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Cognitive Bias as a Framework for Analysis of Multimedia Music Reviews (Cases of Pitchfork, Brooklyn Vegan, AllMusic)

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I. Introduction

Modern society is affected by total communication. People around the world are involved in endless, transnational and overwhelmed streams of information. However, a smartphone screen brings a person not just unprecedented opportunities but also frustration (Lovink, 2019).

In 1962 Marshall McLuhan predicted the loss of cognitive control in digital civilization, what he calls 'Marcony Galaxy'. McLuhan warned: 'Unless aware of this dynamic, we shall at once move into a phase of panic terrors, exactly befitting a small world of tribal drums, total interdependence, and superimposed co-existence.' (McLuhan, 2017).

Today the utopia of the network society is more and more often sided by the dystopia like in the Black Mirror TV series. What Manuel Castells supposed to be the global 'culture of protocols of communication <…> developed on the basis of common belief in the power of networking and of the synergy obtained by giving to others and receiving to others' (Castells, 2005, p. 40), is not far from turning to 'the anti-social future, the loneliness of the isolated man in the connected crowd', as Andrew Keen described that (Keen, 2012, p. 13).

Curiously, perplexity caused by the overabundance of free content is quite like confusion caused by lack of information — a person experiences the same troubled decision-making, not enough supported by reliable facts and logical interconnections. In this way, the mass communication space is getting saturated by myths and rational form of cognition is getting replaced by irrational one. Not surprisingly, in recent years scholars have focused on phenomenons such as fake news, post-truth politics, internet propaganda, etc.

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II. Methodology

What method is appropriate for considering the effects of mass media in this new environment? We have found an answer in the theory of cognitive biases (or heuristics). This area of social sciences has developed on foundations of Amos Tversky, Daniel Kahneman, Aaron Beck, David Burns's works as well as data of psychotherapy practice and social experiments. Today this framework seems productive at least due to numerous examples — both laboratory and everyday ones.

The genre of multimedia music reviews is the object of our research. The problem of the audience's irrational cognition is reflected in this material with relatively soft effects. While fakes in political journalism inevitably lead to destructive and manipulative influence, a music review justifiably appeals to irrational thinking. The genre itself, traditions of opinion journalism and functionally reasoned emotional impact give the green light to this strategy.

This impact, or in other words suggestion, is the subject matter of the research: multimedia music reviews are exposed to the context of readers' irrational cognition reasoned by heuristics. The leading method is the analysis of selected media texts including identification and classification of cognitive biases they contain. The analysis has the foundation of appropriate and theoretically significant concepts adopted to the research tasks.

III. Theoretical Framework

As for the first stage, we've selected the main points of these concepts to define principal categories and necessary relations.

So, we follow Tversky and Kahneman who defined heuristics as 'principles which reduce the complex tasks of assessing probabilities and predicting values to simpler judgmental operations [which are]

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quite useful, but sometimes <…> lead to severe and systematic errors' (Tversky, Kahneman, 1974, p. 1124).

As Russian scholars Elmira Kashapova and Marina Ryzhkova noted, the source of heuristics is 'evolutionally developed mental behavior of a human being' (Kashapova, Ryzhkova, 2015, p. 17–18). Biases are justified physiologically in some regards as they tend to minimize our energy and time resources due to cognitive stereotypes.

Although the psychologists defines the heuristics in similar ways, they take different attitudes to the systematization of this phenomenon. As Alexei Popov and Alexander Vikhman mentioned, there's still no unified classification of cognitive biases because of differences in aims and methods the scholars take (Popov, Vikhman, 2014, p. 8). Beck, Burns, Stanovich, Toplak and West are among those who suggested original concepts (West, Toplak, Stanovich, 2008).

So we've taken the Jonathan Baron as a basis of our own method. This classification has heuristics divided into principal types and sub-types:

1. Attention:
   a) Availability, attention to here and now, easy and compatible;
   b) Heuristics based on imperfect correlations;
   c) Focus on one attribute with unawareness to others;
2. Motivated bias — myside bias and wishful thinking;
3. Psychophysical distortions.

Baron names heuristics in these divisions and gives a normative model and explanation for each bias so the whole classification seems reasonable enough and might be used as a relevant instrument for those suggestive characteristics of music reviews we focus on (Baron, 2008, p. 56).

Necessary to mention, we consider suggestiveness as irrational (unlike persuasion) influence on a recipient of information. As the ability or quality of 'reminding you of something or making you think about something' (Oxford Dictionaries), suggestiveness affects one's mind apart of one's will (Shelestyuk, 2008, p. 171). That's more about inspiring something rather than proving something.

The space of mass communication is full of numerous distinctly suggestive texts, especially in the spheres of ad, PR, and propaganda. Journalism, particularly music reviews, is suggestive enough too.

Generally, a review is 'a report in a newspaper or magazine, or on the internet, television or radio, in which somebody gives their opinion of a book, play, film, product, etc.' (Oxford Dictionaries) So, giving the opinion is the genre's essence and evaluation semantics is in the term's core (Nabiyeva, 2017, p. 15).

The review is still the central analytical genre of music journalism, and it's productive enough to generate new meanings. In a text of this genre, images underlying a music composition are exposed to verbalization and interpretation by an author. Art gets caught and framed with a journalist's view and then becomes subjectively reflected. Multimedia content (music tracks, photo, video, visual design, etc.) created or selected by an author or editor is expected not only to illustrate but to sharpen and enforce personal interpretation.

