"Silence and hoarseness": Symbolic poetics and linguistic structures in the music of Bob Dylan and Trịnh Công Sơn – an interdisciplinary approach

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Abstract: This study offers a comparative analysis of the lyrical aesthetics of Bob Dylan and Trịnh Công Sơn—two iconic songwriter-poets shaped by distinct cultural and historical milieus. The primary aim is to explore how both artists construct symbolic meaning through language, moving beyond conventional communicative functions to evoke deeper emotional, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions. Methodologically, the research adopts an interdisciplinary framework that integrates semiotics, poetics, and linguistic aesthetics. Through close reading and symbolic analysis, the study examines the role of metaphor, binary oppositions, rhythm, and intertextuality in shaping each artist's lyrical world. Findings indicate that despite their divergent aesthetic orientations—Dylan articulating protest through fractured, disruptive language, and Trịnh evoking transcendence through restraint and meditative stillness—both artists reimagine language as a vessel of emotional embodiment and ethical resonance in art. Ultimately, the study positions song lyrics as multilayered cultural texts and proposes a model for cross-cultural poetics within the evolving discourse of interdisciplinary humanistic inquiry.

Keywords: Bob Dylan, Linguistic aesthetics, Lyrical dualism, Poetics, Semiotics, Trịnh Công Sơn.

1. Introduction

"There are words born to scream. And there are words born to dissolve into silence."

If Bob Dylan is the hoarse cry echoing through the storms of his era, then Trinh [1] is the delicate wisp of smoke dissolving into a rainy afternoon—where silence speaks more profoundly than language. Though their musical worlds may appear distant—one compressed by historical gravity, the other expanded into metaphysical openness—they reflect one another like opposing poles of a shared artistic journey: a journey of symbols, poetics, and language steeped in soul.

Dylan [2] and Trinh [1] two songwriter-poets from opposite hemispheres, converge at an invisible threshold where language ceases to function merely as a vehicle of expression and becomes a sign of emotion—both the "body" and "soul" of art. While Dylan wields lyrics as an artistic weapon to confront history, war, and the pursuit of freedom, Trịnh uses language as meditative breath—attuned to impermanence, vulnerability, and the quiet beauty of disappearance [1].

Within this opposition—between Dylan's rasp and Trịnh's stillness—emerges a profound aesthetic duality: motion and stillness. Stillness, like a lake mirroring the sky; motion, like a river crashing into stone. Trịnh embodies stillness; Dylan, movement. Yet stillness is not absolute silence, nor is movement mere turbulence. Between these two poles lies a dynamic space of convergence, resonance, and transformation—opening a rich and nuanced field of analysis, where art may be approached as a multilayered semiotic system: at once poetic, linguistic, and symbolic [3].

This study explores the symbolic, linguistic, and emotional dimensions of Dylan [2] and Trinh [1] lyrics through three primary theoretical lenses:

Semiotics: Analyzing lyrical imagery, symbols, and textual structure as a cultural and aesthetic system of communication [4].

Poetics: Examining the artistic form of lyrics, including syntax, rhythm, style, and voice [5].

Linguistic Aesthetics: Investigating how emotion is structured and conveyed through syntax and affective semantics in lyric language [6].

What distinguishes this research is its refusal to separate music from poetry or to reduce lyrics to a purely linguistic artifact. Instead, Dylan and Trịnh are treated as aesthetic systems of thought, articulated through language—where lyrics become a "sacred body" through which their artistic worldviews are revealed [7].

It should also be noted that, within the scope of this study, specific socio-cultural and political contexts are intentionally bracketed in order to focus on the semiotic, poetic, and aesthetic dimensions of lyrical language. At this level of analysis, Dylan and Trịnh—despite their geographic, linguistic, and historical differences—can be understood as a complementary binary, in which hoarseness and silence do not negate one another, but mirror and enrich each other within a shared symbolic space [8], [12].

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Semiotics: Song Lyrics as Symbolic Space

Building upon the foundational theory of Ferdinand de Saussure, modern semiotics conceptualizes language as a structured system comprising the signifier and the signified. The arbitrariness inherent in the relationship between these two components enables multilayered interpretation—a particularly salient feature in song lyrics, where language does not merely convey meaning but also generates symbolic resonance [4].

Roland Barthes advanced this concept through his theory of myth as a "second-order semiological system," in which everyday language is re-coded into ideological structures. As Barthes argues, "Myth hides nothing: its function is to distort, not to make disappear," underscoring that the role of the sign is not to conceal but to transform meaning through deliberate distortion [8].

