# I Hear Music: Popular Music and its Mediations

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## Abstract

Using as its platform Philip Tagg's 2011 article 'Caught on the back foot: Epistemic inertia and visible music', this essay identifies gaps in the literature of popular music studies. In particular it discusses aspects and forms of music-making which do not fit the model of popular music based on modern mediations and commodification, but which are nonetheless crucial to an understanding of the history and present state of the relationship between music, affect and society. These are discussed under the headings 'vernacular music' and 'corporeality', both of which are largely occluded by theoretical models that deploy conceptual categories inappropriate in the analysis of sonic phenomenologies. The essay proposes a greater interdisciplinary and historical range, and a closer link between the study of music and the physiology and physics of sonicity and noise.

**Keywords:** Music, phenomenology, theory, history, vernacularity, the body.

## Introduction

On the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM), its members have been asked to offer thoughts on co-founder Philip Tagg's recent paper (Tagg 2011) reviewing the state of, and lacunae in, popular music studies. Phil's perspective has the authority that we have come to expect of his work, and while I cannot hope to address all the issues that he covers in his article, my discussion will incorporate the four matters he lists in the abstract: interdisciplinarity, interprofessionalism, epistemic inertia and invisible music, albeit not necessarily in the same specific sense he has deployed them. I shall discuss a category of music-making that is 'invisible' in the sense that it receives little notice in the field, and I shall also argue that the problems of which that 'invisibility' is a symptom are at base not methodological, but to do with a form of 'epistemic inertia', which in turn behoves us to extend our disciplinary and professional horizons. Since I will tease these out with reference to my own research interests, I will inevitably therefore refer in some cases to work I have already published, which I will sometimes paraphrase and reference in order to avoid gratuitous repetitiveness.

One central issue is the perennial question of what is encompassed by the term 'popular music'. The difficulties of arriving at a consensus on this were reflected in an online forum of twenty-three postings from the International Advisory Editors of the journal Popular Music, published in that journal in 2005 (Advisory Editors 2005). The most frequent, though not invariable, point of reference in that discussion was music that was mass-mediated and commodified. The matters that I want to address in this

essay could be encompassed by the idea of mediation, but conceived in a broader, or at least other, sense than is usual.

I feel that the emphasis on mediation and commodification, and the way they are usually interpreted, misleadingly leans towards a conflation of 'pop music' with 'popular music', while the former is more usefully regarded as a subset of the latter. Although 'pop music' is most often located in the post-rock era, Jon Savage traces the term as far back as 1949 in relation to jazz, in a Melody Maker reference to Benny Goodman as the "Consulting Director of Pop Music" on Russian language programmes (Savage 1995: xxvi). It seems reasonable on the other hand to think of 'popular music' as less generically, geographically and historically confined than an emphasis on electric/electronic mass media implies, especially if we study the history of the broader term 'popular' in relation to high and low culture. Debates in English regarding that distinction can be traced back to at least the eighteenth century in conjunction with the rise of industrial capitalism and its associated class divisions. Boswell's description of the music at Vauxhall Gardens in 1778 is a recognition of popular, as opposed to high, culture and music: "it is peculiarly adapted to the taste of the English nation; there being a mixture of curious show, - gay exhibition, musick, vocal and instrumental, not too refined for the general ear; - for all which only a shilling" (Boswell 1970: 959). He identifies this as music imprinted with local identity (as opposed to the 'universalism' of high art music); it is experienced in conjunction with other recreations (as opposed to the conditions of the concert hall); and, given the entry charge, the entertainment could be regarded as commodified. But it is certainly not mass-mediated. The actual term 'popular music' was used by 1855, and already referred to music of "Olden Times". (Shuker 1998: 226).

One problem with a fixation on mass-mediation, then, is that it tends to confine attention to the twentieth century, or at least, the period subsequent to the patenting of the sound recording in 1877; the glamour of later media developments has occluded an earlier form of 'mass mediation', namely print. A tendency towards presentism continues to characterise IASPM's 'intellectual physiognomy', to appropriate a term from Lukacs (1972). From the programme of the IASPM biennial international conference in Grahamstown, South Africa, in 2011, we can extrapolate the following observations. Let us say conservatively that the Anglo-European tradition of popular music is about 350 years old, the period during which evolved the ideas and material conditions that incubated the art/popular music distinction. These include the development of the high/low cultural discourse, of public concert-hall music, and growing attempts to regulate and suppress vernacular and street music. The Grahamstown conference programme suggests that fewer than three percent of the papers dealt with the period from about 1650 to 1950. About thirty-two percent were devoted to the half-century from 1950 to 2000. And a massive sixty-five percent or so dealt with the last decade. Three percent for 300 years, sixty-five percent for ten, is a disconcerting imbalance. Literary, and other branches of cultural studies including traditional musicology, all distribute their attentions over the whole history of their field. Popular music studies is, I think, the only area of cultural studies that does not. This seriously limits our sense of the full sonic range of popular music. It means for example that we are likely to imagine popular music in terms of sonic excess, emptied of silence and confined to the narrow dynamic range, which largely characterizes major pop genres since the late twentieth century. How many other cultural research fields would devote ninety-five percent of their attention to the last 12 percent of so of its history?

