

Is “New Music” contemporary art?

Music, medium specificity and contemporaneity

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My title is a response to a late chapter in Peter Osborne’s 2018 book *The Postconceptual Condition*, entitled ‘The terminology is in crisis: music and postconceptual art’, in which he sets out to consider music under the rubric of what he has called the ‘postconceptual condition of contemporary art’.¹ If a little tenuously, I still think this can be considered as addressing the theme of the session, since it is often *New Music* and postwar art musics that are classified as ‘contemporary’. In the chapter, Osborne asks whether there is really, in any critically comprehensible sense, a difference between certain instances of *New Music* in non-music institutional settings and post-medium-specific contemporary art practices that make use of sound. Osborne continues throughout the chapter to make the case for a generic contemporary art, to which he says music of course contributes, and has done for some time, just not as ‘music’ in a medium specific sense.²

What I want to do today is suggest that the role of the specific medium shouldn’t be cast aside in the consideration of contemporary art, which, with the dissolution of medial boundaries, is increasingly being thought of as an ‘art’ in general. Rather, medium specificity should be thought differently. As well as this, I want to suggest that the qualities we recognise as specifically musical, the material realities and practices that define what ‘music’ is at this historical moment, have a particularly strong affinity to the form of historical contemporaneity, which defines both the capitalistic time of the historical present and the postconceptual condition of contemporary art: in many respects, music is perhaps *the* medium of contemporaneity. The overriding point of my talk is to emphasise that I think before speaking of individual works or asking whether or not *New Music* is a form of contemporary art, it is necessary to explore the more fundamental correlation between music as a medium and the logic of contemporaneity.

Before any type of music or singular work can be regarded as a form of contemporary art in a critically construed sense (and not merely empirically or in its usual adjectival sense), there is an apparent need to bring two seemingly contradictory concepts together: the generic notion of ‘contemporary art’ that is being expounded by Osborne and others; as well as the notion of medium-specificity, now infamously associated with the formalist criticism of Clement Greenberg, which is being (somewhat) revived today

¹ See Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of contemporary art* (London: Verso, 2013).

² Osborne, *The Postconceptual Condition* (London: Verso, 2018), PAGE.

in the formalism of Graham Harman's 'speculative realist aesthetics'.³ The way I think these two contradictory concepts can be brought together in the construction of a new (new version of an old) concept—a conception of contemporary art that is both critical and medium specific—is by trying to conceptualise a Marxist materialist notion of medium specificity (at least begin to in the scope of this short talk) that takes seriously the material conditions of artistic production, reproduction, circulation, and so on, that is specific to each medium. I will attempt to set out a sketch of what this materialist theory of medium specificity could look like, through a rereading of Raymond Williams' work in *Marxism and Literature* (1977). In particular, I will draw upon his use of the concepts of *medium* and *mediation*. But to begin, I will introduce some reasons why I take music to be a particularly important medium with regards to 'the contemporary' (above film, photography, etc), by mentioning a few ways in which music, as a form of cultural production, contributes to the production and experience of contemporaneity.

1. Music: *the medium of contemporaneity?*

It is hard to argue with the idea that the radical effects of economic and technological change of the previous century have been particularly felt in music (matched of course by film and image production). This is especially true, I think, when considering the dual material social relationship between music and what has come to be the historical form of contemporaneity. As a form of historical time, contemporaneity is defined by a global temporal heterogeneity, in which otherwise disparate times (both human and non-human) are brought together through mechanisms of globalised geopolitics and planetary-scale computation, for example.⁴ Osborne describes this as 'a *disjunctive unity of present times*' (2013, p.17) that are all subjects of, and subjected to, a now global capitalist present.

Take for example what the cultural theorist Michael Denning has called the 'audiopolitical revolution' of the 1920s,⁵ with the introduction of electronic recording. This allowed for the reproduction and spatial distribution of otherwise geographically localised histories and music practices. Vernacular music from around the world began circulating through the global network of colonial ports, in turn producing a sort of

³ Though Harman would dispute this point, since he takes Greenberg to a more radical level. For an example, see his essays "Greenberg, Duchamp, and the Next Avant-Garde"; "The Revenge of the Surface: Heidegger, McLuhan, Greenberg"; and "Materialism is Not the Solution: On Matter, Form, and Mimesis".

