# You Say Invisible, I Say Ubiquitous: A (Formally Former) Student's Response to Philip Tagg's 'Caught on the Back Foot: Epistemic Inertia And Visible Music'

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## Abstract

This essay is a response to Philip Tagg's paper 'Caught on the Back Foot' (2011a) in this journal. It uses Tagg's article as a point of departure to discuss several issues in popular music studies: diversity in the scholarly community and in citations; self-citation; the place of semiotics in popular music studies; and the absence of literature on ubiquitous musics. I argue on the one hand that some of Tagg's choices in his essay don't do service to his contribution to the field, and on the other hand that his argument about visible music and oculocentrism misses the crucial issue of attention. Finally, I suggest that the paradigm of ubiquitous musics that I have proposed elsewhere offers a more productive way to approach this crucial body of music.

**Keywords**: Philip Tagg, gender and popular music studies, oculocentrism, attention, ubiquitous music.

## Introduction

I am both a fan and a critic of Philip Tagg's work, as a student (former and always, given how much there is to learn from him) and an interlocutor. So it is both strange and important to me to engage his essay in Volume 2 of this journal in an extended critique. I first came into contact with Philip in 1987 when I was a graduate student looking for a musicologist working on film music with whom I could study. In the process of preparing to write my PhD thesis, I had learned a lot from some outstanding teachers in film and media studies and literary theory, and I was determined to find a musicologist with whom to work. When I found Philip's writings, which were not easy to get hold of in those days before the World Wide Web, I was thrilled, and I was even more thrilled at how welcoming and generous he was. I got my first e-mail account and arranged to spend a semester at University of Gothenburg, which was equally generous, as were my colleagues there.[1]

When I arrived in 1988, the climate at Gothenburg's musicology department was quite unique; not only was Philip there, but there were people (most of whom still work there now) writing on the Eurovision song contest (Alf Björnberg), modes of listening (Ola Stockfelt), and versions of "*Hound Dog*" (Lars Lilliestam), as well as European ladies' orchestras (Margaret Meyers) and concert hall design (Catharina Dyrssen, who now teaches in Architecture at Chalmers University). No music department I was aware of at that time would have supported such a breadth of ideas, so it was easy to see why Philip's work found a home there.

I now work in a place where Philip worked for ten years, and it is another unusual line-up for a music department. While musicology has certainly changed substantially in the last 25 years, both Gothenburg and Liverpool music departments have much more strength in both popular music and audio-visual sound and music studies than most other departments. In this way, both my research, from the time I was writing my PhD to now, and my professional contexts have been related to Philip's. That makes it feel a little odd to focus on the areas in which we disagree, or that I consider crucial but are absent in Tagg's essay. I hope that readers will keep this small introduction in mind as they read and remember that there is far more about his work with which I agree than with which I do not.

I will focus on these four critiques of Phil's work:

1. The absence of work by women, by queers, by scholars of non-European heritage, and by scholars working outside of Europe and North America, which has important consequences[2]

2. One significant cause of this, Tagg's inclination to cite his own work, leaving aside the many fellow travellers – both those who use his work and those who don't – who have argued similar and related points over the past twenty years[3]

3. Tagg's focus on semiosis to the near exclusion of relationships among musical events within a single work

4. Most importantly, Tagg's argument in this journal that invisible music is under-studied due to the oculocentrism of Western culture, whereas I argue that the low levels of attention given to ubiquitous musics make it a perfect tool for contemporary affective design and marketing strategies (see Kassabian 2013)

I will discuss each of these issues in turn, and then close with some observations about the state of play in popular music studies thirty years on.

## Diversity of the scholarly community

I attended my first IASPM US Branch meeting in 1990, and my first international meeting at Humboldt University in Berlin in 1991. In those days, our community was mainly white, straight, and male (though there were women, like Jan Fairley, involved from the very beginning). I used to joke about it being a group of balding men with ponytails, mainly because I felt deeply out of place, yet hugely welcomed and included at the same time.

Nevertheless, it has been quite a long time now since one could even joke about that, it is simply no longer true. The past twenty years have seen a transformation of the field, such that the range of gender, racial, sexual, and national identities of popular music scholars has broadened considerably, and with it, the range of musics and of scholarly perspectives on them. While there are a number of reasons why diversity is crucial, there are two that I think are most important.