In so doing, it also obscures our understanding of the historical development of popular music as a socio-political phenomenon. I believe that it is only through those

early high/low discussions by, inter alia, Kant and von Herder, that we begin to understand the subsequent destabilization of the notion of the popular, as reflected in the Popular Music forum referred to above. To encapsulate: an imperative for the increasingly powerful middle classes in the eighteenth century was to differentiate themselves from the proliferating urban underclasses that accompanied the industrial revolution. Lines of demarcation included literacy, leisure time and surplus income, and certain cultural activities that advertised refinement and sensibility and which could be 'fenced off', through such institutions as concert halls, private art collections, literacy rates and the cost of books. The arrival of modern mass media from the late nineteenth century broke down those fences, making all those artifacts available to underclasses hitherto excluded from 'Culture'. Indeed, far from defining the idea of 'the popular', mass-mediations radically problematised it (See further Johnson 2007a; Johnson 2010). I prefer not to limit my understanding of popular music to mass mediation and commodification, but to encompass the broader brief given by Phil Tagg: "It would be as misleading as it would be undemocratic to exclude from serious consideration any set of musical practices associated with any population" (Tagg 2011: 4).

In the period since the foundation of IASPM, a fixation on mass media has indeed produced some arguments that 'exclude' significant musical practices. These reflect a lack of historical depth, but also falsify contemporary music practices, as in a recent declaration in a scholarly collection of essays on popular music that "Music in the twenty-first century does not exist for popular culture if it is not online nor amenable to the iPod" (Robertson 2011: 32). In 2006 I had reason to discover that total sales of iPod units by market leader Apple still numbered only half of one percent of the world's population, which suggests that Robertson's untroubled generalisation is highly implausible (Johnson 2007b). As an analogy with the cultural history summarized above, I argue that the centralizing of mediations as a sine qua non of 'popular music' fulfils the same political function as Samuel Johnson's decision to confine his English lexicon exclusively to words that had appeared in print (Johnson and Cloonan 2009: 43−44). Both maneuvers exclude from their field all practices that are not sanctioned by some form of technological dissemination; in Johnson's case access to print, in the latter case, access to contemporary information technologies, which places beyond consideration pretty much all pre-twentieth century music, and also a great many later musical practices as exemplified below. But also, and like Johnson's decision, it banishes the intense quotidian, the oral 'coal face' of communication, where the links between music and identity are germinated, and where a decisive cultural history is created.

## Vernacular Music

The two exclusionary parameters I want to challenge – mass mediation and commodification - would leave us with no warrant for exploring what remains a category of music which is arguably the most immediate, intense and ubiquitous site of identity formation. I exemplify from an infinite store of possible sources. The following concern the period leading to the 1916 Irish Easter rising:

> Volunteers marched in step to such songs as Ireland Boys Hurrah, God Save Ireland, The Felons of our Land, and Wrap the Green Flag. Implausibly, it was the Protestant choirmaster of St John's Church in Sandymount, Cecil Grange McDowall, who composed the music for many of the most propaganda verses … on the church organ. He was also responsible for the musical arrangement of The Soldier's Song, a song which countless Volunteers could remember where they first heard it, and the powerful impact it had: 'in a few days' time', one recalled, 'every Volunteer in Dublin was whistling or singing it'. (McGarry 2010: 71.)

A Volunteer who attended a special mass for the Volunteers recounted:

Suddenly a rich baritone voice burst into the hymn to our Patron Saint Hail Glorious St Patrick and it was taken up by the whole congregation in such a fervent manner that a lump rose in my throat and I wanted to burst out crying or to do something to prove that I was worthy of being in their company. (2010: 93.)