⁴ Benjamin Bratton's term, *The Stack*

⁵ Denning, *Noise Uprising: The Audiopolitics of World Musical Revolution* (London: Veros, 2015).

cultural contemporaneity which would later be realised historically (demise of actually existing socialism) with the spatial expansion of the temporality of western modernity.⁶

Of course, subsequent to the electrification of music recording came digitalisation, which intensified the effects of Denning's audiopolitical revolution by enabling music to be stored and archived thousands of songs at a time and reproduced with ease, anywhere. Alone, these two changes to the mode of musical production drastically altered the way music history is perceived, disrupting the linearity of traditional music historiography by bringing the past in conjunction with the present, as well as bringing different subjectivities of the present in conjunction with itself. Music production is subjected to the conditions of contemporaneity, and in turn produces its own forms of subjectivity, its own experiences of the time of the present.⁷

There is also the very specific problem of Popular music, which today operates in many ways as a background to everyday life (whether you jump in a cab in Istanbul, Wigan, or Ouro Preto, a Michael Jackson song probably isn't far away⁸), but I won't go into detail about that here. It is also true that music played no small part in establishing an important movement that would later provide the foundation for a critical conception of contemporary art, Fluxus, which first came into being at Wiesbaden, in 1962, as *Nueste Musik*.⁹

The point is, if these are problems and conditions specific to music and its dual relationship to both historical contemporaneity and contemporary art, the problem of medium specificity becomes a legitimate line of inquiry for contemporary art discourse today.

2. Medium-specific and generic art; a disjunctive conjunction of competing theories

The problem with the concept of medium specificity in the way it's normally received—as a tool from the belt of the modernist formalist critic—is that it appears to offer a fixed, universal answer to the question “What is a medium?” In this respect, the (artistic) medium has undergone a process of reification, in the Lukácsian sense, in that

⁶ See Osborne, 'The Postconceptual Condition, Or, The Cultural Logic of High Capitalism Today' *Radical Philosophy*

⁷ We are always experiencing a disjunctive unity of times, or a certain short circuiting with the past, since the modernist capitalist pursuit of the new always brings old technologies into dialogue with new ones. High fidelity, low latency digital audio recording to capture the London Philharmonic orchestra; downloadable pdf files of Bach scores; from live performance as dissemination to live performance as marketing campaign... and so on.

⁸ As Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht suggests in *Our Broad Present: Time and Contemporary Culture*.

⁹ Florian Cramer, 'Crapularity Aesthetics' p. 6.

the medium itself is treated as a natural object with a set of established and observable properties.¹⁰ This is, in no small part, a result of the legacy of Greenbergian modernism. Under the conditions of Greenberg's medium specific modernist formalism, the physical limitations of the medium is as deep as the artwork gets—political and historical forces are illusory and do not enter the work. The authentically modern painter, in Greenberg's now famous example, aims to serve the medium by alluding to the flatness of the canvas.¹¹ To strive for mimetic representation is to take the medium for granted in favour of content, which should be a secondary concern.¹² Greenberg's appeal to Kantian aesthetics is well documented,¹³ but for those who may be unfamiliar, it suffices to say that his theory of modernist art is rooted in the ability to assign an aesthetic judgement of taste to an artwork, and an artwork's status as 'art' depends on this judgement of taste. Adopting the form of the self-reflexive Kantian critique, aesthetic taste, and hence *value*, for Greenberg, rests [SLIDE]

in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in the area of its competence. Kant used logic to establish the limits of logic, and while he withdrew much from its old jurisdiction, logic was left all the more secure in what there remained to it.¹⁴

Essentially, aesthetic value for Greenberg is directly linked to the concept of medium specificity; the extent to which an artwork references its own medium.

