

The Politics of Medium Specificity

Thanks for having me—happy to be here to speak with you all and thank you for reading (or entertaining) the draft of my essay. I want to emphasise that it really is a first draft, I just about managed to get it together for the purposes of this talk, but in many ways I hope that it's looseness may be more productive to facilitate discussion that will inform further work on the paper. I have been looking forward to this as I am usually unable to join in with these talks because I'm typically working at this time, though I have watched a few back after the fact so it feels like a familiar forum, even if my involvement has been on the periphery. So yes, despite the inescapable presence of the medium through which we are communicating and which has become second nature, it is good to be here speaking with you 'live'.

I'm going to use this time before we get into a wider discussion to expand on some of the issues I address in the paper, and to explore some things I haven't yet been able to include. But it is also an opportunity to raise concerns that are important to the broader conversation but will nevertheless fall outside of the scope of one essay (which is, in any case, being written with a particular venue in mind and as such pursues a particular line of inquiry that brings with it its own limitations).

What politics?

Essentially, the paper attempts to reappropriate the concept of medium specificity and render it a useful tool for thinking about art in the context of globalised capitalism. I come to this argument in one sense through the philosophy of contemporary art, where recently there have been renewed calls to transcend the notion of medium and recognize contemporary art as a distinctly generic category. It's not that I disagree with such an approach per se, but that I think it leads us down an intellectual path steers us away from the historical and material specificity of our present moment.

So, perhaps a good place to begin is with the title: 'The Politics of Medium Specificity'. That is, to break into the two contentious concepts of 'politics' and 'medium specificity'.

While I don't explicitly state what I understand 'politics' to mean in the paper, it is implicit throughout, emphasised in the introductory paragraphs. It hopefully becomes clear through reading that I am primarily attempting to follow what—in our current state of theoretical affairs—feels necessary to qualify as an 'old' materialist conception of political economy, which remains aligned to a Marxian emphasis on social relations as they are subjected to, and which are also central to the reproduction of, the structural logic of a tendentially global capitalism. To do so, I think, is important for a number of reasons (even though such an approach may be out of vogue, so to speak).

In particular, as I frame it in the paper, the position I advocate stands in tension with more recent 'new' materialist perspectives—the so-called material turn inspired by, among other approaches of course, Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory and so on—that want to deflate the specificity of domains such as art and to an extent bypass, by advocating for a 'flat ontology', discussions of the structural realities of capitalism itself. As Latour himself has previously put it, 'Like God, capitalism does not exist' (*Pasteurization*, 173).

For those unfamiliar, broadly conceived a 'flat ontology' is the opposite of systems based on hierarchical orderings of ontologies, and finds its origins in the work of philosopher Manuel DeLanda. These types of what are described as 'monist' ontology, which place all individual things or objects on a categorical even footing, run counter to what some term 'dualist' theories that attempt to maintain any distinction between the categories of, to take the grandest example, nature and society, such as the dialectical relation between the material economic 'base' and cultural 'superstructure' in Marxist orthodoxy or, speaking more recently, multi-level constructions like Benjamin Bratton's concept of the computational 'Stack' (which I read perhaps idiosyncratically, along with media and cultural theorist McKenzie Wark, as an expanded focus on the forces and

relations of production as they are bound together within the megastructure of planetary-scale computation). In a broad sense, what many theoretically flat ontologies claim is that nature and culture, or the natural and the social, are so intertwined that it is futile to attempt to render them as separate entities (hence Latour's now famous dictum, 'we have never been modern').

An 'old' materialist, or historical materialist, perspective, to draw upon a distinction recently explored in some depth by Marxist ecologist Andreas Malm, instead advocates for what has been described as a 'substance monism' but a 'property dualism'—for me this language all sounds too orthodoxly 'philosophy of mind' or Cartesian, but what such a proposition impels us to recognise at once is that both nature and society are made of the same substance or matter, but that between the two remain highly distinctive qualities (and they are qualities that are important if we are to address the concurrent crises that abound within the extractivist practices of global capital accumulation and what Malm fossil capital). So that which is natural and that which is social is essentially made of the same matter, but their emergent properties differ. I won't really go further into this debate here explicitly, but I'd be really happy to discuss this in more detail afterwards if this is of interest to the group.