Within this symbolic framework, words such as "wind," "dust," "river," or "moonlight" in Trịnh Công Sơn's music, and "bullet," "mirror," or "dark sky" in Bob Dylan's lyrics, transcend physical reference. Dylan's phrase "A hard rain's a-gonna fall" does not depict meteorological conditions—it prophesies violence. Similarly, Trịnh's line "Hạt bụi nào hoá kiếp thân tôi" is not only a Buddhist allusion to the cycle of rebirth but also a poetic semioticization of impermanence.

Lotman [3] posits that culture is a semiotic space in which "the text becomes the generator of new meanings" [3]. In this light, the lyrics of Dylan and Trịnh function as semiotic nodes where memory, history, and spirituality are re-encoded—forming intersections between the real and the symbolic. Notably, both artists frequently deploy imagery of movement: roads, wind, travelers, darkness, and light—signs evoking both origin and dissolution.

Greimas [9] introduced the semiotic square to illustrate how meaning emerges through binary oppositions and complementary contrasts [9]. In Dylan's work, such oppositions are pronounced: light and dark, war and peace, silence and outcry. In Trịnh's oeuvre, these binaries assume a metaphysical and contemplative tone: impermanence and finitude, being and void, love and release. Through movement across these oppositional axes, their lyrics construct a symbolic universe wherein meaning unfolds and language becomes a multidimensional field of resonance.

Recent contributions by Assoc. Prof. Dr. Hoa [10] have further expanded the application of semiotics in Vietnamese literary analysis. In his monograph *Reading Literature as a Journey of Linguistic Reconstruction*, La examines visual and auditory signifiers—such as color, form, and sound—to reconstruct the submerged artistic language of literary texts. He frames this as a "journey of linguistic reconstruction," aiming to recover the primal language embedded in literary artifacts [10].

Additionally, intersemiotic translation in Asian cinema adapted from the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky has received scholarly attention. In her dissertation at Vietnam National University,

researcher Tuan [11] identifies the nature of intersemiotic translation and proposes a structural model for its application in Asian film adaptations of Dostoevsky's texts. Her work contributes significantly to both pedagogical and theoretical frameworks in the field of adapted cinema and semiotic transfer [11].

Collectively, these studies reflect the growing significance and interdisciplinary reach of semiotics as a critical tool in understanding artistic language across literature, music, and film.

2.2. Poetics: Form as a Second Layer of Meaning

Jakobson [5] defined the poetic function as the moment when "the message focuses on the message for its own sake" [5]—when form itself becomes meaning. Dylan frequently disrupts conventional meter through enjambment and inverted syntax, producing perceptual dissonance and aesthetic tension. Trịnh, by contrast, employs gentle rhythms, soft internal rhyme, and loose cadences to create music that "can be heard with the heart."

Shklovsky [12] emphasized the aesthetic value of *defamiliarization*, writing that "art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important" [12]. Dylan defamiliarizes through elliptical imagery and fragmented structure, as in: "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows" (*Subterranean Homesick Blues*)—a dislocated line layered with political doubt, freedom, and irony. Trịnh defamiliarizes through minimalism: "Tôi là ai mà yêu quá đời này" (Who am I to love this life so deeply?) is not merely an existential question, but a subtle rupture in the continuity of self-awareness.

Bakhtin [13] emphasized the dialogic nature of language, noting that "the word in language is half someone else's" [13]. Dylan's lyrics engage in constant dialogue—with American history, biblical motifs, politics, and protest. Trịnh's words resonate with suffering, classical Vietnamese poetry, and Eastern philosophy. Neither speaks alone—their voices echo across traditions and generations.

Genette [14] theory of *transtextuality* holds that every text exists in relation to others [14]. Trịnh drew poetic imagery from Bùi Giáng and Phạm Thiên Thư; Dylan referenced Rimbaud, Shakespeare, and American gospel. His line "The ghost of electricity howls in the bones of her face" (*Visions of Johanna*) is haunted by Rimbaud's surrealism and Eliot's spectral modernity. Text, in this sense, is a palimpsest of echoes and memory.

2.3. Linguistic Aesthetics and Poetic Cognition: Language as Emotional Presence

In *Real Presences*, George Steiner writes, "Where God is not, there is no word" [6]. For Steiner, artistic language embodies the sacred—the unsayable that nonetheless demands articulation. In the lyrics of Dylan [2] and Trinh [1] language does not strive to assert absolute truth but instead seeks to expose the interior fractures of the human condition. This notion aligns with Steiner's broader claim that authentic artistic expression is predicated on a metaphysical presence, whereby language becomes meaningful only when grounded in the transcendent [6].