Much work has been carried out to free art (theory and criticism) from the perceived constraints of Greenbergian modernism.¹⁵ The critic and historian Rosalind Krauss attempted to undermine the Greenbergian problem by emphasising the 'technical support' of artistic practices as the basis for the medium. This was a practice of continually creating new mediums, as opposed to the self confirmatory approach of Greenbergian medium specificity whose main goal was to eventually abandon all non medium-specific aspects of a work. In her 2011 book *Under Blue Cup*, for example,

¹⁰ See *History and Class Consciousness*, 1923

¹¹ Hence his fondness for cubism.

¹² See Greenberg's essay, "Modernist Painting". There is a sense of McLuhan's mantra from *Understanding Media*, 'the medium is the message'.

¹³ See for example Steven Melville's 'Kant After Greenberg' *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56:1, Winter 1998, pp. 67-74; Diarmuid Costello's 'Retrieving Kant's Aesthetics for Art Theory After Greenberg', in Halsall, Francis and Jansen, Julia (Julia Alejandra), 1973- and O'Connor, Tony, 1943-, (eds.) *Rediscovering aesthetics : transdisciplinary voices from art history, philosophy, and art practice* (Stanford:Stanford University Press, 2009), pp. 117-132.

¹⁴ "Modernist Painting", p. 85.

¹⁵ Constraints being the historical stasis it produces: How does it account for pre-modern art? How does change occur in any meaningful way?

Krauss presents the example of Ed Ruscha [SLIDE], whose use of the car becomes the technical support for his work, offering not only an artistic commentary on what it means to drive, but exposing a new way of seeing: through the lens of the windscreen perhaps.¹⁶ The problematic point of Krauss's critique of Greenberg, which I can't go into detail here, is that they operate as the opposite side of the same coin. She is in total opposition, but as other commentators have noted,¹⁷ remains very much within the parameters of Greenbergian theory by extending a Structuralist infused medium specificity via the creation of new mediums by demarcating their formal possibilities (through the use of the Klein group) [SLIDE].

So far, the proposition of a materialist approach to thinking about the artistic medium appears to be old territory, since both Greenberg and Krauss hold the physical materiality of the medium central to their criticism. However, what each of them do in their own way, is bracket out the determinacy of the historical and material conditions of the creation of art in favour of marking the limits of the already reified medium. This is where the discourse on the post-medium condition of art becomes an important point of reference. Osborne's concept of the postconceptual, for example, aims to rectify the lack of history in Greenberg and Krauss's formalism by reinterpreting recent art history from the perspective of contemporaneity. This injects a certain philosophy of history into the concept of contemporary art, which is defined by Osborne as a *transmedial, generic* category.¹⁸

The generic nature of postconceptual art builds upon the notion of art's 'post-medium condition', which started to emerge in the 1970s alongside shifts in artistic production.¹⁹ This has been defined by Krauss, and others, as a discourse that has centred around an ontological (re)questioning of what 'art' is, as opposed to questions of specific medium.²⁰ Osborne's discussion of Robert Smithson's project, *Spiral Jetty* (1970), is perhaps the clearest example of his engagement with the effects of post-medium discourse as it relates to the concept of postconceptual art, but under the heading 'transmedia' or 'transcategoriality'. Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* not only refers to the well known earthwork, or land sculpture, situated in the Great Salt Lake, Utah, but also refers to an essay and documentary film under the same name. For Osborne, the work should be considered postconceptually by recognizing the three 'components' as a singular yet spatially distributed work, with the essay and film carrying equal ontological

¹⁶ See Rosalind E. Krauss, *Under Blue Cup* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).

¹⁷ Diarmuid Costello, "Greenberg's Kant and the Fate of Aesthetics in Contemporary Art Theory"

¹⁸ See Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All* (London: Verso, 2013).

¹⁹ Rosalind Krauss, *Reinventing the Medium* (Critical Inquiry, Winter 1999, 25/2), pp. 289-305.