Firstly, students are more likely to pursue a field of study if they see themselves in the scholars who teach them and whose work they read. That may not be a conscious process, but it is well documented and widely accepted by those who study education. To have the best community of thinkers possible, that community must be inclusive, which means diverse in all possible senses.

Secondly, scholars bring with them perspectives and cultures. If we are to take a range of musics seriously, as Tagg insists we should (and I couldn't agree more), then our chances of doing so are much better if our community is as diverse as possible. From Kyra Gaunt's work on African-American girls' games to Mark Slobin's and Philip Bohlman's work on Jewish music to Alejandro Madrid's work on Nor-tec Rifa!, scholars often think and write about musics that have some connection to their own

backgrounds, childhoods, or communities of origin.⁴ Very obviously, then, a more diverse community of scholars is much more likely to produce scholarship on a much broader range of musics. But if our work isn't cited by our mentors and other senior scholars, we have less chance of having an effect on the field. As Freya Jarman points out in *Queer Voices*, there's not a single female artist about whom more than one article appears in the journal *Popular Music* up to its 25th anniversary in 2006 – not Kate Bush, not Dusty Springfield, not even Madonna. So when I say it is a problem that there is a complete lack of diversity in Tagg's long list of works cited, that isn't simply sour grapes or feminist crankiness; it is, rather, a grounded critique of a widespread practice that has genuinely negative consequences. While I don't know the causes, I do know at least one answer, which will be widely reviled by many readers – we have to try consciously be diverse and inclusive in our references. People will say: I quote the relevant literature; I quote the best literature; I quote the literature I know best. To which I can only say, unless you believe that women, queers, and people of non-European heritage or geography *don't* produce relevant, excellent work, you might want to think about why you're not familiar with it.

## Self-citation

There is a similar danger in citing one's own work. If, like Tagg, you are far-seeing enough and lucky enough to have said many things before others, it might be very tempting. But you lose all the strength and support that your fellow travellers would give you, not to mention the nuances and elaborations their work might offer.

Being the first to have said a host of things and then watching others get credit for the idea is challenging to our scholarly egos, of course. I have had that feeling about things I said in *Hearing Film* (2001) still, perhaps it is inevitable. Even worse, perhaps you only think you were the first. More than once I have published something, and then found out afterwards that someone had made a related argument somewhere else. Another way to think about that would be to look at how topics become hot all of a sudden. Part of that usually is because a handful of people were working on a topic at the same time without awareness of each other, but their work comes to publication at around the same time.

All of this adds up simply to one point: we do ourselves a disservice by not citing the other scholars who write about similar topics – it makes us seem alone in a conversation when we genuinely aren't. In Tagg's case, as a groundbreaker, his work is widely recognised, at least in popular music studies; that it should have more recognition in musicology goes without saying, especially among popular music scholars. Thus, referring to others making the same or similar points would only strengthen both his argument and theirs.

## Semiosis

Tagg developed a particular version of music semiotics, first in *Kojak* and most extensively in *Ten Little Title Tunes*, which has influenced many popular musicologists, including me – for a discussion of Anglo-American music semiotics and Tagg's place therein, see Hooper (2013). But there is one peculiar problem with it: focussed as it is on small musical events, or musemes, it has great capacity to account for similarities and associations between the event in question and other events in other pieces of music, but it has a harder time dealing with the relationships among musical events within a single piece. In other words, it thinks of musical meaning in terms of semantics at the expense of syntax. Since most discussions of music focus on structure (often enough to the exclusion of everything else), that might be seen as a strength, an improvement, a corrective. And in a certain way I think it is. But I also think musemes accrue meaning throughout a piece, and any music semiotics needs to be able to account for that. While intensive studies of single features, such as Tagg's study of the Scotch snap (Tagg 2011b), are crucial to the development of musicology generally, so

are ways of understanding musical units in relationship to themselves and to other units within a piece.[5] Tagg's oeuvre is an important beginning in this field of work, but there is much more that still needs to be done – but I will come to that at the end of this essay.

## Oculocentrism versus Attention

The problem of oculocentrism in Western culture is rife, and it has generated quite a bit of scholarship.[6] When my co-editors and I looked for a cover photo for our collection *Ubiquitous Musics* (García Quiñones et al 2013), we found it almost impossible – even commissioning a photo was challenging. How do you show music that is in the background? It is very invisibility makes it challenging to see.