Iser [15] characterizes these interpretive openings as "blanks," which prompt the reader to "fill in" meaning through personal emotion and experiential knowledge [15]. In Dylan's work, such blanks are evident in lines like: "And the ladder of law has no top and no bottom," a statement that evokes a conceptual void and challenges traditional perceptions of justice. Trịnh conveys similar gaps through poetic suspension, as in: "Chiều nay em ra phố về, thấy đời mình là những chuyến xe…" ("This afternoon you came back from the city, and saw your life as a series of passing vehicles…") —a fragment that opens an inner landscape for contemplation. Recent studies reaffirm Iser's view by emphasizing how reader-text interaction constitutes a co-creative space where interpretation evolves dynamically [16].

Quoc [7] compares Trinh [1] to "a man who breathes soul into syllables," asserting that his lyrics "do not chase meaning, but flow with feeling" [7]. In this context, language is no longer a passive vessel for transmission but a resonant current of affect. As Steiner similarly observes, "The poem is not a statement but a gesture" [6].

3. Research Methodology and Data

3.1. Methodological Framework

This study employs a qualitative analytical approach, incorporating three theoretical perspectives: conceptual metaphor theory, semiotics, and literary aesthetics. These interdisciplinary approaches are utilized to examine how the lyrics of Dylan [2] and Trinh [1] construct a dualistic cognitive framework, wherein language, imagery, symbolism, and musical resonance function as epistemological structures rather than mere communicative tools [17, 18].

Instead of analyzing each song in isolation, the study applies a comparative symbolic framework along a dynamic–static axis, emphasizing how lyrical language reflects fundamental human conditions such as existence, suffering, belief, and transcendence [19]. The methodological process follows a micro-to-macro trajectory—examining lexical choice, sentence structure, symbolic imagery, semantic fields, stream of consciousness, and overarching conceptual structures [3].

3.2. Research Data

The dataset consists of 24 selected songs, with equal representation from both artists. For Bob Dylan, representative songs include *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall, Blowin' in the Wind, Mr. Tambourine Man, Chimes of Freedom, Not Dark Yet,* and *It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)* [20]. These works illustrate Dylan's artistic transition from socio-political protest to existential introspection.

For Trịnh Công Sơn, selected works include *Diễm xưa, Biển nhớ, Một cõi đi về, Tình xa, Ca dao mẹ,* and *Để gió cuốn đi,* which demonstrate his creative shift from anti-war music to a poetics shaped by existential and meditative reflections [1].

In addition to song lyrics, the study incorporates supplementary materials such as autobiographical narratives, interviews, and essays written by both artists. These materials serve to enhance the symbolic and conceptual interpretation of their works. The selection of songs does not aim for comprehensiveness, but rather prioritizes texts with high symbolic density and clear articulation of value contrasts, including movement–stillness, fragmentation–coherence, life–death, and confinement–liberation [21].

4. Findings

4.1. Analysis of the Static–Dynamic Binary in the Music of Dylan and Trịnh

If each artist is understood as a symbolic system, then Dylan [2] and Trinh [1] may be envisioned as two artistic universes operating at opposing poles of a binary: dynamism and stillness. This contrast is not merely evident in rhythm or musical structure, but more fundamentally in how each artist perceives, interprets, and constructs the world through symbolic language [17, 18].

In Dylan, lyrical universe, symbols are in perpetual motion—restless, fragmented, and constantly colliding with history, political moments, and social institutions [20]. By contrast, Trịnh constructs his symbolic world through a contemplative and introspective aesthetic—deeply influenced by Zen philosophy—where the turbulence of the era is transmuted into interior meditation [1]. The "static–dynamic" binary thus functions not only as an aesthetic axis, but also as a fundamental mode of symbolic world-making, expressed through lexical choices, semantic architecture, and the poetic use of silence [3].

4.1.1. Movement and Dwelling: The Symbolic Spaces of Dylan and Trịnh

In Dylan, musical universe, symbolism is intrinsically linked to motion. Space is not a site of refuge, but a terrain of unrest, conflict, and displacement. Even images typically associated with spiritual or religious connotations—often implying sanctuary—are placed within a context of volatility. His 1962 song *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall* outlines a haunting symbolic landscape:

"I saw a newborn baby with wild wolves all around it / I saw a highway of diamonds with nobody on it"

(The Lyrics: 1961–2012, p. 62) [22]

These lines possess striking visual intensity. The "newborn baby" surrounded by "wild wolves" and the deserted "highway of diamonds" are not merely metaphors, but existential conditions. Every symbol in Dylan's poetics is uprooted from stability. His spatial imagination is open, exposed, and ever-shifting, where even the most intimate states are drawn into collective movement.