These descriptions are representative of perennial music practices that play a major role in the definition of identity to profound social effect, yet they would fail to appear in any mass-media or commodification model of the subject. Other examples of these practices range through chants at sports grounds and political demonstrations, locker room singing, street busking, children's playground songs, hymn-singing, live-music-serviced dances and ethnic club events, domestic music-making, from group celebrations to solitary household or in-the-car singing and whistling. As another subset of 'popular music', in government policy discussions I have referred to these as 'vernacular music' (Johnson 1996). The term is of course not my own (see for example Hitchcock 1969; Illich 1981; Pickering and Green 1987; Bohlman 2001). But I suggest an approach to its definition that plays to the orientation of popular music discourse towards production and consumption. In this sense vernacular music comes into being the more the producers and consumers of the musical experience overlap, as for example in a group of people singing 'Happy Birthday' at a party. Gathered under this definition, what appear to be discrete and often minority musical practices in generic terms, are aggregated into a major site of transgeneric musical activity. It embraces ethnic, indigenous, folk, jazz, pub rock, classical and religious music.

Examples are alluded to in discussions of popular music (see for example Tagg: 136; Bradby: 137; Toynbee: 137; Stokes: 139; all in Advisory Editors 2005), but as a sustained field of study they remain marginal in popular music studies. This is not to undervalue the work that is done in the field, but to note how little of it there is, as is confirmed by any review of conference programmes and journal contents. In the last ten years of Popular Music around 180 pieces were published under the heading 'Articles', of which fewer than a dozen would fit the category I am describing, as for example essays on street parade bands and community singing. Yet this is a significant music culture: multivocal and generically diverse, overlapping with both art-music and mass-mediated pop. It embodies a cultural history that runs parallel to, but obscured by, the accounts on which music policy, funding and even discourses of nation are based. As such, these music practices are uniquely instructive sites of the social contestations through which local and national identities are developed and played out.

I illustrate with a few examples from my own country, where from colonial times vernacular music practices marked the lines of demarcation that defined our evolving social structures. These took various forms, such as convict songs in which old tunes were given new lyrics about a spirit of resistance that was suppressed, and elided in the more sanguine official reports back to the Mother Country. In Van Diemens Land (Tasmania), "As with the slaves of North America, songs sustained the spirit and gave voice to sentiments of resistance. At the Launceston women's factory, 'singing, telling stories and dancing took up much of the women's time' " (Boyce 2008: 135). The overseer of the Hobart factory "confirmed that the female inmates spent much of their time composing songs ridiculing the authorities. On occasion women were punished for singing 'Obscene' songs in the factory" (Ibid.). Singing also occurred at executions. "By celebrating the life of the condemned man and expressing solidarity with him at his final fearful moments, the music undermined the gruesome function of the gruesome public spectacle" (Ibid.).

When possible, singing was accompanied, most often by a violin, but it was reported in the 1820s that "convicts turned the jingling of their chains into music 'whereto they dance and sing'" (Ibid.: 136). In 1848 Lieutenant Governor Denison was petitioned by fourteen Hobart musicians claiming that "repeated attempts had been made to deprive them of their only means of subsistence by the interference of the police", arguing that the only recreation available to the "mechanic and labourer" after work is "the innocent one of music and a dance". The police magistrate to whom the matter was referred responded:

> I have with much pains and opposition succeeded to putting a stop to fiddling and dancing in public houses, which have been much improved in conduct and character in consequence. The practice of fiddling in public houses was the means of congregating together vicious and dishonest characters of both sexes, and was the source of much evil to the community. (Ibid.: 219.)

But we don't have to go back to a pre-electric/electronic era for testimony about the importance of non-mediated, non-commodified music practices. There is ample evidence of the power of vernacular music to fortify communities during periods of crisis, as in air-raid shelters during the London Blitz, and farther afield, as in recollections of community singing in the bomb shelter pillboxes when Townsville in Queensland came under aerial attack in July 1942 (Fenton 2003: 85). Community singing has also celebrated war's endings, as exemplified in the case of the war in the Pacific; a witness recalled a huge crowd in Prince Alfred Park:

> … we stopped for over an hour to join in community singing. We sang all the popular war songs: 'Coming in on a Wing and a Prayer', 'We'll Meet Again', 'The White Cliffs of Dover', 'The last Time I Saw Paris'. As one song ended the strains of another would start in the crowd and we'd all join in. 'Three Cheers for the Red, White and Blue', 'Bless 'em All', 'Kiss Me Goodnight, Sergeant Major', we sang the lot. Large sections of the crowd linked arms and swayed as they sang. (Ibid.: 126.)

