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Music as a Media Problem: Some Comments and Approaches¹

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Both Mark Villegas and Peter McMurray pose music as a media problem. And as a media problem, both authors tie their analyses of music to dynamics of circulation. For Villegas, circulation is a problem of Filipino diasporic identity—both in terms of the movement of people in space, and the movement of representations from “model minority” to “moreno.” He takes readers on a tour through the history of representations of difference, connecting MC Geo’s use of 5-Percenter references in his lyrics to a 500-year-old trope derived from the expulsion of the Moors from Spain.

Meanwhile, for McMurray, circulation raises the question of how to conceive or conceptualize of music as something more than “the work,” a “hermeneutic abstraction.” To conceive of YouTube videos as haptic, McMurray takes us on a tour of new media theory, arguing against any theory of music or media that begins with the autonomy of image and sound. Following Henry Jenkins, his final landing point is that images “are more and more defined by responses to them.”

The construction of music as a media problem has been a minor thread in music scholarship across the disciplines for over a century. Walter Pater’s famous claim that “all art aspires to the condition of music” was ultimately a reflection of what today we might call music’s *mediality*—the relation of form and matter.² Classic organological work took a natural-historical orientation in its attempts to classify instruments

¹ With thanks to Carrie Rentschler and the editors at *Repercussions*.

² See Withrop-Young’s translator’s introduction to Friedrich Kittler, *Gramophone-Film-Typewriter*, trans. Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), xiv; and John Johnston, *Information Multiplicity: American Fiction in the Age of Media Saturation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 268.

according to their physical and operational characteristics.³ The positivist orientation may strike contemporary scholars as outdated, and linked to a colonial project we no longer want to support. But the questions organologists asked about materiality have resurfaced in fields like media archaeology, which write cultural and technological history through the analysis of “textual, visual, and auditory archives as well as collections of artifacts, emphasizing both the discursive and material manifestations of culture.”⁴ They have also appeared in fields like musicology and ethnomusicology, as in Nina Eidsheim’s analysis of the singing body—above and below water; Louise Meintjes’ brilliant recounting of the role of “gear” in a recording studio; Andrew Weintraub’s study of the politics of instruments in Dangdut; Dave Novak’s work on world music 2.0 and Japanese; and Tom Turino’s writing on signification and music.⁵ Writers like Charlie Keil and Steven Feld have, of course, built whole careers considering music as a form of communication.⁶

In the world of media studies, music has increasingly been understood as a central problem in thinking about media, communication and culture. The writers in a book like James Lull’s *Popular Music and Communication* worried about the relatively low status of music in Communication Studies (itself already a low-prestige field—we should have known better!).⁷ Graduate students who started when I did (1993) were routinely advised to avoid low-status objects like music and sound as subjects for their dissertations. Of course, a generation of popular music scholars in communication,

³ Erich M. von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs, "A Classification of Musical Instruments," *Galpin Society Journal* 14 (1961).

⁴ Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications and Implications* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 3.

⁵ Nina Sun Eidsheim, "Sensing Voice: Materiality and the Lived Body in Singing and Listening," *Senses and Society* 6, no. 2 (2011); Louise Meintjes, *Sound of Africa!: Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Andrew Weintraub, *Dangdut Stories: A Social and Musical History of Indonesia's Most Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); David Novak, "2.5x6 Meters of Space: Japanese Music Coffeehouses and Experimental Practices of Listening," *Popular Music* 27, no. 1 (2008); *Japanese Music at the Edge of Circulation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013); Thomas Turino, "Signs of Imagination, Identity, and Experience: A Peircean Semiotic Theory for Music," *Ethnomusicology* 43, no. 2 (1999).

⁶ Charles Keil and Steven Feld, *Music Grooves* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Steven Feld, *Jazz Cosmopolitanism in Accra* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

⁷ James Lull, *Popular Music and Communication* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1992).

people like my own doctoral advisor Larry Grossberg, knew better. Many historical musicologists were also reluctant to consider media. Some of that reticence may have come from old anxieties about distinctions between high and low culture, and commitment to what Bourdieu would call “legitimate” forms of music at the expense of all others.⁸ But the reticence to consider media also emanated from a particularly idealist conception of music as text, and a set of attendant epistemologies and method. Here’s John Corbett explaining it in 1994:

