

The Universal Poetry and the Work-Net of Bob Dylan's Oeuvre: With Special Regards to Dylan's *The Brazil Series*

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Abstract The article suggests that the German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel's concept of "universal poetry" provides an interesting approach to Dylan's songs and artwork. In a famous fragment from 1798, Schlegel asserts that universal poetry unites the forms of art, philosophy and thought with the beautiful sigh and kiss that the creative child "exhales in its artless song." It is hard to claim that Dylan's voice has ever sounded like a child exhaling its artless song, but nevertheless Schlegel's concept opens the way for new approaches to his oeuvre, and it can be combined with the sociologist Bruno Latour's concept of the actors' work-net of social phenomena. Dylan's artwork can be described both as universal poetry in the sense of Schlegel and as a Dylan-work-net with numerous actors in the sense of Bruno Latour. The Copenhagen exhibition of *The Brazil Series* (2010) clarifies the relevance of Schlegel and Latour's concepts to the discussion of the relations of artforms in Dylan's work.

Key words Bob Dylan; poetry; actor network theory

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Introduction

Bob Dylan is a songwriter, musician, poet, film director, actor, performer, painter and sculptor. His artistic oeuvre includes several genres, and it seems difficult for art critics to understand and appreciate the diversity of his extensive oeuvre. Bob Dylan himself has not made the discussion easier by his statements on his art and his songs. He once called himself a “song and dance man” and characterized himself as a poet, but when he was awarded with the Nobel Prize of Literature, he said that he had never asked himself if his songs were literature. “But, like Shakespeare, I too am often occupied with the pursuit of my creative endeavours and dealing with all aspects of life’s mundane matters. “Who are the best musicians for these songs?” “Am I recording in the right studio?” “Is this song in the right key?” Some things never change, even in 400 years. Not once have I ever had the time to ask myself, “Are my songs literature?” So, I do thank the Swedish Academy, both for taking the time to consider that very question, and ultimately, for providing such a wonderful answer” (Dylan 2016). Dylan is not interested in art categories and genres; he is occupied with practical possibilities that are needed to carry out his artistic ideas and bring his creativity to life. But many scholars prefer a specialization and division of art forms and genres and do not appreciate multi-mediality of contemporary art and literature, although the change of art and literature started a long time ago in 1960ies, when Dylan was a very young man. It seems difficult to some critics to accept Dylan as both a painter, a song writer and a poet. This discussion has been going on for years, and it reappeared in 2010, when Dylan exhibited his paintings in Copenhagen at the The National Gallery. When you read the various discussions of Dylan’s *The Brazil Series*, it is evident that the critique is not equal to its object. It obviously lacks concepts and approaches that can promote an insight into Dylan’s art in its multifaceted use of expressions and genres. I will argue that we can find concepts and approaches to Dylan’s work of art by the ideas of the German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel, who lived in the 18th and 19th century, and by one of today’s controversial thinkers, the French sociologist Bruno Latour.

The Brazil Series

“If I had been able to express the same things in a song, I had written a song instead,” Bob Dylan said about his paintings in connection with the exhibition, *The Brazil Series*, which he created for The National Gallery in Copenhagen in 2008-2010. It is a series of approximately 50 works, of which 40 Paintings and eight drawings were shown at The National Gallery, Copenhagen. Since then, *The Brazil*

Series has been shown by the English Castle Galleries and the Brazil paintings have also been the basis of a series of hand-signed, limited-edition prints. When the board of The National Gallery first contacted Bob Dylan about an exhibition, the curators had no idea that Dylan would embark on a whole new series. The board had seen a catalogue based on Dylan's Drawn Blank Series, which had been shown in Chemnitz in 2007. At this exhibition Dylan first revealed the results of many years of work in drawing and painting on a large scale. Based on the Chemnitz exhibition, the Danish museum hoped that Dylan would exhibit some work from his long production. However, the approach by the National Gallery led Dylan to embark on a whole new series of paintings from Brazil. These were not painted on a journey; they were created in his studio on the basis of sketches from his previous visits to Brazil.

The curator of the exhibition, Kasper Monrad (1952-2018), who was a specialist in Danish Golden Age painting, was of course asked if the highly respected museum would have exhibited the paintings if they were not painted by Bob Dylan: "Some said to us: 'Is it just because it is Bob Dylan's that you show these paintings.'" I would answer them: "Are you more critical, just because these are Bob Dylan's paintings" (Monrad 9).