The power of such music-making to fortify the spirit, even against almost certain destruction, was exemplified grotesquely during the Winter War between the Finns and the Russians in 1939−1940:

> In one area of the Summa battlefield, repeated attacks were delivered straight across a massive Finnish mine field by men who used their own bodies to clear the mines: they linked arms, formed close-order rows, and marched stoically into the mines, singing party war songs and continuing to advance with the same steady, suicidal rhythm even as the mines began to explode, ripping holes in their ranks and showering the marchers with feet, legs, and intestines'. (Trotter 1991: 83.)

This is not by any measure an inconsequential music practice, nor one that was rendered irrelevant in an age of mass mediations. Nor is it only a music in extremis. Everyday vernacular music-making remains an active way of affirming the individual and collective self and occurs on a massive scale. I am particularly familiar with the example of jazz, the great majority of which is played on a regular basis as a highly localised phenomenon for the small communities it brings into being each week in each venue. While each of these venues may be regarded as a minority recreation, in Australia in the late twentieth century they accounted for 2.5 times the audience of 'art music' concerts and employed about the same number of musicians as the orchestral sector (Johnson 1995). Factor in all other vernacular music activity in the sense I have described and we have a massive cultural presence, but one which has little or no place in studies based on mediations in the usual sense.

> 'Vernacular', then, does not refer simply to styles of music so much as to their relationship to the community that produces them. As such they are invaluable sites for a new

understanding of social formations, as in the case of a doctoral dissertation I examined in 2012. It investigates the community singing practices of New Zealand 'tramping' societies and the use of the guitar in Maori social gatherings, and in doing so, reconfigures our understanding of those social formations to great effect (Brown 2012).

## Hearing, the Body and Theory

Whether pre- or post-twentieth century, a cognate feature of all the musical practices I am alluding to under the rubric 'vernacular' is their corporeality. I have noted that vernacular musics, in the sense I have articulated, are almost 'invisible' in popular music studies. They are also literally 'embodied' in their modes of production and consumption. They are not produced at a distance from their consumers and mediated technologically in the general sense of these terms. The total vernacular music experience is corporeal as opposed to technologically mediated, live bodies performing for live bodies. This is one link between the above discussion and the issues to which I now turn. But in addition, not only is vernacular music primarily corporeal, but this mode of musical experience is equally neglected when the emphasis falls so heavily on media technologies. This is instructively provocative, given the fundamental physicality of music experience. Music may be categorized as art or culture, but before it is either of these it is sound. Before it can be cognitively processed it must be sensed. An axiom articulated by one of the founding figures in gestalt therapy is relevant in this connection: it is important to "lose … your mind and come … to your senses" (Perls 1976: 53). Secondly, when the hearing body is put back into the music experience, we realize that in the focus on mediations, the most fundamental mediation of all remains almost completely ignored: the senses. Studies of technological mediations are driven by the question of how they filter and regulate the music experience. But the senses are themselves complex mediating processes that intervene in the making of meanings. "We grasp the sensible with our senses, but we know now that this 'with' is not merely instrumental, that the sensory apparatus is not [just] a conductor" (Merleau-Ponty 2012: 10). In the case of hearing in particular, the space between the physical sound source and music affect is not 'transparent', but is densely mediated. One of the central questions addressed by popular music studies is how and why we attach meanings and emotional responses to a piece of music, and the almost invariable answer centralizes cultural conditioning and context. This is indeed so, but only to a limited extent. Before 'culture' steps in, physiology and physics have already set up limits to our responses to music, establishing a foundation which will not fully determine the cultural scaffolding, but which limits what it might be. If we shout in someone's ear, it is unlikely if not impossible that what we say can be interpreted as tenderness, and the reasons are physiological.

The character of sound and the path it takes to our ear set up pre-conditions to how we respond to its content. If we cannot locate the source of a sound for example, then an anxious sense of being in an unequal power relationship will underpin our response to it before we have begun to cognitively assess the content. This "ubiquity effect" (Augoyard and Torgue 2005: 130−131) is one of the reasons that the music in a highly resonant cathedral will overawe us in a way that music in a corner pub will not, or that low frequency sound will invariably set up a sense of threat in the listener (as film music composers well understand – witness the 'shark' theme in Jaws). Likewise, the journey from the ear to the seat of emotions will also establish physiological foundations for music affect. Taking low frequency sounds again: these tend to turn the hearer into a set of asymmetrically resonating chambers, producing organic damage.

