

BSA annual conference: 'Remaking the Future'

Deadline for paper upload March 7th 2021

Music and contemporaneity

Temporality, scale and the global(ised) present

Before we can begin to 'remake the future', necessary though such a project may be (now more than ever), we must first attend to the conditions of the historical present, those processes and practices that render it the way it is. My contention is that rather than concentrating on speculative futures or whether something can be said to be sufficiently new or have been 'remade', attention must be directed towards when and how the present itself—of a particular project, political movement, or work of art—comes into existence. In this respect I turn to the notion of 'contemporaneity', here conceived as a constitutive *condition* of the historical present, but I will go into this in more detail momentarily.

One way of doing this is to examine how present is both mediated through, and as it itself mediates, artistic and cultural practices. As my title suggests, I think music is a particularly useful medium of production through which to conduct such a project. The analytical, and indeed political, utility of music, I would suggest, resides in its embedeness in everyday life. To repurpose a phrase from art historian Ben Burbridge (originally speaking on photography), 'in its present state [music] exemplifies the best and worst of what we can be'.¹ Such a proposition provides this talk, and my wider phd project from which it is derived, with a certain critical perspective, and serves as an appropriate metaphor for the larger political project with which it grapples (which at its core is a global politics of time).

Contemporaneity

¹ Burbridge says this about photography, I reappropriate here in reference to music. See *Photography After Capitalism* (London: Goldsmiths Press, 2020), p. 18. COMMENT FROM GEOFF: reminds me of Benjamin Noys, "This paradox [of value] is simply stated: on the one hand, the artist is the most capitalist subject, the one who subjects themselves to value extraction willingly and creatively, who prefigures the dominant trend lines of contemporary capitalism [...] on the other hand, the artist is the least capitalist subject, the one who resists value extraction through an alternative and excessive self-valorisation that can never be contained by capitalism." The most capitalist subject is the least capitalist subject at the same time.

The philosopher Peter Osborne's work has been influential in thinking about contemporaneity in a critical context, where the term has been stripped of its colloquial definition of *things occurring in the same chronological period of time* to describe the complex temporal logic of the historical present as a site of heterogeneous forms of time. In his 2013 book *Anywhere or Not At All*, Osborne describes contemporaneity as 'a coming together not simply "in" time, but *of* times.' He carries on to say 'we do not just live or exist together in time with our contemporaries—as if time itself is indifferent to this existing together—but rather the present is increasingly characterized by a coming together of *different but equally "present"* temporalities or "*times*", a temporal unity in disjunction, or a *disjunctive unity of present times*'.²

Such a conception of the present, for Osborne, is a product of the spatial expansion of Western modernity, which can thus be classified as the temporal logic of global(ised) capitalism. As such, 'contemporaneity' comes to stand in for the experience of various social and cultural times that developed along their own historical trajectories and which have been increasingly brought together in what Osborne has called a 'disjunctive conjunction'. To point to the historical forces that have contributed to this conjuncture, often highlighted are the transnational character of post-89 global politics, the emergence of what Arjun Appadurai called the 'global-cultural economy', and the pervasiveness of media technologies and Bratton's 'planetary computation'.³ But I'm not going to expand on these points here.

Contemporary art/cultural production

Adopting such an understanding of contemporaneity complicates, or at least modifies, the meanings of notions like 'contemporary art' or 'contemporary culture'. In Osborne's terms, they stop referring to an empirical totalisation of art or cultural production at the time of a given present.⁴ For something to be contemporary in this critical conception, it must be said to contribute to the production of the present itself. This is what gives it its critical, and thus also its exclusionary, character (not everything can be 'contemporary' in this regard).

² Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 17.

³ Appadurai, Bratton, *The Stack* (MIT Press, 2015).

⁴ Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All*, p. 2.