But I think that is a consequence, rather than a cause. The real issue about this type of music is its intent to engage us under the attentional radar, as it were.[7] In 1971, Herbert Simon first described the attention economy. He said:

> Now, when we speak of an information-rich world, we may expect, analogically, that the wealth of information means a dearth of something else—a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence, a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention, and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it. (6-7)

What he recognised was that mass mediation, which arguably began with the printing press but exploded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, had flooded us with information, and the rise of new technologies, especially photocopiers and computers, was set to expand that flood by several orders of magnitude. The demands on our attention, about which much has been written (see, for example, Davenport and Beck, 2001), has made it all the more appealing to try to address us without bidding for our attention. This is the realm of affect.

There has been a great deal of writing on affect lately (see Clough, Ticineto and Halley 2007; Massumi 2002; Gregg and Seigworth 2010), including on affective marketing (Thrift 2004). What I have called ubiquitous music (also known as background music, Muzak, elevator music or programmed music) was already in place as just such a technology, which might contribute to explaining its explosion over the last ten years. It offers a way to address consumers without their consent or notice, much as Starbucks does with its décor and seating – and, of course, music.[8] This use of music requires that its source be beneath notice, which is to say invisible. Thus, while I think Tagg is correct in saying that most of the music we hear is invisible, I do not think its invisibility is the reason we don't analyse it. Rather, I think most music scholars don't analyse it because it goes unnoticed, unattended.

In addition, there are two other reasons that flow from this that are important to note: First, while, as popular music scholars, we have talked ourselves blue in the face about the art versus commerce debate and its attendant ideologies (see, for what I believe is the first example, Frith, 1978), scholarship (with the exception of work on the industries themselves) continues to show a deep discomfort with music that purely has a profit motive. While we accept that musicians must earn a living, music produced for overtly commercial purposes remains among the least studied bodies of works in music – how many articles can we name on music for television, for advertising, for production libraries, and so on? Fortunately this is changing: James Deaville's edited collection *Music in Television* (2011) and the special issue of *Journal of Sonic Studies* examining music on TV, and Nicolai Graakjaer and Christian Jantzen's collection on music in advertising (2009) are evidence of that shift. Nonetheless, if we even begin to contemplate how much of that kind of music we hear each day in relation to the percentage of all music scholarship that studies it, we can hear how out of proportion scholarly output on these musics is. I do not mean to suggest here that only

headcounts and hours justify attention to music, but rather that very high numbers of listeners and listening hours should motivate at least a significant body of scholarship.

Second, there is a pronounced preference for attentive listening, for works written for attentive listening, and for modes of study based on attentive listening. While they are closely related, these are not all exactly the same phenomenon, so I will comment briefly here on each in turn.

The bias towards attentive listening is the most obvious and most widely commented on. All music analysis (that is the subdiscipline called "music theory" in the US) depends on carefully attending to melodic and harmonic (and very occasionally rhythmic) relationships. In the various skills classes in music departments, it is this kind of listening that we work hardest to inculcate in our students, whether they are performers or composers or budding musicologists. It is the listening Adorno holds up as important:

> The *expert* himself, as the first type, would have to be defined by entirely adequate hearing. He would be the fully conscious listener who tends to miss nothing and, at the same time, at each moment, accounts to himself for what he has heard. (1976: 4)

Moreover, popular music studies has done nothing to unseat that bias, preferring instead to replicate it uncritically. It is only in ethnomusicology that one finds descriptions of other modes of listening, though even there I have not seen anything on inattentive or background or ubiquitous listening. Moreover, I haven't seen work on popular music by ethnomusicologists that takes the question of listening and differing modes of listening into the terrain of popular music studies.

The preference for works written for attentive listening is overdetermined. Of course the valorisation of attentive listening, which underpins the professionalisation of the study of music, demands works written for it, but it is also a preference for complexity that under writes this. Complexity theory has generated a great deal of scholarship, including in music, but I mean the word in a more everyday sense. We prefer complex works because they tantalise us, inviting attention and repeated listenings. They don't seem – as some pop does – like things we could have plunked out ourselves on a guitar or keyboard. It is rare to find musical beauty or excellence being extolled on the basis of simplicity, as one can in, for instance, painting or fashion – with the exceptions of some folk and some minimalist compositions.

