



For a few naive moments, I had been expecting music.

Instead, I found myself being taught how to make pasta by a clearly multi-skilled pop starlet. Garbed in a short grey top, she reminded me of that common pop condition whereby the midriff is lacquered with some sort of cloth-eroding agent. She pottered around like a second-rate Ainsley Harriot with all the personality of a Blue Peter presenter and tried to convince me, a student of the media, that this "one she had prepared earlier" had not in fact been hastily mocked up by a proper chef.

I felt mildly inclined to try my hand at cooking Pasta a la Clara, but was deterred by the fact that were I to expand on this, I would have to consider homosexual tightrope-walking as well.

In a moment of satire, I imagined the angelic Claire Richards putting herself and four other jobless showpersons into that little pot, adding some gay iconography, some blatant plagiarism, some Bananarama and ABBA CDs, and Pete Waterman, coming out at the end not with a relatively unappetising pile of tomatoey gloop but with a highly successful pop phenomena. Her recipe for Pasta a la Clara had become a recipe for thoroughly undeserved success. There was only one fundamental difference...

Pasta a la Clara was, prior to this demonstration, a family secret. The recipe for pop success was, like Claire's boiled pasta, let out of the bag much much earlier.

***"...the story has just begun
and darling what's done is done"***

In case it needs clarification, I am referring to Steps, the line-dancing, dwarf-menacing pop quintet masterminded in 1997 by musical terrorist Pete Waterman. The surreal cookery sequence is from "Steps - The Video", a little cocktail of distractions which I shall return to in more depth shortly for a proper, and certainly enlightening, textual analysis. Steps - The Video sums up in 82 'steptastic' minutes everything that is good and bad, modern and



postmodern, about the band, its construction, its deconstruction, its reflection of society and its stubborn lack of meaning. Steps are a band that excel at random, at doing things for their own sake, and rejecting the notions of innovation and signification.

In short, they would seem to be a perfect example of a postmodern band, but they are not decisively so, while sometimes it seems like their videos, their costumes, their very media image is throwing postmodernity in your face. In analysing Steps, it is difficult not to get drawn into their strangely hypnotic little world, where nonsense seems to have an odd commodity value and meaning is witch-hunted. These five overly-presentable urchins make for fantastic tools of capitalist repression - "Go on, buy our records, buy our keyring, live in our world; we're always smiling, aren't we?"

This essay cannot ever be objective, and so I make no apologies for its frequent subjectivity; we are also dealing with a topic where the occasional bout of flippancy is unavoidable. This in mind, I can go no further without admitting I am a huge Steps fan, and despite the fact I am also an ABBA fan (a band whom Steps plagiarise on an operatic scale), I find myself listening more frequently to Steps (I am now). Essentially, I consume the copy more than the original, and it is in such contradictions that the value of studying Steps as a postmodern band becomes apparent.

The main body of this essay will be in a case study of the aforementioned box of delights - Steps - The Video - and of their marketing and presentation. I'll also spend some time on their actual music, but surprisingly - or maybe unsurprisingly - their music isn't that important. Initially, however, we need to define a foundation (one which is deliberately general - the specificity will come in the applications).

"Is this love that we're feeling, or are we dreaming"

Putting Steps in their context, some definitions of applicable



postmodern ideas. Postmodernity has been described in relation to a number of marked changes in society, our perception of it and the media's role in it.

Firstly, there is the notion of a breakdown in the boundaries between culture and society; the former having effectively swallowed the latter. Is the media so powerful that it has eclipsed the concept of quality; will we buy any old rubbish so long as it is packaged with attractive enough signs? In relating this changing role of culture, from mirror to mediator, Strinati states that the "mirror is now the only reality we have" (1995, 224). As culture, capitalism and consumerism feed off one another and from the media, cultural signs and media images have indeed come to construct not only our sense of reality but the way we consume it.

Another facet of postmodernity is a move towards *ST*yle at the *ExP*ense of *S*ubstance, and I think the italics say it all. The idea of signs for their own sake and of the supremacy of the surface is deeply ingrained in the nature of our featured band.

Art and popular culture are said to be amalgamated in the postmodern scheme. The implications here are the increasing relationship between art and economy (or, better put, culture and economy), the appeal and practicality of reproductivity, and the infinite potential for taking even the most sacred of institutions and turning it into a joke.

Fourthly, there is the confusion over time and space. Particularly pertinent in an industry such as pop music, popular culture is "without frontiers and outside history" (ibid. 227).

