

## **Conference report: 'Music and Genre: New Directions'**

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Over the weekend of September 27-28, 2014, warmed by Montreal's glorious early-autumn sunshine, Georgina Born, David Brackett and myself were delighted to welcome a number of internationally renowned scholars and industry practitioners for a stimulating and exciting exploration of the complexity of musical genre. Our conference, *Music and Genre: New Directions*, took place on the eighth floor of the Strathcona Music Building at McGill's Schulich School of Music, overlooking the skittering streets of downtown Montreal, and was co-funded by the European Research Council's programme, "Music, Digitisation, Mediation: Towards Interdisciplinary Music Studies" (or MusDig), and by Sean Ferguson, Dean of the Schulich School of Music. The conference was, among other aims, intended to be an opportunity to present and gain feedback on some of the fruits of the MusDig programme, in the form of several of the papers presented.

The conference brought together genre specialists from different disciplines, from both inside and outside of the academy. Our aim was to advance thinking and practice on two major challenges facing theories of musical genre today. First, how genre occupies an increasingly paradoxical position: both elusive, in the widespread claims that certain pervasive new musics are "beyond genre;" and concrete, in the growing scientific and technological capacities to analyse, model and even predict the movement of genres. And secondly, how genre theory in music needs to progress so as to respond to and encompass the dynamic relations between musical sounds, and the social groups that constitute their audiences and producers. Each day was devoted to one of these two overlapping challenges.

### **Day One: "Digital Genre Machines: Between the Dissolution and Reification of Genre"**

We were pleased to welcome leading genre theorist John Frow from the University of Sydney, Australia, who opened our conference with a keynote presentation titled, "Scale and Taxonomy in Musical Genres." John's paper analysed the organising structures of the websites Amazon and iTunes, and posed two crucial questions. First, can we be specific about the levels of generic *scale* and *scope* that operate on these websites in such a way that allows us to define musical genres as coherent and formal structures? And secondly, what are the uses of such musical taxonomies?

During our first panel session, "Genre, Circulation, and the Formatting of Consumption," presenters responded to many of the core issues and questions raised in John's keynote, focussing in particular on the mediating role played by different technologies of musical consumption. This panel comprised papers by Mads Krogh from Aarhus University, Blake Durham from the University of Oxford, and Eric Smialek from McGill University. Mads addressed how Danish National Radio's genre-based channels in the early 1990s contributed to the reification of certain genres by using listeners' musical preferences (concerning style, atmosphere, and context) as templates for the curation of genre-based radio programming. Blake

used comparative ethnographic research concerning a private BitTorrent tracker community and users of the streaming service Spotify to analyse processes of musical classification within strictly regulated networks of musical exchange. And Eric's paper, "Metal Taxonomies: Parallel Universes of Genre," highlighted the unspoken assumptions underpinning metal taxonomies, arguing that certain visualisations of genre reify and inform common, but often erroneous, beliefs about metal music.

Our second panel continued to investigate the notion of reification in genre, this time turning to the increasingly pervasive presence and use of music information retrieval. Here we heard from Jason Hockman from McGill University, Aaron Einbond from IRCAM in Paris, and Eric Drott from the University of Texas. Jason traced the stylistic genealogy of three EDM genres—jungle, hardcore, and drum & bass—each rooted in the practice of sampling breakbeats. Jason advocated the use of MIR and computational musicology as a means to map and catalogue the large-scale trends of using particular breakbeats in these genres. Aaron's paper, "Beyond Automatic Genre Classification: MIR and Moving Information," looked at the ways in which MIR can leverage machine listening to organise sound, which may in turn be used as part of a creative compositional process. Eric's presentation, "Genre in the Age of Algorithms," analysed how MIR algorithms are re-imagining genre as lists of identifiable parameters, represented in the form of genre maps.

One of the highlights of the first day was hearing a presentation by the influential genre-mapper Glenn McDonald, of the leading MIR-based companies The Echo Nest and Spotify. Glenn was kind enough to join us dusty academics and offer his experience and insights as a music industry insider. Heading a round table discussion, the final event of our first day, Glenn talked us through his Every Noise at Once genre map, detailing how The Echo Nest organises the often overwhelming-seeming amount of music made available by the internet into a navigable and intelligible format, the genre map, as an aid to understanding and consumption. We also heard about new ways in which digital music services are categorising music according to its function in daily our routines, rather than according to its formal stylistic features.

The first day of the conference closed with dinner at one of Montreal's many French bistros, Au Petit Extra in the east of the city, where our conversations about genre continued in a more informal setting.