Osborne himself comes to quite specific conclusions regarding the philosophical character of ‘contemporary art’, owing to the significance he places on the conceptual art project of the 1960s and his dedication to the post-Kantian romantic philosophy of art (particularly as the tradition of Kant, Hegel, Schelling has been mediated in the work of Theodor Adorno). Briefly put, this leads Osborne to the conclusion that contemporary art is ontologically ‘postconceptual’—a category that recognises the ineliminable aesthetic dimension of all art (the success of conceptual art’s failure) while affording primacy to the concept across all material instantiations of individual artworks, emphasising the conceptual character of much contemporary art.⁵

Thus, Osborne arrives at a position that stresses art’s conceptual, material, and relational dimension, returning to an almost Baumgartian sense of the ‘aesthetic’ (though again mediated by Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*) as related to the spatio-temporal sensuousness and distributed materialisation of autonomous works. This perspective enables a re-reading of the art of the past 60 or so years from the position of the historical present, what Osborne has come to call a ‘historical ontology of art’.⁶

Criticisms and lack of theorisation of the social

In affording primacy to the conceptual dimension and distributed materiality of autonomous works of contemporary art, Osborne’s philosophy has come under scrutiny from a number of disciplinary perspectives. One such line of critique has been levelled at the seeming extrapolation of ‘Western contemporary art into an existing Western-centric scheme’, which Osborne elevates to contemporary art *as such*.⁷ However, this criticism isn’t what I want to focus on here. Rather, in the context of this conference, I turn to sociologist and anthropologist Georgina Born’s contention that Osborne (among many others it must be said) fails to sufficiently theorise the

⁵ See Peter Osborne, ‘The Postconceptual Condition: Or the Cultural Logic of High Capitalism Today’, in *The Postconceptual Condition* (London: Verso, 2018).

⁶ *Anywhere or Not At All*, p. 22.

⁷ Ian A. McLean, ‘The necessity of the new: between the modern and the contemporary’, in N. Croggon and H. Hughes eds., *Three Reflections on Contemporary Art History* (Melbourne: Discipline, 2014), pp. 15–52.

social dimension of art in the globally interconnected context of contemporaneity. As Born puts it,

Rather than re-theorize art's "ineliminable" aesthetic dimension, Osborne ultimately develops a post-Adornian conception of the aesthetic dimension by equating it with art's "materialization," that is, its "felt, spatio-temporal" presentation—where this excludes from feeling, space, and time any social dimension. Indeed, here and elsewhere, for Osborne the "spatial" (in the guise of the geopolitical, or art's transnationalization or globalization) appears to represent an inadequate stand-in, theoretically, for any diagnosis of art's plural social mediations.⁸

Arguing for what she calls a 'social aesthetics', Born rejects the idea that 'one can or should disentangle the social, in all its varied modalities, from experiences and conceptions of the aesthetic.'⁹ As such, for Born, art's social dimension plays a constitutive role that transcends the conceptual or material (in the sense of its spatio-temporal physicality), situating works of art (including 'non-object-based' performance and sonic arts) within the 'larger socio-material assemblages within which they are created, circulated, and consumed.'¹⁰

Where Osborne might attempt to retain the *autonomy* of art, maintaining its Kantian functionless-ness or the Adornian view of the artwork as a social totality, Born argues for deeper investment in the many ways in which 'our interactions with art participate in or serve an array of political orientations and social and cultural processes.'¹¹ Indeed, in the context of contemporaneity, which is itself a sort of historical totality—the totalisation of global (techno)social 'times' that constitute the present—mightn't it be productive to understand how, as Born puts it, works of art 'and the subjects of aesthetic experience that they elicit and encounter together live their lives'?¹² To observe what Ina Blom has called the '*art-specific production of sociality*' from the perspective of the present?¹³

⁸ Georgina Born et al., 'What is Social Aesthetics', p. 29.

⁹ Born, 'What is Social Aesthetics', p. 2.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 5.

¹² Ibid, p. 2.

¹³ Ina Blom, 'Mediating Sociality: A Contested Question of Contemporary Art', in Liv Hausken ed. *Thinking Media Aesthetics, Media Studies, Film Studies and the Arts* (Oxford: Peter D Lang, 2013), p. 69. Italics in original.