Imagine several partitioned cubicles, each of which contains a headphoned student who faces an amplifier and a turntable: on each platter spins a record of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*. One student lifts his needle to run to the bathroom; another listens twenty times to a difficult passage; a third is frustrated by a skip in the record and proceeds directly to the next movement of the symphony; at the same time another finds it difficult to concentrate due to the volume of her neighbor’s headphones. Even as they do these things that are made possible only by the technology of recording, these students are required to develop a historico-theoretical interpretation as if the technical means through which the music is accessed—right there, staring them in the face—are of no significance whatsoever.⁹

Today, the situation has changed considerably. Writers interested in music and media in whatever field are more likely to find one another, read one another, and build on one another. There are a lot more of us, people in a variety of fields have realized that knowledge of the technocultural history of music and sound is a major asset (and ignorance of sound and music are major intellectual deficits), and the commercial and journalistic foregrounding of our changing technological environment means that

⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Logic of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁹ John Corbett, *Extended Play: Sounding Off from John Cage to Dr. Funkenstein* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 36.

scholars are particularly sensitive to changing physical and institutional forms of communication and culture. Digital initiatives like [Sounding Out!](#), [Interference](#), [The Journal of Sonic Studies](#) and [Sound Effects](#)—alongside outlets like [Repercussions](#)—allow for music scholars to produce media-rich work that retains rigorous humanistic analysis, but allows for exposition of audiovisual material within the text. Although Steven Feld has argued for the use of recording and playback as a part of music scholarship for over a generation now, the idea seems to be finally catching on. Free software like Audacity and commercial software like Ableton Live, marketed to musicians and engineers, can also be of great use to academics who want to manipulate and edit sound as part of their humanistic research, and the fact that this software runs easily on laptops means we are no longer limited to the linear environments of presentationware like PowerPoint and Keynote. Programs like Scalar offer new opportunities for “born digital” work, like Jentery Sayers’s multimodal [dissertation about magnetic tape](#). Initiatives like [Soundbox](#) will help us further integrate sound directly into our scholarship.

Scholars interested in music are better equipped than ever to think with media; scholars interested in media are better prepared than ever to think with music. So where can all this goodness lead? Let us return to the register of ideas. Both Villegas and McMurray draw from distinct traditions of media scholarship. Villegas draws on longstanding practices of analyzing the politics of representation, following tropes back through history, and watching discursive modes jump across populations and contexts. McMurray cites scholars in film theory and sound studies who attempt to make sense of new media using the extant tools of their fields. Both authors use the analogical reasoning common in humanistic thought about media, rendering music as “like” other modes of mediatic representation so that it can be analyzed in an analogous fashion. In performing the tension between likeness to and difference from old media phenomena and difference from them when considering the contemporary conditions of music (to borrow a phrase from Durant), both authors enact the central dilemma of new media

studies.¹⁰ How seriously do we take “the new” as an analytical proposition, given its historical inaccuracy and ties to logics of marketing and promotion? New media are now older than radio was during its so-called golden age; and as Wendy Chun has pointed out, we’ve done very little to interrogate the conception of “the new” that modifies the term media.¹¹ Another tack, one taken by Fran Dyson, by Mara Mills, and by me, is to refuse altogether periodizations of media history derived exclusively from so-called “visual” (actually audiovisual) media.¹² Even as big a cheerleader for cinema as Lev Manovich acknowledges that audio points toward a different media history: “the modern music synthesizer, the first instrument which embodies the logic of all new media: selection from a menu of choices.”¹³ The problem quickly becomes that many of the features so central to new media existed in the infrastructures of old audio media like radio and telephony, just not necessarily at the consumer end (a point hinted at in Manovich’s invocation of the theremin).

How, then, might we consider the range of ways to cast music as a media problem today? What theoretical principles might we bring to its analysis? I want to suggest a few working assumptions that I have found helpful in the hopes that they might be of use to others embarking on research projects—or in the middle, dealing with the really messy part. Naturally, these are meant as procedural suggestions, not timeless ontological claims. The list is also obviously open and unfinished.

1. We begin with an old principle from cultural studies: **radical contextualism**. What we study, we study with **no guarantees**. For Stuart Hall and other theorists of articulation like Jennifer Daryl Slack, Greg Wise, and Anne Balsamo, this is simply the idea that no practice, ideology, technology, or formation has a guaranteed political or

¹⁰ Alan Durant, *Conditions of Music* (London: Macmillan, 1984).