I must make a point of stating, however, that I agree with many facets of a variety of new materialist or new materialist-inspired projects, especially in earlier formations that were born out of a desire to re-centre the materiality of the body (as in feminist theory) as well as addressing the role of technology as it became and continues to become more and more central to everyday life, but with subsequent developments I think there can be a danger of placing emphasis in the wrong places (such as the consumptive practices of individuals, as we shall see), and find it difficult to contend with the ascription of what appears to be 'human-like' agency to all things.

It is in this respect that I frame something like 'music' (which I'll come on to say more about momentarily) as a 'medium of production', which is to recognise it as a specific subsection of the totality of what Marx characterised in the *Grundrisse* as 'production in

general' (p. 19): that is, the abstraction of all production. As a medium of production, what music (and I stress that it could be photography or other forms) is taken to mean, or that to which it is said to refer, must be radically reconfigured or expanded to include things that would otherwise be deemed non-musical, such as the social relations, technologies and other non-human processes that are required to ensure that the business-as-usual of music powers on as one, say a western popular music fan, might expect.

As a medium of 'production', then, other relationships are implied and hold a place of significance, including abstractions like 'the market' or capital's 'laws of movement' and so on, but it does not follow or demand that their ontological status be thrust under the microscope. And as I note in the paper, this expansion is the exact opposite to the methodological tactic of deflation, materially as well as semantically. But importantly, the intention behind confronting music as a *medium of production* is to replace the dominant understanding of the musical work as an object—the 'work'—that interacts with other objects on a flat plane or that is even produced for the sake of 'art', with an understanding of music as a socially-located activity defined in terms of its historical, social, and material specificity.

In relation to the text, then, I propose something as broad as 'music' can be understood as a medium by exploiting the slippage of that term that Raymond Williams traces in his 'From Medium to Social Practice' essay in *Marxism and Literature*. The meaning of 'medium', Williams tells us, shifted from quite a specific usage in the realm of perception (related to technical equipment such as lenses) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, then to communications media (like newspapers) and artistic materials (like wood and paint, or words) in the nineteenth, and then to what was more commonly referred to as the 'forms' of art themselves in the twentieth century, which he argued came about with the emergence of modernist formalism. More on that in a second.

Williams's call to move beyond medium for what he described instead as a focus on 'material social practice' was both a materialist response to what he perceived as the

reification of artworks as existing ‘in the medium’ (wanting to focus on practical activity and flux over fixed categories or notions of objecthood) and the so-called idealisation of art, which set out to cast it as a higher-order form of cultural production and domain of primarily bourgeois interest, much removed from the everyday toil of mechanical work as the concept of ‘work’ itself had come to be understood under the real subsumption of capital.

As I put it in the paper, ‘The introduction of the artist to the capitalist market gave rise to a peculiar form of alienation ... in which both the identity of the [handicraft] worker[, the artisan] was thrown into question and the product of the work itself became displaced by the form of the commodity. As noted by Williams (1977, 161), the general form of protest that arose out of this alienation was two-fold; at once in the name of handicraft workers’ status [as productive workers] within the capitalist system of production and in the name of art as an autonomous and exceptional domain of material activity’.

I won’t repeat too many of the details of Williams’s argument, as it was outlined in the essay, but it suffices to say that ‘social practice’ was, in many respects, an attempt to de-idealise art and cultural production more generally—to emphasise it as one type of labouring among others, which is a perspective I broadly agree with. As art historian WJT Mitchell asks, however, does this de-reification go too far? As Mitchell puts it:

Is every social practice a medium? This is not the same as asking whether every social practice is mediated. Is a tea party, a union walkout, an election, a bowling league, a playground game, a war, or a negotiated settlement a medium [at which point I might add for that some, like Friedrich Kittler, they might be]? Surely these are all social practices, but it would seem odd to call them media no matter how much they might depend on media of various sorts—on material supports, representation, representatives, codes, conventions, and even mediators. The concept of a medium, if it is worth preserving at all, seems (unsurprisingly) to occupy some sort of vague middle ground between materials and the things people do with them.

In other words, in my reading, Mitchell appears to be probing the question of a boundary, or what I would prefer to think of as the ‘specificity’ of one medium rather than another, and to this I turn to the art critic Clement Greenberg.

Moving on from Greenberg

In the essay I sort of set Williams and Greenberg up as two sides of the same coin—characteristically distinctive in their approaches and intentions but not altogether alien to one another.