Art critics' reactions to Bob Dylan's exhibition were an example of how modern art criticism, despite all the experiments and avant-garde border crossings of contemporary art and the changes of the modern art institution, is still based on the idea of a specialization of artforms. The reception of the Dylan exhibition was largely negative — the paintings were called "Sunday painting" and worse. But the negative predicates were often connected with the concept of the excellent singer. Dylan is an excellent singer and songwriter, and therefore he must stay out of visual art. The reception showed that the criticism works with a norm of specialisation — there is a determined field where an artist can be sovereign. The idea that you can work with several art forms or genres at the same time is taken as almost insulting. Some of the critics mention that certain artists succeed in a side-door practice next to their main area. But in principle, an artist must stick to his arena. As one of the critics said, Bob Dylan is one of the music's Picassos:

But now he exhibits at The National Gallery. He doesn't do this because his pictures are good. He does this because he is Bob Dylan. If the person behind the paintings was not called Bob Dylan, he would of course never have been invited. (Weirup 1)

Meanwhile, the idea of the work of art as a source of understanding of the artist's personality was invoked. Film director Christian Braad Thomsen claimed that the paintings could be interpreted as Bob Dylan's personal therapy or a kind of self-revocation: "For an artist who uses himself as a raw material, the paintings become an opportunity to escape the constant preoccupation of himself or herself. A kind of self-revocation" (Henriksen 8). Another art critic, Michael Jeppesen, claimed that Dylan had become his own white cube, ie. his own modern art institution, a modernist art museum, a temple where it is not works of art, but experiences or adventures that are in focus. According to Jeppesen, visitors met the myth Bob Dylan, but in such a way that they found that when Dylan plays "painter," he shows himself as a human being; he exposes himself. He steps outside his own mythology. According to Jeppesen, visitors found that Dylan was inspired, but that the paintings were boring (Jeppesen 4).

When you read the various discussions of Dylan's *The Brazil Series*, it is evident that the critique is not equal to its object. But we need to find new concepts and approaches to Dylan's work of art and we can be inspired by the ideas of the German philosopher Friedrich Schlegel, who lived in the 18th and 19th century, and by one of today's controversial thinkers, the French sociologist Bruno Latour.

The Universal Poetry

Friedrich Schlegel's concept of "universal poetry" provides an interesting approach to Dylan's songs and artwork. Schlegel's criticism and thinking were attempts to formulate a cross-cutting alternative to Classicism's fixed and established concepts, where poetry, art and philosophy were kept separate as different genres. In a famous fragment from 1798, Schlegel emphasized that universal poetry unites the forms of art, philosophy and thought with the beautiful sigh and kiss that the creative child "exhales in its artless song." In the fragment, Schlegel only once uses the concept "poet," and, it should be noted, does so only in order to assert this figure's freedom: The "poet" is not be subject to any law, Schlegel says. It is hard to claim that Dylan's voice has ever sounded like a child that exhales its artless song, but never the less Schlegel's concept opens for new approached to his oeuvre. Schlegel described the idea of the universal poetry in this way:

"Romantic poetry is a progressive universal poetry. Its destiny is not merely to reunite all of the different genres and to put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. Romantic poetry wants to and should combine and fuse poetry and prose, genius and criticism, art poetry and nature poetry. It should make poetry

lively and sociable and make life and society poetic. It should poeticize wit and fill all of art's forms with sound material of every kind to form the human soul, to animate it with flights of humor. Romantic poetry embraces everything that is purely poetic, from the greatest art systems, which contain within them still more systems, all the way down to the sigh, the kiss that a poeticizing child breathes out in an artless song. [...] The Romantic form of poetry is still in the process of becoming. Indeed, that is its true essence, that it is always in the process of becoming and can never be completed." (Schlegel 62)