¹¹ Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Software, or the Persistence of Visual Knowledge," *Grey Room* 18 (2004).

¹² Frances Dyson, *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009); Mara Mills, "Deafening: Noise and the Engineering of Communication in the Telephone System," *Grey Room* 43 (2011); "Hearing Aids and the History of Electronics Miniaturization," *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* 33, no. 2 (2011); Jonathan Sterne, *Mp3: The Meaning of a Format, Sign, Storage, Transmission* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

¹³ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001), 126.

cultural implication.¹⁴ Rather, as scholars, our job is to reconstruct the context whereby our objects of study come to be coherent objects at all. A phonograph, radio set, YouTube video or mp3 is only apprehensible as “concrete” because it is “a *differentiated unity*.”¹⁵ To paraphrase Hall, in order to examine any phenomenon or relation, we need to describe both its internal topology or morphology—its structured and structuring components—and those other phenomena or relations with which it congeals in a larger formation.¹⁶ Writers in the Actor-Network tradition, like Madeleine Akrich and Bruno Latour, have made similar points.¹⁷

2. The most important research operation is the **construction of the object**, a phrase I take from Pierre Bourdieu. If you will indulge me, here’s a summary I wrote elsewhere of what Pierre Bourdieu’s social theory offers to study of technology:¹⁸

To be intellectually effective, technology scholars must willfully construct their objects of study, and not accept “pregiven” objects or “prenotions.” This requires us to try and make an epistemological break from the objects we study, so that we do not simply describe them in their own terms. This is especially crucial for technology scholars who are approached from all sides with pre-given objects, approaches, and programs of study. Our job is to provide real insight into

¹⁴ Stuart Hall, "On Postmodernism and Articulation: An Interview with Stuart Hall," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10, no. 2 (1986); Jennifer Daryl Slack, "The Theory and Method of Articulation in Cultural Studies," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996); Jennifer Daryl Slack and J. Macgregor Wise, *Culture + Technology: A Primer* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006); Anne Balsamo, *Designing Culture: The Technocultural Imagination at Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹⁵ Stuart Hall, "Marx's Notes on Method: A 'Reading' of the '1857 Introduction'," *Cultural Studies* 17, no. 2 (2003): 127.

¹⁶ The original quote is: "In the examination of any phenomenon or relation, we must comprehend *both* its internal structure—what it is in its differentiatedness—as well as those other structures to which it is coupled and with which it forms some more inclusive totality." I wanted to sidestep the question of whether research must always grasp the totality, and whether we are always better off thinking of things in terms of structures. Ibid.

¹⁷ Madeleine Akrich, "The De-Description of Technical Objects," in *Shaping Technology, Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, ed. Wiebe Bijker and J. Law (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992); Bruno Latour, "Mixing Humans and Nonhumans Together: The Sociology of a Door-Closer," *Social Problems* 35, no. 1 (1988); *Aramis, or the Love of Technology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

¹⁸ Jonathan Sterne, "Bourdieu, Technique and Technology," *Cultural Studies* 17, no. 3/4 (2003): 384.

technology as a social phenomenon. It is not to settle accounts in the field of digital media, to extend analyses in the business pages, or to find new commercial applications for producers of digital technologies—though there may be appropriate times to address those different audiences in our work. This requires that we attend to the “construction of the object” in our research. It means that we should take seriously the notion that even in so-called “critical” research, research *design* is a central part of our work. We must also be willing to make deep theoretical connections from unexpected places: “The *summum* of the art, in the social sciences, is, in my eyes, to be capable of engaging very high ‘theoretical’ stakes by means of very precise and often apparently mundane, if not derisory, empirical objects.”¹⁹ In other words, the relative prestige of an object of study (for instance “science” vs. “sport”) cannot in advance forecast the quality of insights generated by the study of the object. It is on us, the researchers, to construct our objects so that they address important questions.

3. Plural Materiality. In recent years, scholars have turned to “materiality” as a way to try and arrest the centrifugal forces that confront them when they consider media. The complexities are so great, the reference to materiality provides a grounding metaphor, a stopping point for an otherwise ongoing chain of signification and reference. The problem is that nobody seems to agree on what materiality might be. Jeremy Packer and Stephen B. Crofts Wiley suggest that the material turn encompasses materialist approaches not only to technology, but also to economies, bodies, spaces, and even discourse itself.²⁰ One finds different materialisms across the disciplines. The various permutations of the term *material* signal the shape and affordances of the physical world we make and move through, as well as the constitutive social relations that compose our lived reality. But there are major disagreements over how to talk about

¹⁹ Pierre Bourdieu and Loic J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 220.