The Internet raises issues of glocalisation and new sense of community, and the internet is somewhere Steps have a significant presence.

*“See I’ve had enough takin’ chances on love,
an’ I said I’d never do it again”*

Postmodern culture is recognisable also from a decline and



fusion of personal and collective identities (again somewhere the internet comes in), a reliance on consumerism for identity, fragmentation of selfhood and declines in familial community.

The family is just one meta(or grand)-narratives which the postmodern era is seen to have moved away from; it is a concept which denies such all-encompassing discourses. And whilst this might seem a contradiction (surely is postmodernism not a meta-narrative then), Dick Hebdige explains it is "neither a homogeneous entity nor a consciously-directed 'movement'" (ref). Postmodernity thus, as a concept, is very postmodern.

Popular Music, though not as oft-discussed as architecture or art, has a more specific place in the overall theory. Strinati defines it is "marked by a trend towards the overt and explicit mixing of styles and genres of music in very direct and self-conscious ways" (1995, 233), and is concerned with collage, pastiche and quotations, remixes covers and sampling, crossing sub- and pan-cultural identities along the way (234). To illustrate this latter notion, imagine Steps singing a up-tempo dance music ABBA rip-off dressed in oriental clothes.

The difference between this form of music production and that in modernism is that in modern music, something new, a "novel and original fusion" (ibid) was created from the elements. Perhaps a good example of this surviving today might be Norman Cook's strange but rather original concoctions; however, you could equally argue he is postmodern, depending on how good you think he is. Modernity/postmodernity is so often a case of subjectivity.

Rejections of generic boundaries, the novelty of the 'original' and the view of the world as somehow "non-primary" (Hawkes, 1994, 565) are all further appropriate facets of postmodern music; David Harvey goes a far as to suggest it may just be the "commercialisation ... of modernity" (1989, 42).

Christopher Williams (1976) attributes differences in British and American pop music to an emphasis on eclecticism, humour and theatricality, "Pop's development has owed a great deal to the dislike of the serious, pompous and pedantic", while Frith and Horne (1987),



and Walker (1987) highlight its aesthetic aspects.

All these components are woven into the music of Steps, mostly accidentally I'd wager, but even that lays the blame for this almost institutionally postmodern framework at the door of the music industry as a whole.

*“Are you breakin’ someone else’s heart,
‘cos you’re takin’ my love where you are”*

It may have been Vanilla Ice who gave us all those annoying songs with the band/performer's name in the lyrics (a legacy now carried on by such songs as SClub7's "SClub Party"), but in my recollection, the general trend which seems to afflict the music industry now was started by the Spice Girls. They were a green light to everyone with an ability to count to five to compile a band.

You advertise in the trade papers, have a big audition, get together five people with different coloured hair and 'unique' personalities, make sure one of them is 'sensible' and one is 'a wee bit wacky', and the only problem facing you is that you can be guaranteed that within a year one of them will either admit taking drugs, pose naked in a magazine or come out as gay. The final task is in compiling a random compound of directions, genders, buzzwords, and numbers to form the band's name.

SClub7 took the formula further by having a 'zany' tv series all about their adventures, not at all happy with just one medium. (I did actually find myself counting the number of people in that band - with postmodernity you can never be too sure). B*Witched further broke the mould by having an almost unfathomable *four* in the band, two of whom look the same and are related to Boyzone (well, Ireland's not that big). The pop music industry has become incestuous.



***“I know we planned to stay together,
we just ran into stormy weather”***

Steps are Claire Richards, Lisa Scott-Lee, Lee Latchford Evans, Faye Tozer and Ian Watkins (known as 'H'). No they're not. Steps are a manufactured, mediatised, consumption-centric, discursive construct, driven by a capitalist economy and the antithesis to quality and musical integrity. Claire Richards, Lisa Scott-Lee, Lee Latchford Evans, Faye Tozer and Ian Watkins don't come into it. They're something else entirely. And this is where it gets complicated.

(If you want or require proper background on the band, please see the appendices).

To understand the phenomena of Steps, we return to their compilation video, a veritable postmodern goldmine. The cover boldly states, "Exclusive interviews, action, laughs, and lots of music". Note the pre-eminence of "action" (what is this?) over music. It's as if they mean "oh, and there's some music too shoved on at the end". Are Steps then not primarily about music? Is this a trait of a postmodern band? In my opinion, no and yes respectively.