Music

Building on Born, I suggest music becomes particularly useful in this regard—though not without complication. As a constitutive ingredient of social ordering (DeNora, 2000), music has a unique capacity to (re)produce social unity and division on a global scale (Born and Hesmondhalgh, 2000) while, at the same time, often functioning on the world market as *capital objectified*, where aesthetic content masks the underlying interests of corporations and exploitative, unsustainable, modes of production. This last point has been powerfully demonstrated in music sociologist Kyle Devine’s recent ethnographic work on the staple commodities that underpin music’s mediatic condition today, which encompasses a global-scale labour force and massive carbon extraction, putting paid to any residual notions that hold music as a particularly ‘absolute’ or immaterial art form.¹⁴

As Born argues with reference to the other arts, music appears to be unique in the way it produces sociality in a plurality of ways that operate across the globe—partly owing to its complex ontological status as an aesthetic phenomenon that unfolds over time. This is of course the case in the practice and performance of music in ‘real time’—music as activity, what ethnomusicologist Christopher Small termed ‘musicking’—but it also plays out in cultural terms. Born asks us to consider, for instance, how ‘music conjures up and animates imagined communities, aggregating its listeners into virtual collectivities and publics based on musical and other identifications’.¹⁵ Riffing on Benedict Anderson’s book *Imagined Communities*, Born is referring here to the powerful role music has played historically in the formation of (sub)culturally imagined communities—or scenes—such as punk, mods, various ‘hippy’ movements and so on, in relation to the formation of social groups through fashion choices and other factors.¹⁶ Such formations, of course, were of central concern to the first and second wave of cultural theory coming out of what was Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, where music featured heavily, particularly in the work of Dick Hebdige and Angela McRobbie.¹⁷

¹⁴ Kyle Devine, *Decomposed: The Political Ecology of Music* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019).

¹⁵ Born, ‘Music and the materialization of identities’, p. 378.

¹⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2016).

¹⁷ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979); Angela McRobbie, *Jackie*

Temporality and scale

In attempting to take both of these perspectives seriously, a number of tensions and inherent contradictions arise that, I propose, might be elaborated through a consideration of ‘scale’. Cultural theorist Anna McCarthy speaks of a ‘politics of scale’, a notion she specifically explicates in relation to the field of cultural studies. Similarly, in a recent book anthropologist Anna Tsing argues that a pressing issue for researchers of phenomena in the context of global capital is to ‘scale up’ our research projects/questions without altering their intent. Of this I am not so sure. As I see it, a scalar perspective radically alters our objects of analysis and complicates their unification, perhaps best exemplified in the disjunctive conjunction of contemporaneity itself.

To think in scalar terms dramatically alters each of the concepts under consideration—of course, to conceive ‘music’ from the level of individual experience is vastly different than conceiving it from the geopolitical construction that is ‘the West’ or even the nation-state, for instance. But to drive the scalar perspective to more radical ends, what does it mean to conceive music from the microscale perspective of tones and signals—the materiality of sound itself—or the microprocesses that facilitate much of contemporary music reproduction? Is it possible to connect microprocesses to macro considerations of broader historical temporalities and trajectories, a complex conjunction of which the historical present is composed. Indeed, as a concept that operates at the scale of the globe, how might contemporaneity be articulated with any semblance of regional specificity, or glimpsed within individual practices, or congealed within signals?

The question of unifying multiscalar concepts or objects would of course be contentious in many disciplines. It is true that one mustn’t ‘attend a panel of world system historians in the morning and chide them for the absence of “voices” in their accounts, and then criticize a panel of ethnomethodologists and microhistorians for disregarding the big picture in the afternoon.’¹⁸

An Ideology of Adolescent Femininity... 1978.

¹⁸ Anna McCarthy, ‘From the Ordinary to the Concrete Cultural Studies and the Politics of Scale’, p. 26.

However, as scholars who appreciate the analytical power of theoretical abstraction, and the role that theory occupies in social research more broadly, we should at least entertain the thought experiment of attempting to connect the micro and macro in our concepts, not for the sake of ontologizing things like ‘music’ in order to define what it is. But in order to use concepts like ‘music’ as tools through which to understand the conditions of the present, which is both defined by competing histories (Raymond Williams’s famous category of the ‘residual’), microprocesses that operate beyond individual human sensibilities as well as a certain planetarity. As I have tried to suggest, music becomes particularly useful in this regard because of its ubiquity in everyday life *and* because it is so intimately interconnected to all of the conditions of the present I have just mentioned. If the future is to be remade—as this conference suggests—we must first know the present historically, which requires us to confront and comprehend the multiscalar conditions through which it is reproduced and music can help us do this.

Thank you.