A dramatic illustration: in December 2009, nineteen year old student Tom Reid was attending his first university party in London, where he was crowded against a bass speaker. He said to a friend "My heart feels funny. I think the bass is affecting me. Oh God, I feel very weird. My heart is beating so fast". Minutes later he collapsed and died. Cause of death was recorded as Sudden Arrhythmic Death Syndrome (SADS), the result according to a medical spokesperson, of being "suddenly exposed to a lot of loud noise." (Erwin 2009). Loudness was not the only problem. Within the general category of noise trauma, Low Frequency Noise (LFN) is the fastest growing problem. By the early twenty-first century, popular music was (along with the sound of a drop forge – hardly commonplace) the most significant LFN source (Johnson 2009b). Cultural commentary can tell us why the young man was there and why the music was as it was. But it is utterly unable to account for the lethal impact of the music. Documented reports of anxiety, depression, and organic damage in various European countries have now led to legislation regarding not only the volume of public music, but its pitch profile (Ibid.). And the foundations of this are the body's hard-wired response to sound. To understand these social impacts we must go beyond the usual parameters of culturalist popular music studies and enter into dialogue with the discourses of physics and physiology, to acquaint ourselves with terms like bass trap, comb filters, Haas effect, amygdala and the 'quick and dirty paths' of neuroscience (Johnson 2008).

Sonic research is well-situated to explore the role of the body in meaning-making, because sonicity disrupts positivist binaries and theoretical categories that have been pampered in scopocentric cultural analysis. What I mean by that is not the analysis of visual phenomena, but that cultural theory is in itself historically visually oriented. By 'theory' in this context I mean the deployment of an explicit discursive screen through which some social practice is viewed, as an explanatory model, another 'mediation'. It might carry a generic name like 'gender theory' or 'postcolonial theory', or the name of an influential theorist like Deleuze or Lacan. A 'screen' is something through or on which we can view a subject, but also something that blocks our view of it. The 'theoretical turn' from the 1970s has brought the latter sense into increasing prominence. There has been a historical tension between empirical evidence and theory:

> … to a great many Continental philosophers, the empiricist assumption that there exists a pre-theoretical world of facts just waiting to be described seems hopelessly naïve. For the past two centuries, almost all Germany's philosophers have subscribed to some version of the Kantian view that – in Hannah Arendt's formulation – "truth is neither given to nor disclosed to but produced by the human mind". (Miller 2002: 88)

The rise of theory was a necessary reaction against the extreme fetishization of so-called facts, which "sometimes obscured the mind's role in framing concepts" (Ibid.: 89). This 'reaction', however, became itself a form of excess, and even the eminent 'post-modernist' philosopher Richard Rorty, watched the ascent of theory with dismay at the unforeseen social disengagement, the "political uselessness, relative illiteracy, and tiresomely self-congratulatory enthusiasm of this new Academic Left with its continual invocation of the names of Derrida and Foucault" (Ryerson 2002: 433). As a discourse that grew out of a need to disclose the ideological webs that help to explain the hidden springs of society, theory has enriched cultural discourse. But in the hands of many spokespersons it also established a smug neo-scholastic independence of social practice.

At best, the specificity of an artifact disappeared as it was reduced to an ideologically-driven narrative that reinforced a cultural theory. At worst, the actual 'text' would be either cherry-picked so selectively, or implicitly falsified, that we lost sight

altogether of what it actually was, the subjects becoming an abstract homogenised mass. Meaghan Morris cautioned against "theorizations" in cultural studies in which "no text is more bleached of cultural particularity than the one which relentlessly theorises 'difference' without ever once stumbling over some stray, material fact – a poem, a press photo, a snatch of TV news – that could, in its everyday density, take 'theory' by surprise" (cited Duggan 2001: xviii; see further Johnson 2009c, from which parts of this section are adapted). The disconcerting gap between theory and social practice is gleefully embraced by one of the recent favourites of cultural theory, Slavoj Žižek: "For me, life only exists insofar as I can theorize it. … I can be bored to death by a movie, but if you give me a good theory, I will gladly erase the past in an Orwellian fashion and claim that I have always enjoyed it" (Boynton 2002: 57). Whether mischievous or serious, this acknowledges a connection between a fetish for theorization and the falsification of empirical reality. The fact that our sense of the real is largely constructed by culture (but not entirely, as pain so vividly demonstrates), does not mean that all reality is constructed by culture. It can be argued that Žižek's cheerfully perverse attitude to the relationship between cultural theory and cultural practice is very much a reaction against the absurdities of Stalinist politics (Ibid.: 61−62). This helps to explain it as a historically based phenomenon, which, in this context, is precisely the point. That is, that the putative indifference to historical evidence is itself a manifestation of historical conditions, the historical specificities – and therefore limits – of (post)structuralist theory when it runs free of experiential checks.