This may of course feel uncomfortable for some—Greenberg’s reputation as the arch-theorist of high modernism certainly isn’t without precedence. However, I would also point out, as others have too, that Greenberg’s writings were certainly the target of a sort of obfuscation campaign by other New York art critics in the 1950s (such as his fellow *Partisan Review* contributor and the later resident critic for the *New Yorker* Harold Rosenberg), through which Greenberg’s writings were subjected to repeated mischaracterization and denigration. This phenomena, in fact, has been referred to as ‘Clebashing’ (Battaglia, ‘Clement Greenberg: a Political Reconsideration’, 2008).

But other damaging elements also arose later, with the emergence of what Rosalind Krauss termed post-medium practices such as installation art, anti-medium specific sentiments tended to reduce Greenberg’s appeal to the specificity of the medium to its basic components without really explaining why Greenberg proposed such an approach in the first place—the results of which being a general sense of distrust of the concept that have stuck with it to this day. I heard a story from a well-known object oriented philosopher who mentioned Greenberg’s name at Transmediale in 2012 where they were allegedly greeted with hissing from the audience! One only needs to read Greenberg to understand that his writings are more complex than they are often made out to be (and, at least for me, are equally as productive in places as they are infuriating).

//It is also worth mentioning that nestled in here is another really crucial conversation around how ill-conceived reactions to medium specific modernism that conflated medium specificity with modernism as such paved the way to a certain strand of postmodernism, but that is perhaps for another time.

As it should be clear from the paper, I am less concerned with maintaining a loyalty with Greenberg's particular construction of medium specificity—the adoption of which would lead me to propose that the primary concern of the artist should be to explore the limits of a medium through self-reflexivity (a version of this is currently being revived, however, both in the work of the photographer Jeff Wall and philosopher Graham Harman, both appealing to Greenberg's specifically formalist concerns).

I am more interested in the logic that guided Greenberg to come to the medium specificity concept in the first instance, which, in his case, can in many respects be boiled down to an appreciation for the work of artists and the execution of technical processes—this is the essence of the medium specificity that resides at the centre of Greenberg's theorisation of modernist art; if traditional or classic art was the interpretation of nature, authentic modernist art was the interpretation of the interpretation, which foregrounded technique. As Boris Groys put it, for Greenberg 'the avant-garde [or modernist art] operate[d] mainly by means of abstraction: it remove[d] the "what" of the work of art to reveal its "how".' It was precisely this approach that gave rise to modernist art's political contradiction, however, because to appreciate the formal and material execution of artistic technique required a 'consumer' suitably trained to do so, which often implied a class a people with both time to invest in the appreciation of art and money. In this sense, Greenberg's theory of modernist art was more political than it was aesthetic—he was not interested in modernist art or even in modernist artists as producers of art per se, as much as he was with the consumers of art (to paraphrase Groys 2010).

Fast forward to today, however, and my own interests are also less immediately aesthetic as they are political. But rather than focussing on techniques and the work of artists in the production of artworks or any sense of artistic genius, I, like Williams, want to bring to the fore an expanded sense of practice; focussing on the specific processes, social relations and technologies that are necessarily bound together to underpin what we understand phenomena such as 'music' to mean on a global scale.

My intention therefore is to reinforce Greenberg's call to specificity, while taking the conversation outside of the limit-case of the individual artwork and understanding specificity as an identification of global practices in action (which I believe is necessary in the global context of our historical present). Though I don't expand on this in the paper as such, this is for me what it means to address the critical contemporaneity of art in our current historical conjuncture.

If modernist art was about autonomy, whether in the immanent sense of theorists like Theodor Adorno, or in the formalism of Greenberg, contemporary art—as it is related to contemporaneity in its historical and philosophical sense—is about heteronomy and a registration of the multiple social and technologised times that come together to constitute the historical present. My proposition is that art forms, broadly conceived as mediums of production, are useful domains of activity through which to analyse this complex conjuncture—and that of them, music is particularly useful.

Why focus on music?

It is in this sense that I turn to Kyle Devine's recent work on the political ecology of music. Devine's work is important for me because it does appear to combine these two approaches I have been describing and is among the first significant studies that constructs the history of music as an extractive industry. Pursuing what he calls a 'musicology without music', Devine is less immediately interested in the artistic content of various musics as he is with the how and why music under capital is made and how it circulates, but importantly how these things draw together a sense of planetary

connectedness through industrial practices. In this respect, he sees something specific enough in music to centre its modes of reproduction while also facilitating an analysis that moves beyond concerns of the individual work by extending music to ‘the things we need to make and hear it’.