It is the ultimate evocation of style over substance; Steps are a popular music band with the emphasis too heavily on popular and not enough on music. The average day in the 'Steps office' would seem to consist of seven hours fifty minutes of marketing, publicity, hairdressing and clothes-arranging, followed by ten minutes of writing music (perhaps with the ambient subliminal inspiration of ABBA playing in background).

***“And there's just no point in looking back,
and finding fault in everything we ever had”***

The video opens with the five faces of the members, only slightly less scary than the similarly-structured "Trainspotting"



line-up, after which the gang come flying in on a huge inflatable couch; computer-generated flowers, love hearts and lips girating in the background (pre-empting the incredulity of this, I have supplied clips).

Chubby-cheeked Welsh temptress Lisa wails "Wooh! Welcome to the show!" to which Lee adds "Well hello everyone and thank you for watching". What exactly was this production pretending to be? What "show"? "Thank you for watching"? Faye, the tall giggly sort, says "We've got over an hour to entertain you and boy have we got some excitement in store for you", and Lee enthuses, "All that and our first five video clips too" - as if "whoopee"; music on the video as an added bonus ... whatever next.

When it descended into banal biscuit-related banter, I had to take a breather. This video had an identity crisis typical of not just the band which bore it but the whole genre in which it was created. It was clearly designed for a young audience, but this was ridiculous. The whole 'show' was spread over countless genres, trying to be a kind of Saturday-morning kids show but with the added bonus that you could, as Lee raves, "rewind it back to the beginning and watch it again!" (the wonders of technology)

What follows is a curious blend of clearly-scripted and falsely-natural "fun" (Faye 'ad-libs' "remember Lee I told you this earlier", as Lee checks his clipboard for an answer), mixed with behind-the-scenes stuff and pop videos, with each of the band highlighting their 'different personalities' by hosting a segment of their own; H (who trained as a circus performer) juggles and tightrope-walks, Faye shows you how to put on make-up (?), Lee does some training in the gym, Lisa teaches you dance steps (at last some relevance) and Claire cooks her favourite dish, Pasta a la Clara.

Throughout, they go to great lengths to emphasize their normality and their individuality, when the sad postmodern truth is that they have none, at least not as part of Steps. They are merely trying to appeal to a have-a-go audience who want to believe that in the same way as they can learn Steps' "easy to learn" dances, they can



also replicate Steps' success. This is a lifestyle they hint could happen to you if you want it - not if you work at it or deserve it, just if you want it. When they say "recording our debut album was a lot of fun" they mean "you should try it". And, you guessed it, they all have wonderful supportive families (who they even wave to).

They like their naive young fans to believe that it was all down to "fate" (Lisa actually says "it's all fate"), because that meta-narrative explains it all. If only this were the case. No grand narrative can explain Steps, their success is surely as much of a surprise to them as anyone else. Pete Waterman only intended them to release one line-dancing single then fade away.

In truth, and allow me to leave the text for a moment to theorise, Steps succeeded and continue to succeed because they are in fact nothing at all. It is a trait of postmodern things that the reader deconstructs and constructs his or her own text. This has never been more applicable than with Steps. I argue they have virtually no structured set of meanings; everything about them is constructed by the audience, and they are so popular because each reader constructs a different, idealised version of them. Their very nature invites the fan to 'build their own band'.

The recipe for Pasta a la Clara takes on new meaning.

Shortly, I'll exemplify this with a look at the startling symbolic emptiness of their pop videos, but first we should at just what Steps were aiming to do with their first album, whose musical content ranged from ballads to covers to songs with distinctly adult undertones. It is my contention that with their initial set of releases, Steps were 'pitching' for an audience. They threw a diverse collection of 'something for everyone' tracks and waited to see who pricked up their ears. Maybe it would be students, kids, a gay following (the latter they surely set out for with their male members). As it turned out, their response was equally diverse, but Steps seem to be constantly reinventing themselves in line with what they think their majority audience is now.



*“One look at you and at once I knew,
that no matter whatever, I’ll never say never again”*

I could textually analyse their pop videos for symbolic imagery, and I'm sure I could find some, but - as in the case of their song lyrics - I genuinely don't think there is any. The impression is given that no-one really spends too much time thinking about them, and whilst I'm sure there is an argument for saying that they are replete with signifiers, I just don't think so (that said, I did start to analyse them, and found plenty to speculate about, but not enough to indicate any reasonable degree of deliberateness).