Underpinning this dynamic is a distancing of ourselves from the messy corporeal self and its obdurate embeddedness in very specific materiality, by invoking theory, mediations and disciplinary boundaries. In music, metaphors for this distancing include: the valorisation of the decorporealised and de-localised concert hall interior, the fixation on the score, and the decorporealisation of performance. I began this section by declaring that cultural theory is drawn towards scopocentric epistemes, and that sonic research will tend to break down that distancing and decorporealising model. Some elaboration is now necessary. In the early seventeenth century Francis Bacon began the Preface to The Great Instauration by declaring that "I, ... dwelling purely and constantly among the facts of nature, …let the images and rays of natural objects meet in a point, as they do in the sense of vision" (Bacon 1960: 13). In 1981 Fredric Jameson began his influential The Political Unconscious: "This book will argue the priority of the political interpretation of literary texts. It conceives of the political perspective as ... the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation" (Jameson 1981: 17). A tradition linking the Renaissance and the postmodern is disclosed in the unquestioned reliance on visual metaphors to theorise knowledge: images, rays, vision, perspectives, horizons. The rise of 'perspective' in draftsmanship and painting, later broadened into a general phenomenological principle by Leibniz, is the construction of the world as we see it. In painting and literature 'realism' took as its starting point the visible world. Attitudes to the body assumed a visual orientation, its dismemberment for purposes of 'inspection' becoming institutionalised with the rise of 'anatomies' from the Renaissance. This 'visualisation' of knowledge has remained deeply entrenched in a range of cultural discourses from Michel Foucault on mechanisms of punishment and control, to Laura Mulvey on film (Foucault 1977; Mulvey 1975; see further Levin 1993; Tonkiss 2003). Even Merleau-Ponty, in his 'Introduction' to his analysis of 'The Body' and its sensations, reduces the sensorium exclusively to vision (2012: 69−74. As a crude check, the index to this edition has well over one hundred references for 'vision' and 'gaze', most of them multi-page; there are no index entries for 'sound' and 'hearing').

As Foucault's work reminds us, as an instrument of knowledge devoted to control and maintaining a separation between Self and Other, the hegemony of vision encompasses the modern era epistemologically and discursively. Because we can't directly apprehend 'knowledge', it requires tropes, which shape both the discourse and its subject. Forms of knowing and interpreting are described as 'insights', 'observations', 'speculations', 'visions'. We 'demonstrate', 'exhibit', 'display, 'visualise' or 'reflect', even sonic experience and knowledge, which is 'theorised' (a word derived from the Greek for 'spectacle'), deploying terms like 'signify', 'semiotics' (from the Greek, 'of signs'), 'visualisation', 'imagery', 'imagination', aural 'perspectives' and acoustic 'horizons'. These words, familiar in discussion of sonic experience, are all 'on loan' from visual discourse.

The metaphors through which we model knowledge are not just rhetorical ornaments, but shaping principles that affect how we understand, value and deploy knowledge. Because visuality became the most authoritative mode of knowing from the time of the scientific revolution, it became the model for the analysis of culture, creating a self-perpetuating feedback loop. The point emerges in the way cultural theory tends to reduce its field to visual entities. This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in film studies. A review of relevant bibliographies discloses an overwhelming privileging of the visual, in a medium which is in equal measure sonic, as in the case of Mulvey's essay cited above, in which 'the gaze' becomes the only operative faculty in the cinematic experience. Cultural theory talks of all meaningful artifacts as 'texts', of which it supplies 'readings'. The selective focus of 'reading' as both an activity and as a trope for attentiveness and analysis, makes it much easier to ignore any inconvenient material datum than does 'listening', which occurs in a less discriminated sonic flood. Visual epistemologies analyse and compartmentalize, while acoustic orders and their phenomenologies are characterised by leakages within and between material and intellectual spaces. The study of music and emotion "dissolves intractable dichotomies concerning nature versus culture, and scientific universalism versus cultural particularism" (Becker 2001: 154).

The body itself has come to represent the antithesis of culture:

> One of the historian's most tenacious habits is the strict separation of biology as an immutable sphere of life from society and culture as spheres that are variable and changeable over time. In this dichotomy between nature and history, the body is assigned to the category of nature and biology. … the body itself, is always thought of as a physiologically stable entity. (Duden 1991: vii.)