As Ricks observes,

"Dylan's poetics is not of resolution but of movement. His lyrics don't arrive, they travel" [23].

In contrast, Trinh [1] constructs his symbolic world as a mode of poetic dwelling. Spatiality in his lyrics is folded inward—not a directional path but a shaded veranda, not a highway but a *cõi về* (realm of return), shaped by memory and softened by lived experience. In *Mưa Hồng*, he writes:

"Em đi về cầu mưa ướt áo / đường phượng bay mù không lối vào"
(You return across the bridge, rain soaking your blouse / the path of flame trees blurs, with no entrance)

Trịnh's spatiality is slow and reflective—where time does not pass but lingers. Deprived of orientation, his symbols function as emotional sanctuaries—places for the soul to dwell. In *Một cõi đi về*, a non-linear, goal-less structure emerges:

"Đường chạy vòng quanh một vòng tiều tụy Một bờ cỏ non một bờ mộng mị ngày xưa"
(The path loops around a circle of fatigue / One bank of soft grass, one bank of dreamy yesterdays)

Here, the "path" leads nowhere—it is a psychological landscape, a contemplative journey inward. If Dylan allows his symbols to migrate, Trịnh offers them stillness and permanence through meditative tonality and Zen-inspired language.

From a semiotic perspective, Dylan constructs symbolic space by destabilizing spatial orientation: his symbols are displaced, mobile, and unsettled [17]. In contrast, Trịnh sacralizes space by condensing time and embedding symbols within stillness—where emotion condenses into aesthetic depth [8]. One evokes *movement*—unceasing, outward, kinetic; the other embodies *dwelling*—inward, reflective, and permanent. This binary does not negate but mirrors itself, enriching the symbolic systems of both artists.

4.1.2. Flow and Eternity: Time as a Symbolic Binary

If space is where symbols reside, then time is the axis along which symbols must either move or disintegrate. Between Dylan [2] and Trinh [1] this temporal axis is asynchronous—one characterized by the violent rhythm of the present, the other by the lingering resonance of eternity. The way each artist structures time in their lyrics is also how they define beauty, pain, and the meaning of life [17].

Bob Dylan is a poet of fragmented time. In songs like *Like a Rolling Stone* (1965), time does not flow linearly; it is pushed, pulled, and fractured—reflecting the discontinuity of the self in an age of uncertainty:

"You used to laugh about / Everybody that was hangin' out / Now you don't talk so loud / Now you don't seem so proud"
(The Lyrics: 1961–2012, p. 142) [22]

Time in Dylan's work is historical, unstable, and politically charged. It is not cyclical like natural time but functions as the volatile turbulence of society and identity. The lyrical subject does not live within time—they are swept along by it. In *Tangled Up in Blue* (1975), Dylan recounts a love story through nonlinear memory shifts:

"Then she opened up a book of poems / And handed it to me / Written by an Italian poet / From the thirteenth century"
(The Lyrics: 1961–2012, p. 363) [22]

This abrupt temporal leap—from the present to the thirteenth century—occurs without transition, resembling a cinematic cut. Time here is a narrative device that fragments sequence, creating instability consistent with Dylan's modernist aesthetic [23].

In contrast, Trịnh Công Sơn constructs an aesthetic of eternity. In his lyrics, time does not pass—it accumulates. It is not measured in seconds but in emotional density. Songs such as *Diễm Xưa* operate within a "soft time" framework—a temporality of the soul:

"Chiều nay còn mưa sao em không lại?"

"Ngày sau sỏi đá cũng cần có nhau"

(Why don't you come when the rain falls this afternoon? / Even stones and gravel will need each other one day) [1] Trịnh's time is poetic and metaphysical. It is not linear but cyclical, where what is past still persists, and what is present already feels distant. *Một cõi đi về* (A Realm of Going and Returning) epitomizes this logic, blending binaries such as life and death, departure and return, loss and recovery:

"Bao nhiêu năm rồi còn mãi ra đi,

Đi đâu loanh quanh cho đời mỏi mệt…"

(So many years have passed, still we keep on leaving— / Going around in circles until life grows weary…) [1]

Here, time does not move forward but inward—it loops, becoming a meditative structure of return. While Dylan's characters are pulled through historical time, Trịnh's exist within emotional time—space where memory and loss coexist.

From a linguistic perspective, Dylan frequently employs the simple present and past tenses, creating urgency and linearity. Trịnh, on the other hand, often uses continuous tenses or verbless constructions, which blur temporal boundaries:

"Em đi về cầu mưa ướt áo / Đường phượng bay mù không lối vào"

(You return across the bridge, rain soaking your blouse / The path of flame trees blurs, with no entrance) [1]

Time in Trịnh's lyrics is like smoke: ungraspable, uncontainable, experienced only through melody and language soft as a lullaby.