Schlegel's concept of universal poetry is relevant to Dylan's career because Dylan works with different genres and forms of artistic expression and makes art a process of continuous genesis — he breaks out of the modern art institution's isolation of the experience-potential of the different genres. His artistic career has been a journey through a series of art circles and artistic traditions, which he has both used and enriched in his own creative process. He has worked with folk music, literary avant-gardism, gospel music, American pop, Shakespeare's drama, Chaplin's films, Brecht's theater, the poetry of Antiquity, and much more. It can be argued that his poetry, with the many citations and references, is rugged, and when you compare his paintings and his songs he, as he himself emphasizes, does not illustrate his songs. The paintings are an artistic expression of their own. From the planning phase of the Danish exhibition Dylan underlined that he did not want his songs to be played or his albums to be shown in the rooms where the paintings were exhibited. But at the same time, it is obvious that the different artforms are connected by moods and themes. Some argue that what links Dylan's paintings and his songs is the narrative character of his work — stories are narrated in both songs and pictures. According to Monrad, for instance, it is narration that forms the connection (Dylan, *The Brazil Series* 173). The leading American art critic, John Elderfield, a specialist in Henri Matisse, emphasizes that Dylan's paintings work with the human imagination, which is grounded in a strong sense of reality. Using the imagination, the artist focuses on reality, even while reality is absent from the painting. The painting is a painting. In order to express this fact, the paintings are shattered via fragmented references to time and place. Paradoxically, this fragmentation creates a sense of presence, of reality and of a time track. The two different forms of expression, paintings and songs, are connected to each other in an artistic awareness of the absence of reality, and by an expressionist impulse.

In a more direct and simple argument one can also claim that Dylan's work in different genres is linked by recurring themes of art, love, modernity and

melancholy. Several of the paintings have motifs of art and artistic creation, which find parallels in Dylan's songs from "Visions of Johanna" (1966) to "Roll on John" (1967). Melancholy is also an important theme. It is a basic mood in Dylan's entire work, and often relates to thresholds between night and day, between before and after, and between indoors and outdoors. The melancholy of Dylan is not a passive or purely depressive mood. It often springs from love sorrows, but it is a creative melancholy that sharpens the language and sensibility of the artist. The song "Standing in the Doorway" from *Time Out of Mind* (1997) describes the artist at the threshold between the outside and inside: here he has been left by the beloved, weeping, and he cannot take his next step into a new life. He is mentally bound to the doorstep and he cannot get away from this place. Stanza 2 says:

"The light in this place is so bad
 Making me sick in the head
 All the laughter is just makin' me sad
 The stars have turned cherry red
 I'm strummin' on my gay guitar
 Smoking a cheap cigar
 The ghost of our old love has not gone away
 Don't look it like it will anytime soon
 You left me standing in the doorway crying
 Under the midnight moon" (Dylan, *The Lyrics* 561)

In *The Brazil Series* we find the painting, "Chrysanthemums," which pictures a creative, sensitive melancholy. In the painting we see an open window: a threshold between inside and outside. The human character is introverted, holding a sheet of paper with letters or signs in his hands — he looks away from both the open window and the colorful flowers, and is wrapped in brown and gray colors. But both the red colors and the lush greenness are nevertheless linked to the man, and the painting becomes a portrait not only not of a human figure, but of a form of creative melancholy as a state of mind. With Schlegel's concept of universal poetry as an artistic impulse or power that moves through art forms and unites them, we have a conceptual framework that enables us to follow the travels of the themes through Dylan's paintings, songs, performances and films.

Actors' Work-Net

In addition, we can advantageously combine Schlegel's concept of a universal

poetry with French sociologist Bruno Latour's concept of the actors' work-net of social phenomena.

Bruno Latour, who belongs to Dylan's own generation, is one of the present-day's most significant thinkers. His ideas on a renewal of sociology have gained importance in other disciplines, including art, music and literature. Latour's idea that social phenomena arise in a complex network or work-net, where both people and nonhuman agents influence each other, opens new approaches to the study of literature, art and music. In *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (2005), Latour discusses how the concept of work-net originates from the Actor-Network method, an approach to social theory that describes both things and human beings as actors in networks, which are always engaged in processes of change and transference.

“With Actor-Network you may describe something that doesn't at all look like a network — an individual state of mind, a piece of machinery, a fictional character; conversely, you may describe a network subways, sewages, telephones — which is not all drawn in an ‘Actor-Networky’ way. You are simply confusing the object with the method. ANT is a method, and mostly a negative one at that; it says nothing about the shape of what is being described with it. [...] Really, we should say ‘worknet’ instead of ‘network’. It's the work and the movement, and the flow, and the changes that should be stressed.” (Latour 142-143)

Latour is interested in empirical studies and descriptions and seeks to avoid closely-knit theoretical constructions in the study of actors and networks; he prefers a radical empiricism — and the Dylan's oeuvre seems perfectly designed for such an empiricism. Using Latour's method Dylan's whole oeuvre can be understood a mobile, rather than a fixed, limited outer object of study that the public and the critics stand outside of or opposite to. With Latour in mind, it becomes possible to see how the art works of Dylan are formed in an exchange, and interwoven with other genres, and how it becomes a collaboration or a concern that circulates among fans, critics, artists and the originator himself.