When you look at the videos, a few things strike immediately. They appear arbitrary; they were mostly filmed in oddly far-flung locations (Cuba for LTOMM, North Italy for OFS - why? England has grass too). This can perhaps be seen as a symptom of the confusion over space so associated with postmodernism. They also seem to be centrally concerned with one colour scheme per video (LTOMM - blue, OFS, yellow/white, 5678 - yellow, orange); and they all end in a party.

However, most noticeable is the way they bear no resemblance to anything in the lyrics; there is a complete divorce of image and language. They mouth the words while doing other things - riding bicycles, playing with bananas, folding scarves, stacking logs, sifting hay (the latter as if to find the meaning of it all somewhere therein).

Take Heartbeat as an example; the band get kidnapped by dwarves. What is this? My conclusion is that the 'snow' is in fact something else, perhaps some kind of hallucinogen. Lee himself described that video as "It's Lee from Steps meets James Bond trying to be the Milk Tray man" (other band perceptions were of Emma Pell and Sonic the Hedgehog). The meaning in this video is either non-existent or unrecognisable behind all the nonsense. Put this with the other videos and we have a good example of the



postmodern trait of everything being subjected to jokes and fun (even marriage in Tragedy).

And the new video "Say You'll Be Mine", again, has nothing to do with the subject matter. Instead it relies on intertextuality, and to add further complications, it's not just intertextual within its own genre, but instead is a music video featuring intertextual parodies of cinema scenes which themselves transcend all notions of generic boundary. As for the lyrics, they have absolutely no context.

For the more imaginative reader, check out the notable (if probably accidental) gay and lesbian iconography (Faye and Claire in each others' arms singing in OFS, the use of Claire on the lonely swing immediately after; or in Tragedy, the scene of Lee in his boxer shorts waking up H because they're late - are they supposed to be living together or what?)

***"I know you don't believe it,
but I really didn't mean it, when I said goodbye"***

Moving to the songs themselves. It is a common fact that you can sing "One For Sorrow" along to ABBA's "Winner Takes It All"; in a more diluted way, "Eternal Flame" by the Bangles goes along to Steps' "I Think It's Love" and parts of Boyzone's cover of "Love Me For a Reason" in the musical structure of "I Surrender". All this, and the melody for ABBA's "Mamma Mia" is present in "Back For Good". There is nothing particularly original in Steps' music, but is there really such a thing? It could be argued however, that they do blend their dance music style into their plagiarised versions rather nicely. Do they create a "novel fusion" - that is a matter of opinion.

Their lyrics, as you should have gauged from the section headings, are gibberish, often not even grammatical gibberish; as if they have been compiled from some kind of ready reckoner. For a humorous take on the Steps lyric phenomena, see the Appendix.

One thing that distinguishes Steps from bands like B*Witched is their general lack of pretensions; look at the B*Witched video on



the tape - it is clearly trying to be something it isn't. Steps pretend to be nothing.

In a similarly self-reflexive way (self-reflexivity is a big component of Steps), they participate in shows like *Abbomania*, although they have a 'mania' of their own now; covering the songs on other days of the week, they openly plagiarise.

Taking the postmodern aspects to another level, Steps themselves are parodied and paid tribute to. See the footage of Lucas and Walliams and of tribute band *Stairs*. A tribute band to what is ultimately already an ABBA tribute band - now that's postmodern.

Finally, and briefly because the appendices speak for themselves, Steps - in another typically postmodern way - have established a strong presence on the internet, where time, space and identity are all confused. Androgenous 'citizens of the globe' host whole websites dedicated to their favourite one, but as the *B*Witched* example shows, the internet can be a forum for pessimism too.

“And if I let you hold me, will I ever survive oh oh”

To conclude then, whilst we cannot take Steps too seriously on any front, a number of key elements identify them as postmodern, including a lack of innovation, a bridging of generic boundaries across different media, more style than substance, and a dissolution of meaning.

One final point, now that we have looked at their music, lyrics and videos, is that neither of these three mean anything. The words, the music and the images are all recycled. They all mean nothing, and that appears to be all they were intended to mean. Steps represent a stubborn loathing of sense, a phobia of cohesion, which - I imagine - is a symptom recurrent across the spectrum of pop music. From the gibberish of their lyrics to the de-ja vu of their melodies, Steps' products have been stripped of their meaning and



left without a context.

The only context left is that of postmodernism.