In summary, Dylan portrays time as a ruptured journey in which individuals must chase the currents of history. Trịnh, by contrast, renders time as an emotional field in which all memories and losses have a place to dwell. One embodies historical time—chaotic, contingent, and outward-facing; the other, spiritual time—cyclical, contemplative, and inward. This symbolic binary does not oppose but complements, revealing two distinct yet equally profound aesthetic worlds.

4.1.3. The Language of Fracture and the Language of Dissolution

In the artistic universes of Dylan [2] and Trinh [1] language is not merely a tool for communication, but a living substance—a gateway into layers of experience inaccessible through conventional rationality. Within a symbolic binary framework, Dylan's language is characterized by fracture—sharp, raw, paradoxical, and resistant. In contrast, Trịnh's lyrical language leans toward dissolution—gentle, absorptive, as though distilled from the breath of silence.

Dylan frequently allows language to clash with reality, letting it crack, rupture, and form fissures—through which political awareness, resistance, and personal anguish emerge. In *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall*, he writes:

"I saw a newborn baby with wild wolves all around it" [24]

This haunting image is both paradoxical and multilayered. It evokes the extreme anxiety of an era where life is besieged by death, while also embodying a fractured symbolic logic—where language breaks from ordinary coherence to express emotional violence. Dylan wields language like a blade—cutting through the surface of experience to reveal pain, urgency, and truth [23].

Conversely, Trịnh Công Sơn dissolves language into the emotional atmosphere of human existence. His lyrics blur distinctions and resist division. Words flow like mist or rain, permeating memory. In *Biển nhớ*, he writes:

"Ngày mai em đi, biển nhớ tên em gọi về."

(Tomorrow you leave, and the sea remembers your name, calling you back) Trinh [1].

This line does not merely praise beauty—it exemplifies linguistic softening, where subject and object merge, and the individual dissolves into the symbolic environment. Dissolution here is not absence, but a form of gentle presence—where existence is found in the intangible and ungraspable.

If Dylan lets language rupture and bleed, Trịnh lets it absorb, vanish, and dissolve into the eternity of silence. One is a scream; the other, a breath. One resonates with rebellion; the other, with meditative stillness. Yet both meet at the furthest edge of expression—where language ceases to be a medium and becomes the very substance of lived presence.

This symbolic polarity reveals a profound convergence:

"If time traces the path of symbols, then language is the deepest resting place of human emotion—where the personal becomes universal, where silent breath touches the depths of existence."

This thought serves as a bridge between two expressive realms: where Dylan cries out fragmented dreams, and Trịnh whispers voiceless truths into the wind. Whether fractured or dissolved, their languages embody extraordinary efforts to inscribe pain, beauty, and presence within the fragile condition of being human [17].

4.1.4. Action and Contemplation

If Bob Dylan is a songwriter of movement—of marching crowds, spilled blood, and ideological urgency—then Trinh [1] is the figure behind the window, quietly listening as time passes like the earth's sigh. The binary of action and contemplation is not simply a juxtaposition of opposites, but a reflection of how each artist approaches pain, beauty, and humanity. This duality defines their respective aesthetics: one swirls like a storm, the other rests like a suspended cloud.

Dylan embodies the voice of action. Songs such as *Blowin' in the Wind* and *The Times They Are A-Changin'* transcend musical boundaries and become rallying cries for an entire generation:

"How many roads must a man walk down / Before you call him a man?" [3]

This line is not simply rhetorical—it confronts the world, demanding a response. Action here is not limited to protest or resistance; it becomes a way of existing. Dylan's language pushes listeners beyond complacency and into confrontation with questions of morality, responsibility, and truth. He does not lull—he awakens [22].

In contrast, Trịnh Công Sơn embraces contemplation. Rather than calling people into the streets, he calls them inward, into their own inner being. In *Tôi ơi, đừng tuyệt vọng* (*Myself, Do Not Despair*), he pleads gently:

"Đừng tuyệt vọng, tôi ơi, đừng tuyệt vọng / Đừng tuyệt vọng, em ơi, đừng tuyệt vọng." *(Don't despair, myself, don't despair / Don't despair, my love, don't despair)* [1].

Here, contemplation is not surrender but a different form of resistance—quiet, inward, and resolute. Trịnh does not break the world; he dissolves it. His approach is soft yet firm, like water seeping into the fractures of a troubled world—a meditative defiance.