Devine’s book *Decomposed: The Political Ecology of Music* dispels the often recited myth that music is an immaterial domain, or that with the digitalization of music and the dematerialisation of the record or CD artefact it became more immaterial (such myths have been perpetuated by critics and scholars alike). This is evidenced in the ever rising emissions the industry has pumped into the atmosphere since at least the beginning of the twentieth century, passing through the production of shellac discs, plastic products such as cassettes and CDs, and now to streams of data.

The intensifying embeddedness of recorded music into everyday life by streaming platforms, along with attendant rising rates of turnover of electronic devices, constantly growing ranges of accessory technologies, such as speakers and headphones, and the waste these all produce, has meant a massive increase in energy consumption. Some of the estimates Devine examines put emissions produced by streaming at double the peak output of the plastic era, all while levels of plastic consumption have not declined.

As I state in the paper, I think this work is vital and is an area I hope to contribute to—though as I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, Devine’s adoption of the Latourian method of ‘deflation’ is problematic. The deflation of music is important for Devine because it offers a counter to approaches that understand it as an exceptional domain of activity, which for him leads to a general lack of critical engagement with its dirty and exploitative practices. Perhaps he is right—however in doing so, Devine reverts to an analysis of music’s staple commodities and their consumption. But such a contention is salient only if we understand consumption primarily at the level of the desire of the individual consumer. Yet as long as access to music is primarily grounded on the accumulation of capital, it will continue to be entwined with ideological processes, themselves inseparable from a racialized and gendered global division of the pleasures

and the suffering that music engenders. As I say in the paper, music represents the best and worst of what we can be.

As I outlined what I think of this new materialist approach, and what it precludes, earlier and in the paper I won't repeat it now. We can discuss this further momentarily, but I thought it might be interesting to end this introductory talk with some remarks on the problem of 'scale'. Though I had every intention of doing so, I didn't really get into this as much in the draft as I would have liked, but it is something I intend to develop and place more centrally in subsequent drafts.

Scale

Considerations of scale have often been neglected in art theory and criticism, though a number of recent and forthcoming books and projects have been attempting to rectify this, largely from some form of media studies perspective.

Each of the concepts or fields I explored in the paper are problematized when we add the scalar dimension: while taking a historical approach, Devine's project remains in what I would describe as the mid-scale, concerned primarily as it is with the circulation of musical works; Greenberg's variation of medium specificity operates at the scale of the individual work of art, which occupies an awkward position that might be considered as the micro-scale through its emphasis on technique and materials; and Williams's approach is quite clearly concerned with the macro-scale that looks to society and culture itself.

These are all examples of what media ecologist Zach Horton calls 'scalar collapse' in a forthcoming book. Scalar collapse, as Horton describes it, 'is an interfacial technique of conjoining two or more different scales within a single medium, enabling access from the first to the second by homogenizing their differential dynamics and subordinating the second to the first.' (Horton, p.36) I think it is clear to see how such a concept becomes

useful, such as in reference to Williams, for example, where we risk losing the specificity of art when artistic production is conceived as operating like society at large.

As I say, I haven't yet developed this in the paper, but in my phd thesis I argue that the concept of medium must be conceived across multiple scales (it is the conjunction of scales), and that attentiveness is paid to the specificity of each scale and importantly their conjunction. In contrast to recent remarks from anthropologist Anna Tsing, who says that the challenge for scholars working in the debris of capitalist ruins is to scale up their research objects without altering their essence, my contention is that a scalar perspective radically alters our objects of analysis and complicates their unification. Music takes on different forms at different scales, I would counter (riffing on Benjamin Bratton).

From the level of individual experience music is vastly different than when conceived from the geopolitical construction that is 'the West' or even the nation-state; and when considered from the individual consumer it is markedly different than when viewed from the capitalist property relation. But I would also argue that it is necessary to drive the scalar perspective to more radical ends, and to ask what it means to conceive music from the microscale perspective of tones and signals—the materiality of sound itself—or the algorithmic microtemporal processes that facilitate much of contemporary music reproduction? I am interested in whether it is possible to connect such microprocesses to macro considerations of broader historical temporalities and trajectories, the complex conjunction of which the historical present is composed.

In the interest of time I am going to leave it there and hope that I have said enough to provoke some questions. Again, I am really thankful that you all took the time to have a look at the paper and I'm looking forward to hearing your thoughts before starting on the next draft.