Although, the review has various functions: to inform the audience about new music, to promote or criticize it, to educate and entertain a listener, to reason the reviewer's opinion with historical and cultural background — the evaluation is still its leading communicative strategy while suggestiveness is this strategy's key intention.

Suggestiveness gets enough power in a music review. Although a professional journalist has to ground his/her opinion on real facts and credits as well as relatively impartial social, political and cultural context, what makes a review subjective anyway is the abstract nature of a sound image, evaluation strategy and textual expressiveness.

So, the multimedia music review has to and does implement suggestiveness transmitting an author's ideas and images about music to readers. What helps reveal this effect is the theory of heuristics (cognitive biases) that has comprehensive empirical reasoning and especially relevant to the modern digital media that often make us think and behave irrationally.

This theoretical framework needs practical try-on so we've considered some real reviews through the lens of cognitive biases. We've selected multimedia publications in Russian and English in various formats trying to embrace the area of the up-to-date music journalism with truly diverse check points.

In this article, we present the case study of the following publications:

1. James Manheim, Le Nuove Musiche and Krijn Koetsveld. Arvo Pärt: Magnificat; Stabat Mater // AllMusic, 2019.
2. Andrew Sacher, Notable Releases of the Week (7/12) // Brooklyn Vegan, 2019.
3. Stacey Anderson, Billie Eilish. Where We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go? // Pitchfork, 2019.

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Table 1: The review by James Manheim at AllMusic

Position of Analysis		Explanation
Object of reviewing		Arvo Pärt's Magnificat and Stabat Mater performed by Le Nuove Musiche under Krijn Koestveld (Brilliant, 2019)
General idea of an object		'This is a very Pärt satisfying recording on its own terms, highly recommended.'
Cognitive biases		
Attention	availability, attention to here and now, easy and compatible;	—
	heuristics based on imperfect correlations	—
	focus on one attribute with unawareness to others	—
Motivated biases		illusory correlation: Le Nuove Musiche ensemble is a follower of Hilliard Ensemble (assumption of direct creative inheritance)
Psychophysical distortions		—

Table 2: The review by Andrew Sacher at Brooklyn Vegan

Position of Analysis		Explanation
Object of reviewing		Glitterer's album 'Looking Through the Shades' (ANTI, 2019)
General idea of an object		Punk sound is 'what makes Glitterer stand out from your average indie pop record'.
Cognitive biases		
Attention	availability, attention to here and now, easy and compatible;	—
	heuristics based on imperfect correlations	hindsight bias: considering Title Fight's work as more significant than its member's debut solo album released later
	focus on one attribute with unawareness to others	—

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Motivated biases	illusory correlation: stating that if a listener liked Title Fight, he would allegedly like Glitterer
Psychophysical distortions	—

Table 3: The review by Stacey Anderson at Pitchfork

Position of Analysis		Explanation
Object of reviewing		Billie Eilish's album 'Where We All Go Asleep, Where Do We Go?' (Darkroom / Interscope, 2019)
General idea of an object		'The debut album from the meteoric pop star lives in a world of its own: gothic, bass-heavy, at turns daring and quite beautiful.'
Cognitive biases		
Attention	availability, attention to here and now, easy and compatible	asymmetric dominance: arguing direct adoption and ignoring alternative variants ('Lana Del Rey-indebted crooning')
	heuristics based on imperfect correlations	—
	focus on one attribute with unawareness to others	prominence effect: arbitrary selection of the artist's 'most self-aware lines on the record'
Motivated biases		biased assimilation: the combination of various signs in one portrait and, consequently, considering all of them as typically of teenagers ('a lawless young female singer sporting baggy, androgynous clothes <…> casts her bored, listless eyes upward instead of batting them at the camera'); belief overkill: generalization of teenagers' tastes in one sentence ('ask any teenager in America as they wait patiently for the rest of the world to catch up to their consummate taste in pop music'); selective exposure: absolutization of two arbitrarily selected tendencies ('all teen angst is both fiercely sincere and an affect of being only partially informed')
Psychophysical distortions		framing effect for gains and loses: the number of followers as the direct evidence of success ('an obscenely famous pop star – the kind with 15 million Instagram followers, sold-out shows…')

Necessary to note, in these cases, we appeal to the framework of cognitive distortions not as deviations but as expressive means. We consider heuristics as part and parcel of distinctly human and, in this regard, inevitably irrational worldview, social and cultural existence. So we've analyzed the reviews looking for not disadvantages but examples of enacting natural psychological triggers. It can work out either partly (Table 1) or in full-scale (Table 3).

IV. Conclusion

The analysis of multimedia music reviews in the framework of cognitive biases could be a part of a more complex analysis. Besides, this method could be extrapolated to the texts of other genres and formats including ones that don't belong to professional journalism. From the one side, a heuristic can be a mean of suggestive expressiveness in a music review and, from another one, a mean of suggestive misinformation in fake news.

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Anyway, 'tribal' confusion of a person in the network society with its swift streams of information causes cognitive irrationality and must be relieved (or at least diagnosed) with mindset rationality — due to the reflection in social sciences or personal media hygienics.

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