

Musicking assemblages: popular music and new materialism

We tend to think of music as a uniquely human affair. It is us, humans, that confer a form upon the raw matter of sound to create music. However, a set of philosophical theories known as new materialism challenges these assumptions. It conceives matter not as passive, but as capable of self-organization and thus not only constraining human will and action, but possessing certain propensities of its own. This project will investigate how these theoretical premises can help us to think about music in novel ways and to better understand the state of contemporary popular music culture.

This will involve, first, a theoretical philosophical inquiry that tries to reimagine what music is and what it can become. Christopher Small has famously coined the term “musicking” to think music as action, as what people do or perform via different relations. This project, however, goes a step further and shifts attention to the impersonal processes of assembly whereby different entities and forces come together to give rise to what we conventionally call music. Secondly, the research will examine particular instances of these musicking assemblages as they manifest in the area of popular music. It will specifically focus on composite phenomena that involve a variety of materialities acting on one another, such as albums recorded with animal musicians or the YouTube phenomenon of misheard lyrics videos.

So far researchers studying popular music have been predominantly preoccupied with meanings attributed to musical phenomena. This project, therefore, aims to extend the scope of inquiry, both theoretically and empirically. In other words, it strives to offer new vocabularies and analytical strategies, as well as to shift attention to phenomena that so far have eluded academic analyses. As a result, it can provide a way to think about popular music that is better accustomed to the realities of contemporary times, characterized by ever-present connectivity, smart technologies, and pressing environmental concerns. This project, therefore, is committed to offering a more comprehensive understanding of how these processes manifest in and affect popular music via a thorough investigation of material complexities of musicking assemblages.