The preference for modes of study based on attentive listening may seem obvious. How else would we study anything after all? Yet it presents the gnarliest, knottiest challenge to the study of ubiquitous musics. If we mean to study music that is listened to inattentively,[9] we cannot ask people about it, because the process is not a conscious one.[10] We can analyze the musical processes but there is hardly any kind of music that cannot be heard as ubiquitous music in one or another context.[11] There was a time when programmed music in shops and restaurants did not include voices or percussion but that was over by the late 1980s. What we are left with is the same set of tools as those who write and programme such music – our shared (unspoken and unscholarly) cultural understanding of what different styles and genres of music mean or do in different settings. If this were not the case, there wouldn't be a burgeoning mood music industry – which has given certain parts of the western art music repertoire whole new listenerships.

This is a very uncomfortable basis for scholarship, but I believe it is necessary to get over this discomfort and move on. Within Europe and North America, there is a widely shared musical vocabulary, though there are of course local inflections and differences. Nonetheless, based on the first century of film music, we understand particular musical gestures similarly, as Tagg has shown (2003). Moreover, we have a shared understanding of genres and their meaning: bossa nova is sensual, punk is angry. There is even a smartphone app, Mood Agent, that will produce a playlist for you from your own music collection based on how high or low you place five sliders: Sensual,

Tender, Joy, Aggressive, and Tempo. One might think of Mood Agent, then, as marketing affect itself. Given that there is a widely shared understanding of gesture and genre – which is being used to sell us everything from bread and milk to bits of plastic junk to our own moods – I suggest it might be time to get comfortable with scholarship based on what we know. This might seem like a bold call. And from some perspectives it is. But we are trying to comment on a set of industrial practices – and the listening and life practices that both come from and make them – that take such knowledge for granted. If we don't get comfortable with scholarship based on such shared understandings, we will never be able to catch up with what music is doing all around us in the world.

Tagg's work, over the years and in the particular essay under discussion, offers some important directions for this area of scholarship. I have simply wanted to push them further, harder, and in some new directions: for more diversity, for the relationship between museme and structure, and for the centrality of affect and attention in contemporary everyday music listening.

There is so very much that remains before us to do in popular music studies. The thirty years of IASPM's history have seen profound changes. What was once a rockist organisation now welcomes work on a wide range of contemporary musics, and even some historical repertoires. What was once white and male is now significantly more diverse. What was once mainly Anglophone (with Scandinavian, German, and Japanese branches) is now truly international, including a very large Latin American branch and a renewed German branchI have.

I am sure there are many other changes, too, but I want to point out one thing that has not changed, and that is the text/context divide. While there are admirable attempts from both approaches to include the other (and here Tagg's work has always been exemplary), the two approaches generally remain distinct. One reviewer of this article suggested that this was an old issue, and s/he's right – It has been something we have discussed in IASPM meetings since before I began attending them. It is by no means a new concern. And yet it seems to me that relatively little has changed. Most textual scholars – often those trained in music, literature, and film – will point towards contextual matters, but they are unlikely to delve in deeply.[12] Similarly, many contextual thinkers – from sociology, anthropology, and some kinds of media studies – will now make some gesture towards textual processes, but they will not travel too far down that path, either.

Ultimately, it is important that this divide be much more substantively bridged. The way to do so may not be simple, however. As Tagg says, no one can be an expert in everything; the ideal way to approach this problem would be collaboratively. A team that included a textual analyst, an industries scholar, a reception theorist and an audience ethnographer working together would be able to produce a very different kind of research output than any one of them working alone – this isn't a new insight, either, but it remains important, I think. Unfortunately, institutional evaluative bodies such as tenure and promotion committees or, in the UK, Research Excellence Framework panels prefer, at least in the humanities, work that is clearly attributable to an individual scholar.

There are any number of directions that have developed that connect to these issues: developments in curricula, the growth of sound studies, and the expansion of audiovisual sound and music studies are some of the most obvious.[13] However, it is clear that the bulk of music engaged in by people in any number of contexts remains the least studied by scholars of music across all disciplines – and it is important that that changes. In this matter, I couldn't agree with Tagg more.