For Dylan, action generates momentum. For Trịnh, contemplation generates depth. Yet neither is bound to a single mode. Dylan also inhabits stillness, as in *Mr. Tambourine Man*, where the language drifts into dreamlike abstraction:

"Yes, to dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand waving free…" [2] Likewise, Trịnh occasionally lets his lyrics swell with collective energy, as in *Nối vòng tay lớn* (*Joining Hands*):

"Rừng núi dang tay nối lại biển xa

Ta đi vòng tay lớn mãi để nối sơn hà"

(The mountains stretch out to embrace the distant sea / We march in widening circles to unite the land) [1].

The difference lies in the point of departure: Dylan pushes from the outside, Trịnh resonates from within. One urges the world to change to save humanity; the other hopes humanity will transform to

save the world. Yet despite their different origins, both artists converge toward the same goal: encouraging people to live authentically amid beauty, suffering, and potentiality.

At this juncture, action and contemplation no longer oppose each other but become two tributaries of a single expressive current—where the artist does not merely reflect reality but dares to reshape it through their unique rhythm.

4.1.5. Open Space and Closed Space

In music, space is not merely a physical setting—it is an emotional environment, a symbolic architecture through which an artist's worldview is silently inscribed. For Bob Dylan, space is expansive and indeterminate—filled with movement, dust, and imagined horizons. In contrast, for Trịnh [1] space is enclosed—folded like a winter door, like the quiet corner of an old courtyard, where one returns to confront the self.

4.1.5.1. Bob Dylan and Open Space

Dylan writes as if walking against the wind, singing like a drifter with no home:

"I'm a-thinkin' and a-wond'rin' walkin' down the road / I once loved a woman, a child I'm told." *(Don't Think Twice, It's All Right,* [22, 24]).

Here, space becomes "the road"—a haunting motif that recurs across Dylan's work: *"how many roads," "walkin' down the line," "rolling stone."* It represents an endless pursuit—an open, recursive structure. Dylan's spatial imagery becomes a cartography of potentiality; each turn marks an epistemic threshold, a crossroad of fate.

From a semiotic perspective, recurring symbols such as "road" and "sky" create a semantic field of displacement, reflecting an existential condition in which the individual has no fixed place—only the journey. Space, in Dylan's work, embodies both liberation and isolation.

4.1.5.2. Trịnh Công Sơn and Closed Space

If Dylan opens space through movement, Trịnh folds it inward like a dream. His spaces are shaped by memory and longing: *"the roadside café," "the old rooftop," "the childhood dream."*

"Tuổi nào ngồi khóc tình đã ngàn thu. Tuổi nào mơ kết mây trong sương mù"

(What age sits weeping for a love eternal. What age dreams of weaving clouds in the mist) *(Còn tuổi nào cho em,* Trịnh [1])

These lines evoke a space of delicate melancholy—simultaneously close and unreachable. A closed space, layered with memory. Its enclosed nature is not stagnation, but distillation. Trịnh stores the world in a raindrop, a silhouette, a sigh.

Such space transforms his music into a spiritual refuge—a place where listeners return to "hear time breathe," realizing that silence itself can become a form of song.

4.1.5.3. Aesthetic Intersection

Though seemingly oppositional, the spatial aesthetics of Dylan and Trịnh converge at a symbolic intersection—where expressive planes meet. Dylan, the wind-bound traveler, continually seeks anchorage, even if only momentarily, in a fleeting line of verse. Trịnh, the custodian of stillness, occasionally allows the wind to pass through his melodies like an echo from the other side of existence.

Thus, spatial semiotics in their music is not simply descriptive but constructive—it generates a cognitive architecture of the world. Dylan opens space to release awareness; Trịnh encloses space to concentrate emotion. One voices a call to depart. The other, an invitation to return.

4.1.6. Reason and Intuition

If one seeks a spiritual axis through which to compare the artistic worlds of Dylan [2] and Trinh [1] the binary of reason and intuition emerges as a compelling key. One side

incline toward analysis, reflection, and critique. The other embraces insight, sensory perception, and surrender to the unspeakable.

4.1.6.1. Dylan – Reflective Rationality

Bob Dylan is widely recognized as a poet of protest, but behind this image lies a conscious mind that surveys the world through skepticism:

"There's something happening here
But you don't know what it is

Do you, Mr. Jones?"
(Ballad of a Thin Man, Dylan [22])

Dylan refuses to accept the world as it appears. He unveils paradoxes, strips away societal masks—including his own. Reason, in Dylan's work, is not cold; it burns quietly, like a torch revealing the blind zones of human reality. Each song functions as existential self-inquiry—an intellectual gesture of resistance against confusion and complacency.