This strict separation is fortified in scopocentric theoretical models. That connection is unmistakable back at least as far as Descartes. Approached as an auditory phenomenon, however, the concept of the body itself becomes problematic, so that we are released from the confining either/or alternatives of the mind/body binary. We must 'exhume' the body, recognize its role in meaning-making before we can problematise that deeply embedded mind/body distinction. Cultural theory, when taking that distinction for granted and extravagantly positing the cultural construction of so many aspects of identity and its relationships with society, has often written the body out insofar as it is not a cultural construct. Phenomena such as affect, ideology, semiotics – the whole realm of meaning which is central to the study of culture and cultures – have been lifted off the bone, so to speak, and identified in ideational terms. Elizabeth Wilson commented that feminist studies think of "bodily transformation ideationally and symbolically, without reference to biological constraints. That is, to think about the body as if anatomy did not exist" (Wilson 2004: 69).

Contemporary philosophical enquiry increasingly undermines such theory, and studies of sonic affect provide empirical evidence of the fragility of its underlying dichotomy, the distinction between culture and nature. The two are constantly leaking into each other. The body is as much a filtering mediator of meanings as is culture. Indeed, the very concept of 'mediation', which I have used as a discursive entry into this discussion, and which is so important in popular music discourses, can no longer be taken as a given. Sonic studies challenge the mind/body binary: where does the mediating auditory interface with the human experience begin and end? In sonic processes, where does the material become the cognitive? Here, some entry into the fields of Extended Mind Theory and Distributed Cognition is instructive, approaches to cognitive ecology that model human thought as "inextricable tangles of feed-back, feed-forward, and feed-around loops, that promiscuously criss-cross the boundaries of brain, body and the world" (Clark 2008: xxviii). Such approaches "require that traditional boundaries among individual, object, environment, and the social world be redrawn" (Tribble and Keene 2011: 4). As so much of the empirical investigation into these fields indicates again, a sense of historical depth, as in the case of Tribble and Keane just cited, is useful in this enterprise in order to break out of the stifling constraints of models for self and society that underpin so much cultural theory.

All of which is to argue the limits of such theory, modelled on the visual, in attempting to make sense of popular music. Again drawing on comments in Philip Tagg's essay, this is not simply a methodological issue, but a deeper epistemological one, a question of how we think we know music and sonic phenomena. The theorisation of music enjoyed a particular efflorescence from the late seventeenth century in conjunction with the newly formed Royal Society, who designed experiments in music and hearing, including comparisons between tuning by mathematics (ratios) and by the ear of a professional performer and teacher – an encounter between theory and practice. Rather dismayingly, the living ear failed to detect supposed 'errors' in mathematical tuning of up to one quarter of a semitone (Wardhaugh 2008: 105). A central puzzle was the ear's ability "to recognize exact ratios when they are expressed in sound, and to tolerate considerable deviation from those ratios" (Ibid.: 59). The 'puzzle' of music, the disparity between hearing and theory, is a further reminder of its distinctive phenomenology and its ability to confound tidy scopocentric models of analysis.

Sonority and modern sound technologies demolish categories that are deployed by epistemological power blocs to preserve their hegemony. Sound blurs public and private space, mind and body, objective and subjective, art and nature, aesthetics and sociology, meaning and being. Such categories can be an impediment to understanding hearing, as the work of seventeenth and eighteenth century theorists demonstrates. Sound defies conceptual order. I can make a sound that is just a sound, that makes no lexical 'sense', yet there it is, an intensely meaningful social practice. We all make sounds which are primal, whose affects are beyond the explanatory power of cultural theory and taxonomy. In extremis we sob, scream, sigh. We laugh, we giggle, we groan. We make what is 'just a sound', unlexical, but profoundly expressive, no explanation required. That expressiveness is explicable in terms of sonic physiology and neuroscience, not culture, and indeed that expressive sound confounds the distinction. If we begin our study of music by recognising its essential sonority, it will be quite some distance down the track that passes through many other disciplines before we need theory. Just in this discussion, these disciplines have included cultural history and philosophy, but also going beyond the humanities to acoustic engineering, auditory physiology, and neuroscience. In his novel, The Dean's December, Saul Bellow wrote

"The humanists have flunked the course. They have no strength because they're ignorant of science" (Bellow 1982: 225).