Philip Tagg is still writing ground-breaking scholarship. Thirty years on, IASPM continues to make spaces for such work – this journal is an example. My critique of Tagg's article is intended to open it outwards, in full acknowledgement that such

openings are among the things Tagg does best. In IASPM's next thirty years, more work on increasing diversity, ubiquitous musics, and a continuing erosion of the text/context divide will be among the most important ways to carry IASPM's – and Tagg's – project into the future.

## Endnotes

[1] Twenty-four years later they were equally generous, inviting me to spend a semester as a visiting researcher. The time was, again, hugely productive, especially thanks to my host, Alf *Bj*örnberg, and to Thomas Bossius, Katarina Glantz, Sara Jansson, Karin Johansson, Lars Lilliestam, and many others in Department of Cultural Sciences, University of Gothenburg.

[2] While there are a wide range of scholars working on popular music who would identify with these categories, it is not unusual to find bibliographies without a mention of one of us. I do not think this is intentional, but it is important to note and think about. Disturbingly, the issue is not a topic of conversation to the extent that it once was, yet we have no plausible explanations for the phenomenon. (Unless, of course, one believes that women, queers, and people of non-European heritage and/or residence are not as good scholars as straight, white men—for the record, I think that belief is very rare indeed.)

[3] The problem here is a simple one: Tagg often talks about issues before they get extended treatment by anyone else. See discussion below.

[4] There are many examples of such connections, both direct and less so: Christopher J. Ballantine's *Marabi Nights: Early South African Jazz and Vaudeville* (1993); Susan Fast's *In the houses of the holy: Led Zeppelin and the power of rock music* (2001); Hiroshi Ogawa's 'The Effects of Karaoke on Music in Japan' (1998); Ellie Hisama's *Gendering Musical Modernism: The Music of Ruth Crawford, Marion Bauer, and Miriam Gideon* (2006); Shuhei Hosokawa's 'The walkman effect' (1984); Freya Jarman's *Queer Voices: Technologies, Vocalities, and the Musical Flaw* (2011); Claire Levy's 'Who is the" Other" in the Balkans? Local Ethnic Music as a Different Source of Identities in Bulgaria' (2002); Alejandro Madrid's *Nor-tec Rifa!: Electronic Dance Music from Tijuana to the World* (2008); Fred Maus's 'Masculine Discourse in Music Theory' (1993); Louise Meintjes *Sound of Africa!: making music Zulu in a South African studio* (2003); Martha Mockus's 'Queer Thoughts on Country Music and k.d.lang' (1994); Frances Negrón-Muntaner's 'Feeling pretty: *West Side Story* and Puerto Rican identity discourses' (2000); Ana María Ochoa's 'Counterpoints of time and space in *El Concierto de los colores*' (1997); Deborah Pacini Hernandez's *Bachata: A Social History of Dominican Popular Music* (1995); Guthrie Ramsey's *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-hop* (2003); Annie Janeiro Randall's *Dusty! Queen of the Postmods* (2009); Jodie Taylor's *Playing it queer: popular music, identity and queer world-making* (2012), Sheila Whiteley's *Too Much Too Young: Popular Music, Age, and Gender (2005)*.

[5] There is, of course, a large literature on musical semiotics outside of popular music studies, and the question of the relationship between semiotic units is dealt with there.

[6] See, for example, Martin Jay's 'Scopic regimes of modernity' (1998) and Alan Spiegel's *Fiction and the camera eye: visual consciousness in film and the modern novel* (1976).

[7] *Ubiquitous Listening* (Kassabian 2013); *Ubiquitous Musics* (García Quiñones et al 2013).

[8] On Starbucks, see Bryant Simon (2009) and *Ubiquitous Listening* (Kassabian 2013), Chapter 6.

[9] I don't believe that this is hearing as opposed to listening; see introduction to *Ubiquitous Listening* (Kassabian 2013).

[10] The relationships between consciousness and attention are beyond the scope of this paper.

[11] See, for example, Sterne (1993) and *Ubiquitous Listening* (Kassabian 2013), Chapter 6.

[12] The biggest exception to this is David Brackett, whose work is exemplary in this regard, and not really as widely used as it should be. See especially *Interpreting Popular Music* (2000).

[13] See, for some examples, the *Journal of Sonic Studies*, *Sound Effects*, the European Sound Studies Association, and the several journals on audiovisual sound and music, including *Music, Sound, and the Moving Image*.

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