²⁰ Jeremy Packer and Stephen B. Crofts Wiley, "Introduction: The Materiality of Communication," in *Communication Matters: Materialist Approaches to Media, Mobility and Networks*, ed. Jeremy Packer and Stephen B. Crofts Wiley (New York: Routledge, 2012), 7.

the various relationships among the things that constitute our thoroughly technical *and* human realm: physical and social processes, consciousness and subjectivity, power and justice. Following Hall, then, *the material aspect* of media, music, or sonic practice is therefore exactly the kind of “concrete” phenomenon whose constitutive relations, and whose role in constituting bigger formations, must be analyzed and described before we can presuppose its unity or coherence.

4. Differential embodiment. As with appeals to materiality, appeals to *embodiment* are often attempts by scholars to limit the messiness of the world; thus, my point here echoes my point on materiality immediately. But the source is somewhat different. Scholars in disability studies have radicalized the plural understanding of bodies that has been a project of writers in feminist studies, postcolonial studies, and queer studies for decades now. We should take as our starting point not a “body” but rather what Tobin Siebers calls “the human variety”—a construct of the human subject that begins from the presupposition of variance in human capacities, and acknowledges that those variances are simultaneously physical *and* socially produced. In the context of disability studies, it is the idea that environments and technologies *are disabling*, rather than assuming a normate body from which the disabled body deviates.²¹ As [Mara Mills has argued](#), media disabilities only exist in relation to media. You can’t have a print disability without a social formation that renders print important.

5. Non-Isomorphism. Put simply, the shape, consistency, and content of practices and relations will be different at different scalar levels. To borrow language from Deleuze and Guattari, this is to begin by refusing to build analyses of concrete phenomena according to “a genetic axis or deep structure.”²² It sounds simple, but it is in fact quite difficult. As writers, we routinely assume, for instance, that collective consciousness—

²¹ Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008); See also Graham Pullin, *Design Meets Disability* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).

²² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia, Volume 2*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 12.

whatever that is—might be analyzed in a manner analogous to how we analyze individual consciousness. But there is no reason to assume that to be the case. Large-scale phenomena have no necessary relationship with small-scale phenomena. Following Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, and C. Wright Mills, our job is to make sense of the relations in which our objects of study are bound up, not to assume them.²³

To sum up: methodological treatises love overtures to holism, as if the key to knowledge is simply following a method: Study production, circulation and consumption! Study political economy and reception! Study technological form and use! Study the text and its appropriation! But these are all false holisms. Just because you followed someone's directions doesn't mean you've achieved knowledge. Rather, all knowledge of culture and society is by definition partial. But our task is to stretch it. Anthropologists walk into a milieu at the beginning of participant-observation and walk out with partial, perspectival knowledge of the situation. It is *different* from the actors they encounter, but not more universal. We can say the same of the historian confronting documentary fragments in an archive, or a technologist "de-scribing" a network of relations. In each case, as human beings we are limited to partiality.²⁴ But as scholars, we are responsible to both the specificities of our studies and the generalities of knowledge, the bigger conversations that transcend our specific interests and hang-ups. Hayden White puts it best in his advice to historians: we must remain "sensitive to the more general world of thought *and* action" from which scholarship departs and returns.²⁵

Media and music are fine objects of study in themselves, but they matter most when they help us understand the questions that continually trouble the human sciences: among others, these include longstanding questions of power and justice; what it means to be biological or technological; what is already actual or conditionally

²³ Ibid.; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1978); C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959).

²⁴ Akrich, "The De-Description of Technical Objects."

²⁵ Hayden White, "The Burden of History," *History and Theory* 5, no. 2 (1966): 134.

possible. As far as I can tell, the current interdisciplinary ferment around media, music, and sound has taken off because scholars understand that studying the mediality of music might give us greater insight into big questions about culture, experience, communication, and collectivity. The story of music over the last couple centuries and around the world has many important implications for understanding other technocultural formations. It is up to us to make those links, to explain them, both to thereby help set an expansive intellectual agenda for ourselves, but also to advance conversations in other, nearby fields.

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