²⁰ Krauss, *Under Blue Cup*, 32.

significance as the earthwork.²¹ The use of transmedial or transcategorial as opposed to the by now more familiar phrase post-medium is Osborne's way of emphasising that, not only does postconceptual art challenge the ontological categorization, plurality and relative autonomy of artistic mediums, it also problematizes the overarching notion of medium as such, in its critically inherited sense from the Renaissance as a system of *the arts*.²²

While I largely agree with Osborne's philosophy of history via his designation of 'the contemporary' as a legitimate form of historical time²³—indeed, the dominant temporal form of the historical present—I think there has been a shortsightedness in his treatment of music, not least for the theorisation of music itself within its own institutional networks of operation. And, while I don't agree wholly with his theory of transmediality, I accept that art needs to be thought of differently since the conceptualism of the 60s but the problem of medium persists. The question then becomes, how to move from the formalist notion of a fixed, objective specificity and a reified medium to a more dynamic, reflexive concept of medium specificity?

3. Marxist materialism and medium-specificity

In *Marxism and Literature*, Raymond Williams speaks of the difference between the concepts of 'medium', which he refers to as an agency separated from social practices and relations (in other words, a reified object), and mediation, which he describes as a reflexive transformation of material and social processes (p.98). The quasi dialectical relationship between medium and mediation appears throughout Williams's work and is the result of a lengthy analysis of the classical Marxist concepts of *base* and *superstructure*, as they relate to cultural production specifically and the production of art in particular. In a rather oversimplified form, the premise of the argument follows that 'reflection' theories of art—in which the superstructural activity of art is determined by the material base, which is then reflected back on to society, etc., and so on—treats the 'real life' (the base) that art reflects as a collection of objects capable of being reflected. Treating the world as a series of objects with no material social relationality or flux is what Williams described as a 'mechanical materialism' (p. 96), which promotes the idea that 'real life', or the base, is itself knowable in a reified form (i.e. as an object).

²¹ Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All*, 106.

²² Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts: A Study in the History of Aesthetics Part I" *Journal of the History of Ideas* Vol. 12, No. 4 (Oct., 1951), pp. 496-527

²³ But not entirely, because Osborne's concept does not presently include non-human temporalities; nor does it deal with the impact of technology on the concept of the global.

This 'mechanical materialism' can be applied to Greenberg's medium specificity—and even Krauss to an extent. With regard to the artistic medium, their formalist theories treat 'The [physical] properties of 'the medium' ... as if they defined the practice, rather than being its means.' Williams then goes on to say that

This interpretation [of the artistic medium] then suppressed the full sense of practice, which has always to be defined as work on a material for a specific purpose within certain necessary social conditions. Yet, this real practice is casually displaced (often by only a small extension from the necessary emphasis on knowing how to handle the material) to an activity defined, not by the material, which would be altogether too crude, but by that particular projection and reification of work on the material which is called 'the medium'. (p. 96)

Mediation, for Williams following the Frankfurt School, does not describe a force that operates between this or that, but as an inevitable process that is itself part of the object: 'Mediation is in the object itself, not something between the object and that to which it is brought', as Adorno put it.²⁴ Therefore, productive processes are to be considered as central to the specificity of the medium as the formal qualities of a work. This is not necessarily a positive thing, of course, and could in fact render medium a negative (but important) concept. With reference to contemporary art, and music as a specific medium in the context of contemporaneity, embedded within the concept is the material social realities of a global capitalist logic that embodies the coming together of disjunctive times that defines the logic of the contemporary.