From a semiotic lens, Dylan resembles a deconstructionist. He dismantles dominant signs of authority, religion, and morality, and reassembles the world through conceptual fragments—where every word is a paradox, every image an open-ended question.

4.1.6.2. Trịnh – Transcendent Intuition

In contrast, Trinh [1] writes as though thought flows through feeling. His intuition is not superficial; it reaches into the depths of perception—where beauty needs no rationale, and truth reveals itself in a passing cloud, a fallen leaf, or a quiet sigh:

"Em đi về cầu mưa ướt áo
Đường phượng bay mù không lối vào."
(Mưa Hồng, Trinh [1])
*(You return across the bridge, rain soaking your blouse,
The flame-tree path is blurred, with no entrance to be found.)*

Trịnh does not chase truth. He allows it to arrive silently. The world he constructs is not made to be analyzed, but to be lived—fully, delicately, moment by moment.

For Trịnh, reason is dust, and emotion is light. Intuition becomes a "đạo"—a way of living, loving, and existing. His music serves as a bridge between human consciousness and a voiceless spiritual realm, where people no longer ask "why," but listen, breathe, and simply be.

4.1.6.3. Two Modes of Artistic Presence

These divergent modalities reveal how Dylan frames questions as acts of critical discourse, while Trịnh poses them as intuitive offerings. Dylan interrogates, centering structure and reason. Trịnh invites, evoking affective space. One employs reflective reason to claim interior freedom—a mode of subjective emancipation. The other draws on aesthetic intuition to preserve existential stillness—a quiet equilibrium of the inner world [1].

These polarities, though seemingly opposed, form a unified symbolic matrix in their artistic visions—a space where cognition and emotion, abstraction and embodiment, analysis and intersubjective experience intersect, resonate, and cohere as dual constants within an awakened aesthetic consciousness.

4.2. Discussion

4.2.1. Aesthetic Convergence: Cross-Cultural Intersections

At their deepest level, Dylan [2] and Trinh [1] converge in a shared use of symbolic language—language that no longer serves to designate external referents, but rather functions as a vehicle for internal sensibility. This aligns with what Roland Barthes describes as "non-referential language," where the signifier is no longer anchored to a fixed referent, but drifts freely through streams of association and emotion: *"the signifier no longer has a fixed referent; it floats, shifting with each new context"* [18].

Within this current, each of Dylan's lyrics functions like a twisted unit of imagery:

"The ghost of electricity howls in the bones of her face"

<center>*(Visions of Johanna, 1966)* [22]</center>

<center>Whereas Trịnh gently evokes an introspective cosmos:</center>

<center>"Nắng có hồng bằng đôi môi em? Mưa có buồn bằng đôi mắt em?"</center>

<center>(Does the sun shine brighter than your lips?</center>

<center>Does the rain fall sadder than your eyes?)</center>

(Như cánh vạc bay, 1970) [24]

As Jakobson emphasizes, both artists transcend the referential function of language to dwell in the poetic function—where form becomes content and rhythm becomes thought [10].

Likewise, both Dylan and Trịnh reject linear temporality—what Freeman calls chrononormativity, the normative time discipline of modern society—in favor of an inner temporal pulse imbued with existential resonance. Dylan writes:

"To dance beneath the diamond sky with one hand waving free"

(Mr. Tambourine Man, 1965) [22].

—an image that pulses with timeless, indeterminate rhythm. Trịnh, in contrast, whispers:

"Một ngày như mọi nngày, em trả lại đời tôi"

(A day like any other day, you returned my life to me)

(Một ngày như mọi ngày, 1971) [24]

—as if time itself were melting into stillness.

Thematically, both Dylan and Trịnh address the cracks in human existence—the fractures of history, love, and identity. Dylan seethes in *Masters of War* (1963):

"Even Jesus would never forgive what you do" [22]

While Trịnh dissolves in existential exhaustion:

"Bao nhiêu năm rồi còn mãi ra đi

Đi đâu loanh quanh cho đời mỏi mệt"

(So many years have passed, and still I keep leaving,

Wandering aimlessly through this weary life…)

(Một cõi đi về, 1990) [1]

Both artists touch the shadowed edges of being—what Ricoeur refers to when he writes: *"Metaphor opens a breach in being"* [21]. In their work, metaphor does not conceal—it exposes the fractured nature of the self.

Their artistic philosophies converge on a shared belief: art is existence. Dylan states in *Chronicles: Volume One*:

"Songs are unlike literature. They're meant to be sung, not read" [2]

—affirming that music is not a product, but an act. Similarly, Trịnh once described music as *"a way of existing through the sound of intuition."* As Gadamer argues, true art does not represent the world—it *"reconfigures it through the act of understanding"* [25].