## Conclusion: from music to noise, music from noise

The platform for this article is Philip Tagg's overview of significant deficiencies in the scope of popular music studies. One of these is the relative neglect of vernacular musics in the sense I have defined, and that is associated with a reluctance to engage with their primary modality: corporeality. I am arguing that popular music studies should seek to close the distance between its discourses and social practices through greater recognition of a number of elements in sonic experience and practice: the body and physical space, vernacularity, empirical studies, violation of disciplinary boundaries (which are discursive constructs, all intended to impose comforting order), recognising and engaging with the messy specificity of musical practice. There are significant gaps in popular music studies, perhaps summarised most encompassingly as 'the case of the missing body'. What we think of as the body is a site of disorder, something like 'the abject' as Kristeva expresses it (1982), that threatens all theorization. This disorder shadows the phenomenology of one of the most visceral of expressive forms, music.

Music I suggest is at its most interesting and instructive when it challenges the mechanisms of order and control, when theory collapses in the face of actual sonic phenomenologies. Indeed, to conclude I wish to signpost an argument that our understanding of music and its social functions will be much enriched if we move away from the orderly discourses of aesthetics and received cultural theory and confront music in its most anarchic form, yet a form in which all music has at some time been characterised: noise. Who among the most ardent music-lovers has never said words to the effect, 'I wish they would turn that damned noise down', when hearing what others are enjoying as 'music'? It is at that moment that we confront music in what can be regarded as its most pure form, sound liberated from theoretical and taxonomic mediations.

Within the sonic field, 'noise' has a particular usefulness in the study of the tensions that defined the historical processes leading to modernity. Futurist Luigi Russolo, in 1913, declared extravagantly that in the nineteenth century "with the invention of the machine, Noise was born", and spoke of what might be learned about modernity if his readers were to "cross a large modern capital with our ears more sensitive than our eyes" (Russolo 1986: 26). The explanatory potential of the idea of noise has been demonstrated implicitly by Picker in the general field of Victorian studies, as in the conflict between street musicians and those who sought to ban them for their 'noisiness' (Picker 2003). Within the sonic field, 'noise' is a disruptive site in the already disruptive realm of sound. It disrupts existing codes, orders, discourses, habits and expectations, aesthetics and moralities, a uniquely pure form of resistance to control. Noise represents the potential power of change, an ultimate disruption of the existing discursive and political order.

Yet noise is also instructively ambiguous in the analysis of cultural change. It is what is excluded from a discourse or symbolic system, as in the case of a musical score, which is intended precisely to exclude 'noise' from 'music'. Yet it is what is left out of a score that may be regarded as a key to music affect, as proposed in Charles Keil's "Theory of Participatory Discrepancies" (Keil 1995). 'Noise' is always potentially meaningful, a message about the temporal and spatial 'Other', an encrypted message about change and the future. Many cultural theorists have proposed ways of modelling the subversive or disruptive in social practices and discourses, including such terms as "the abject" (see above), "dirt" (Douglas 1996), "stigmatization" (Goffman 1963).

"Deterritorialisation" (Deleuze and Guattari 1972) invokes a disruption of articulated connections. A 'purpose-built' sonic-based model might be far more productive in music studies. Noise incorporates features of these models of disruption. It deterritorialises; like abjection it closes the distance between self and other; it 'spoils', like Goffman's stigma. But noise is both more provocatively ambiguous and historically appropriate in our acoustically active urban environment. Attali describes music as, ambiguously, both mirror and prophecy, and as "a means of silencing … the monologue of power" (Attali 1985: 8−9, 111). Attali's interest is specifically in music, but his title is a metaphor rather than an active, fully developed analytical model. 'Noise' takes us closer to an ultimate model of disruption but is also a harbinger of productive change. Sound engineers, astronomers, communications researchers, devote enormous resources to trying to decode noise, to disclose a potentially instructive intelligibility already there, but intractable to current theory. The decision to categorise a sound as 'noise' is immensely instructive regarding the character of belief systems in different places, periods and cultural forms, as is documented in extended field studies co-ordinated by Helmi Järviluoma (Järviluoma 2009). 'Noise' draws our attention to the underlying and potentially productive and instructive intelligibility of what is declared to be 'random', 'distortion', 'disruption', in any social discourse, at any moment in history.

I suggest that the term 'noise', appropriately developed, offers significant potential benefits for the study of socio-historical tensions. The relationship between noise and information is constantly shifting, disclosing changes in the way we invest in 'time' and decide upon cultural priorities and orthodoxies. 'Noise' can become discourse, meaningful information, knowledge, tradition, myth. The attempt to control 'noise', and what will be deemed noise, is a key to the paradoxical relations of power in the narrative of cultural history, as famously exemplified in Munch's iconic painting 'The Scream' in which a fearful figure shuts its ears against a noise of its own making.

## Acknowledgements

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