Arguing as he does that more focus should be spent on the heterogenous practices of the medium over the formal qualities of the individual work (p. 160), Williams opposes Greenbergian formalism where 'The true relationship was seen always as between the taste ... of the reader [or critic] and the isolated work' (p. 46). Equally, when the medium is subsumed to an 'art in general' I think we lose a particular vantage point, or lens, through which material realities of history and society can be perceived through very specific modes of cultural production. To be sure, considered as an act of resistance to the forces of contemporary global capitalism, a piece of postconceptual art doesn't appear to be as easy to own or sell as a painting, or a vinyl record. Isn't it true, however, that it is too late for that type of resistance, since we live and produce in the age of art's

²⁴ Adorno, T. W. [1967], 'Theses on the Sociology of Art,' Trans. Brian Trench, Working Papers in Cultural Studies, Number 2, Spring 1972 (Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham).

real subsumption under capital?²⁵ (Meaning the logic of capitalist production enters individual works at the point of creation, not when they are brought to market.)

With the generic referent 'art', the nuances of these material social processes are lost. There are specific qualities about music, architecture, photography, etc., as mediums that each reveal their own material processes and practices, as well as forms of labour and subjectivation, relations with material means of production etc. (These historically and culturally determined practices are what they communicate as mediums.) I think situating the specificity of a medium in material and social practices supports works that do transcend medium, works that are ontologically postconceptual in Osborne's terms in that they employ multiple mediums (such as Veilhan's *Studio Venezia*). However, instead of recognizing them as art in the generic, they recognize them as a coming together of different material practices and social realities with their own specific histories, methods, forms of production and exchange, modes of reception and subjectivation, etc.

To conclude, the specificity of 'music' in its broadest sense, and its relevance to the discourse of contemporaneity, lies in its potential to act as a marker for multiple material practices that produces and unifies multiple temporalities and different types of time across a range of scales and orders of sociality. Treating medium as a problem of contemporary art opens up the possibility to formulate a medium specificity that doesn't outrightly rely on the physical realities, or sensual experience, of sound—for it is not enough to root the specificity of a medium in a psychological category of sensuous experience, since listening would be the experiential mode with regard to music with the problem being that listening is also the musical element in poetry, sound film, sonic art, etc.—but incorporates modes of production and exchange, leading to a conception of medium specificity that is classically Marxist in form.

²⁵ There are many 'real subsumption' theorists who attest this point, Negri, Nicholas Brown etc. Dave Beech, on the other hand, argues that artistic labour is economically exceptional to the capitalist mode of production.

Cuttings

The title of this talk is somewhat misleading. It suggests that there might be an analysis of *New Music* as a concept, or of particular new musical works; perhaps concluding with a judgement on whether said works can rightly be classified as belonging to the discursive world of 'contemporary art'. I have to apologize, as this is not the case.

In *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, Jacques Attali claimed that music has always operated in direct conjunction with the changing modes of production. He went further, in fact, to say that changes in the dominant mode of production were foreshadowed in music.

Since it isn't the primary focus of this paper,²⁶ it suffices to mention only a few of the ways in which material changes in the production and reproduction of music over the past century has contributed to the production and experience of contemporaneity:

In doing so, the specific medium of music can be considered from the perspective of contemporary art as that which both produces, and is produced by the historical conditions of the present.

'Music is perhaps the paradigmatic multiply-mediated, immaterial and material, fluid quasiobject, in which subjects and objects collide and intermingle.'²⁷ (Born 2007, 7)

The medium—though now a problematic term but useful insofar as it is shorthand for multiple mediations—contains within it the processes of labour, the transformation of materials in both production and consumption (which, in Marx's terms, is the final stage of production²⁸), and so on.

²⁶ This is the wider project of my PhD, to draw together the concepts of music and contemporaneity in the construction of a critically intelligible 'contemporary music'.

²⁷ I'm also interested in Born's use of Tia DeNora's work in her paper on music and mediation. DeNora borrows a concept from perceptual psychology, *affordance*, which 'captures music's role as . . . a "mediator" of the social It highlights music's potential as an organising medium, as something that helps to structure such things as styles of consciousness . . . or modes of embodiment'. Georgina Born, 'On Musical Mediation: Ontology, Technology and Creativity', *Twentieth-Century Music*, 2/1, (2007), 7–36.

²⁸ For an outline on Marx's analysis of the capitalist productive process, see "Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy", in *The German Ideology*....