4.2.2. Divergences: Creative Identity and the Imprint of History

Despite sharing a profound aesthetic foundation, Dylan [2] and Trinh [1] cannot be conflated. They are products of two distinct historical trajectories. Dylan emerged in postwar America, shaped by a culture of identity crisis and expanding consumerism. Trịnh, by contrast, came of age in a divided Vietnam, where war was not metaphorical but corporeal—an embodied, inescapable reality.

As Raymond Williams argues, all artistic forms are *"residually shaped by their historical moment,"* meaning that aesthetics always bear the imprint of their era's tensions and energies [26]. Dylan's sensibility is marked by resistance, irony, and confrontation with reality, while Trịnh's tone is contemplative, metaphysical, and deeply humanistic.

Dylan's music reverberates with the unrest of social upheaval, casting the artist as a *"countercultural bard"* [27]—a voice of critique in an age of conformity. Trịnh's songs, meanwhile, resemble the quiet sigh of a generation that has lived through both the promise of ideals and the pain of disillusionment. One cries out through symbolic violence; the other whispers through invisible sorrow.

Yet it is within these divergences that both Dylan and Trịnh appear as "watchmen of time," in the sense that Walter Benjamin defines the artist—not as one who reflects the world, but as one who interrupts the linear flow of history [28]. They neither escape from reality nor dissolve into it. From a space of existential retreat, they listen to the world as though it were a wound—and they sing in order to heal it.

5. Recommendations

Building upon this foundation, the study proposes three key directions for further research. First, expanding the intertextual framework to compare Dylan and Trịnh with other contemporary or ideologically divergent artists could elucidate how cultural, political, and historical forces shape lyrical poetics. This may include artists influenced by varying philosophical traditions, postcolonial narratives, or religious cosmologies, thereby enriching our understanding of the semiotic elasticity and ideological embeddedness of lyrics.

Second, integrating analytical tools from cognitive linguistics and musicology could yield novel insights into the dynamic relationship between lyrical syntax, rhythmic structure, and affective response. Specifically, employing theories such as conceptual blending, tonal semantics, and prosodic contour analysis can help uncover how emotional resonance is constructed across both microstructural (line-level) and macrostructural (composition-level) dimensions of the song.

Third, examining the reception of their music across diverse listener communities could reveal how universality and cultural specificity are simultaneously encoded and interpreted within their respective semiotic systems. Such inquiry would benefit from cross-cultural hermeneutics, audience ethnography, and empirical reception studies, allowing for a more grounded account of how meaning is co-constructed in performance and listening contexts.

In an era when the humanities are undergoing profound methodological and epistemological shifts, interdisciplinary research is not merely a trend—it is an essential pathway toward understanding art as a living form of cognition. The artistic legacies of Dylan and Trịnh demonstrate that only by transcending disciplinary boundaries can we access the humanistic core of song, where lyrics emerge as the second voice of the human soul.

6. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that, although rooted in distinct cultural and historical contexts, Dylan [2] and Trinh [1] both construct a lyrical paradigm that transcends the conventional communicative function of language. In their music, lyrics become a convergence of imagery, symbolism, and metaphor—not to mirror reality, but to restructure how human beings perceive, interpret, and exist in the world. Both artists position song lyrics as an "open semiotic field," where form and content interweave to generate meaning beyond syntactic conventions. The presence of meta-linguistic elements

suggests that they do not merely write with words, but instead create a space where emotion and memory are activated through language as a symbolic medium.

The significance of this research lies not only in juxtaposing two iconic musical figures representing East and West, but also in its interdisciplinary methodology—bridging linguistics, poetics, and reception aesthetics. This approach opens new interpretive pathways into the deeper semantic layers of their lyrics, where language is not merely read, but embodied and emotionally inhabited. By treating reception as a cognitive-affective act, the study contends that the lyrics of Dylan and Trịnh are not closed structures, but dynamic processes of meaning-making, wherein each listener becomes an active participant in the co-creation and resonance of the work.

Through an experiential mapping of metaphor, the study approaches lyrics as associative networks, in which recurring motifs—such as "wind," "sun," or "shadow"—carry emotional weight and cultural memory. Understood as a dynamic semiotic system, lyrics resist fixed interpretation, instead shifting fluidly across contexts and audiences. In this evolving process, the listener is no longer a passive recipient, but a co-creator—an indispensable agent who animates the inner life of the text and generates aesthetic resonance. In such co-presence, language becomes not merely a vessel for meaning, but a modality of aesthetic being.

Transparency:
The authors confirm that the manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study; that no vital features of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned have been explained. This study followed all ethical practices during writing.

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