Dylan's art works can be thought of as actors — things that collaborate in action — and this brings the mode of the interactions into focus as a question. “Actor-network-theory,” according to Latour, is not really a theory, but rather a method of describing phenomena. Latour's discussions of actors, things and concerns provide an inclusive and dynamic way of thinking about Dylan's work.

Just as one can understand the words as actors in the songs' network of meanings, and the songs as actors in the network of Dylan's art work, one can also describe Dylan the artist as a network with several actors that create and fuel the Dylan phenomenon with their contributions.

Iron and Steel

Let me use an example to illustrate this Actor-network approach to Dylan art works. One element often referred to and used in Dylan's songs and paintings is iron or steel. If we with Latour regard iron an actor in the Dylan network, we can notice that iron is present in Dylan's texts on his childhood world: Dylan comes from Duluth and Hibbing, which were centers of American iron mining in the 20th century. In Dylan's memoirs *Chronicles* (2004) Hibbing and Duluth form a kind of substructure in the narrative, like small pieces of taconite that the artist keeps with him. Towards the end of the chapter on his childhood, Dylan describes how as a young, frail, asthmatic boy, he felt the hooting of the iron ships down in Duluth harbour enter his body. The sound gave him a fearful feeling that there was something out there that could swallow him: a kind of an iron monster:

“Duluth, even though it's thousand miles from the nearest ocean, was an international seaport. Ships from South America, Asia and Europe came and went all the time, and the heavy rumble of the foghorns dragged you out of your senses by your neck. Even though you couldn't see the ships through, you knew they were there by the heavy outburst of thunder that blasted like Beethoven's Fifth — two low notes, the first one long and deep like a bassoon. Foghorns sounded like great announcements. The big boats came and went; iron monsters from the deep — ships to wipe out all spectacles” (Dylan, *Chronicles* 273-274).

Iron becomes a chemical element Dylan's art, where iron and steel are also attached to modern machines, railways and bridges and a fundamental experience is freedom. Iron and steel are also agents for expressing both a personal strength and a fear of stiffness, as expressed in the song “Never say Goodbye” (1974)

“My dreams are made of iron and steel
With a big bouquet
Of roses hanging down
From the heavens to the ground” (Dylan, *Chronicles* 325)

Iron and steel are also important actors in Dylan's paintings, and of course in his new wrought iron works of gates. In *The Brazil Series* we see iron and steel in motifs with weapons, knives, utensils and bridges. However, most expressively, iron acts in a large painting of a nude female figure that lifts an iron sword over her head. The title of the painting is "The Bamboo Road." The woman seems strong and confident and smiles as she prepares to chop her way through the bamboo. In conversations with Monrad on *The Brazil Series* Dylan explained his women characters, "Women are powerful figures, and I paint them that way" (Dylan, *The Brazil Series* 187). The Iron sword becomes an actor in this strength, but it is also evident that the iron actor plays an ambiguous role. The iron actor carries both mental strength and fear with it and expresses both the possibilities and the shady sides of modernity.

Iron and steel are the protagonists of the fundamental, productive opposites of Dylan's artwork. In his newest wrought iron works we find both fairytale constructions, critiques of modernity and mythical images.

Dylan's sculptures incorporate found objects including farm equipment, children's toys, wheels, axes, cogs, industrial waste and even antique firearms. These actors revitalize the iron waste of modernity.

Conclusion

Dylan's artwork is a universal poetry in the sense of Schlegel, with themes that move in and out of artforms, carried by a fundamental artistic ambition and the expressive power of progress. But his artwork is also a work-net with numerous actors in the sense of Bruno Latour. Using Schlegel, we can highlight thematic contexts, the original use of genres and the unifying and never-ending freedom-seeking tendency in Dylan's work. With Latour we can follow the actors and their branching in Dylan's art and the work's interaction with uncountable other artistic and cultural actors. Both conceptual frameworks thus bring us closer to an understanding of Dylan's epoch-making oeuvre and its many genres.

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