## **Day Two: "Genre is Social: From Intra-Musical to Sociological Theories of Genre"**

Day two opened with a keynote presentation from McGill University's popular music scholar and genre specialist David Brackett. David's paper, "'Thar's Gold in Them Hillbillies': Old-Time Music in the 1920s and Its Relations," derived from his forthcoming book, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Identity in Popular Music*, and offered the four following properties as definitive for the analysis of musical genre. First, the legibility of a given genre derives from its place in relation to other genres. Secondly, this relational system of genres is multi-layered and synchronic. Thirdly, genres are products of repetition and difference. And finally, genres have the ability to evoke group identities. David proffered these four properties of genre as a way to overcome the impasse between genre as defined either by a set of formal style traits or by sociological considerations to do with the attachment of certain social groups to certain musics, while also making it possible to acknowledge actors' insistence on the genre-less quality of individual texts.

David's presentation was the first in a series of three papers exemplifying historiographical approaches, stressing the importance of historical analysis to the study of musical genre. The other two were by Steve Waksman from Smith College and myself (Mimi Haddon) from McGill University, and formed the panel, "Historiography, Genealogy, and Emergence." Steve's presentation, "All What Jazz? Genre, Performance, and the Social Geography of Early Jazz," used "live" jazz performances of the 1910s to analyse how a given genre can accumulate associations through its presentation in different kinds of venues. Steve focused specifically on the way in which the term "jazz" at the beginning of the twentieth century carried different meanings and valences depending on the space in which this music was performed. My own paper, "What is Post-Punk? A Case Study in Genre and Genealogy," had two principal aims. First, I traced and analysed the signification attached to the appearance of the term "post-punk" in the late-1970s rock media. And secondly, I situated post-punk in the broader pop music field of the late-1970s, both in relation to neighbouring genres such as punk, reggae and disco, and according to the larger social formations with which post-punk was affiliated.

Continuing with the theme of emergence, papers by Sonya Hofer from Colorado College and Christopher Howarth from the University of Calgary examined the ways in which musical practitioners conceptualise genres and the conditions of their emergence. As part of our panel titled "Reflexivity," Sonya's paper concentrated on the genre known as "microsound," a kind of experimental electronica that appeared in the late 1990s. Sonya focussed specifically on the way in which practitioners of microsound conceptualise the sounds they are working with as forms of matter or material. It is precisely through this material or tactile quality, Sonya argued, that the microsound genre connects with and subsumes other musical and non-musical subgenres of experimentalism, such as glitch and sound art. Christopher Howarth's paper similarly turned to experimental music to both explore and challenge the ontology of music as a purely sonic phenomenon. In his presentation, "Between Critical Concept and Genre: 'Non-Cochlear' Sonic Art," Christopher analysed the tensions he observed at the 2010 Instal Festival in Glasgow during which a "non-cochlear" genre of experimental music was being born and yet participants continued to disavow the notion of genre altogether as a regressive concept.

In addition to exploring the intersection between musical genre and issues of consumption, reification, emergence, creativity and reflexivity, the roles of temporality and affect were also recurrent themes throughout the conference. Charles Kronengold from Stanford University gave a paper titled, "Genres, Affects, Temporalities," in which he proposed a model of musical experience in which affects and genres work collaboratively and antagonistically to help create a piece's multi-temporal flow. Charles argued that music in particular could complicate the notion of temporality proffered by affect theory, which describes affect as pre-cognitive. Drawing on case studies from various genres of late-modern popular and art musics, Charles stressed how the culturally contingent nature of generic musical meaning and music's multiple temporalities disrupt the idea that affect precedes cognition.

As a second keynote presenter for day two we were hoping to hear from anthropologist Karin Barber from the University of Birmingham, whose ethnographic work on the praise poetry of the Yoruba (Nigeria) problematises the binary between genre as a set of formal features and genre as a mode of practice. Unfortunately, Karin experienced travel complications and was unable to join us in Montreal, but we're looking forward to working with her in the future! Instead, Georgina Born stepped up to offer her paper, "Time, the Social, the Material: For a Non-Teleological Analysis of Musical Genre". She argued that the theorisation of musical genre needs to integrate the sociological understanding of genre developed by such writers as Karin

Barber, David Brackett and Keith Negus. But her focus was on the mutual imbrication of time, the social, and the material as they mediate musical genre. Regarding time, she pursued the focus in film-based genre theory on circulation, such that genre is conceived of dynamically, as an evolving constellation with no fixed pattern of development. This led to an account of multiple levels of temporality at work in musical genre as an evolving constellation.

The conference wound up with an informal drinks party, accompanied by a collective sense that it had been an extraordinarily rich and coherent event in which many of the theoretical and substantive strands of the presentations had spoken well to each other. In particular, the focus in a number of the papers on recent electronic and digital music genres, the insights into the internet's crucial mediating role in the experience of genre today, and the unanimous sense that to advance the theorisation of musical genre now requires a combination of deep historical, sociological and musical research, from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present day: these aspects of the conference manifested advances in genre theory in music, while also representing fruitful contributions from the work of the MusDig research programme. We believe the conference took genre theory in music to new levels of sophistication, and as a result the plan was hatched to develop a number of the papers presented into a book proposal for a major university press.

We want to thank all of our contributors very warmly indeed, some of whom came very long distances (Australia, Denmark, Germany, the UK) to participate.