and punctuation marks are in fact the different combinations a poet discovers in his poems and can only induce admiration and awe to the reader.

“Tired of lying in the sunshine staying home to watch the rain
You are young and life is long and there is time to kill today
And then one day you find ten years have got behind you
No one told you when to run, you missed the starting gun”
Time, Pink Floyd

As a poetry admirer, I was surprised to find out that the lyrics of many rock songs have poetic value as well. While the first rock pieces were rather simple in lyrics and music, as the genre progressed, it became richer and more meaningful. As Boden remarks, the second branch of creativity is the “exploration of conceptual spaces, i.e. of structured styles of thought”. This is exactly what rock bands did. They explored the possibilities their music could reach. Hence they expanded the limits, which resulted in an era that our parents lived and my generation envies them for that reason. I would love to live in an age when current political events and philosophical explorations lead to the creation of songs, such as John Lennon’s *Imagine* and Pink Floyd’s *Time*. In an age when music concerts, like Woodstock, become locations for political debate and promotion of peace.

This field of creativity is not confined to music, though. Science and technology offer many examples for such exploration within a confined space. Nanotechnology, a recent engineering field, searches for ways to achieve maximum efficiency of machines using minimum space. This search does not propose a new idea; it isn’t an invention or something that dramatically opens new roads in technology. It is an example, though, of engineers being creative, as it continuously provokes new ways of combining microchips

and circuits with the goal of minimalism in mind. Kathleen McAuliffe presents, in an alternative biography of Thomas Edison, another example of creativity in science and technology, as a result of exploring conceptual spaces. Thomas Edison, one of America's most accomplished inventors, said that the 'secret' for his creativity is "hard work, stick-to-itiveness, and common sense". As a "workaholic", "he was issued more patents than have been issued to any other single person in U.S. history". Actually, Edison did not advance science or technology the way Euclid, Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein have done. What made him remarkable was his ability to explore the means available to him, realize the possibilities of his inventions and proceed to make them real. The lamp filament and the telegraph are but two examples of the inventions Edison's creativity granted us.

Science and technology proceed in other ways, too. For them to advance in leaps and not in slow steady steps, a major breakthrough must occur. Boden describes this as the third kind of creativity, "transformation of conceptual spaces in people's minds", which involves realizing the limits of the conceptual space in which the creative process acts and pushing them, altering them in order to evolve creation to the next level. The emergence of alternative rock, or underground music, as it was first called, out of rock music can be used to illustrate this field. While its name suggests that it is a variation of rock, it is much more than just this. Its themes are different, its music rhythms are diverse and the audience it attracts is varied, too. Alternative rock advances music in a different way than traditional – if I am allowed to use the term – rock music.

To return to science, Einstein's remarkable work on relativity transformed the time-independent world proposed by Newton, which worked satisfactorily in most real-life situations, to a completely different world. In this 'new' world, time and space are interchangeable and dependent on each other. This discovery opened vast possibilities in mathematics, the sciences and technology, of which we have yet much to expect.

What made Einstein's work special was his ability to take nothing for granted. The antithesis of his ideas to previous ones has distinguished him in the pantheon of the scientists.

Rollo May, who is regarded as the best-known American existential psychologist, manages in his books to make creativity a more comprehensible idea to the wire audience. As he says, "To every thesis there is an antithesis, and to this there is a synthesis." Jerry Hirschberg, in *The Creative Priority* expands on the idea of synthesis. As we have articulated in class, Creativity is less about the analysis, where the objective is to break down the subject, but synthesis, that reveals hidden relationships and meanings that lead to new permutations and perspectives. Yet, in my opinion, Hirschberg underestimates the potential of antithesis in the creative process. "The transformation of conceptual spaces" proposed by Boden may well mean exactly the antithesis that opens new doors in creativity. Who hasn't experienced, while listening to a song and expecting the rhythm to continue in a certain way, the feeling of being surprised by an out-of-place note or a completely different theme? Then, the antithesis between the unexpected and the expected creates an excitement and interest in the audience's ears.

All in all, Boden successfully divides creativity in the three fields of "unfamiliar combination of familiar ideas", "exploration of conceptual spaces" and "transformation of conceptual spaces in people's minds". My recent encounter with rock music and the concurrent study of Boden's ideas enabled me to see a connection between the two. Rock music would not be like we enjoy it today if composers and performers were not inspired and did not express their creativity through music. More broadly, though, the advance in every aspect of the arts, sciences and technology requires, apart from hard work as Thomas Edison modestly stated, a creative spark. This spark is the force that evolves and advances creativity, and hence life to the next level. May it always find its

way to reveal itself through any form. This way the world can become a better place to live.