

Cultural Theory – Who Needs It?

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by Bruce Johnson

This temporary posting is the unedited text version sent to me by Bruce Johnson in July 2011. He added: '[T]he paper itself was written "against" a position, which is why it probably appears rather schematic, as any revisionist 20-minute conference paper must be. It was written against the prevailing belief, incubated by a climate of stale post-structuralist derived theory, that all meaning-making is culturally determined. Evidence of the perverse obduracy of this belief was amply forthcoming in the responses I got to the paper. These were not based on a critical analysis of the argument, but on the fact that those objecting had simply never entertained the possibility, and it left them feeling rather like the committed devotees of Stalinism after Krushchev's 1956 revelations'.

Background

This emerges from a growing impatience with cultural theory over the last two or three decades. I think the term 'cultural theory' will have a sufficiently agreed meaning to this gathering. What I mean in this context by theory is the deployment of a specific and explicit discursive screen through which some social practice is viewed, as an explanatory model. It might carry a generic name like 'gender theory', 'queer theory', 'postcolonial theory', or the name of an influential theorist like Derrida or Deleuze or Lacan. At the outset, it is worth noting the double sense of 'screen'—something through or on which we can view, but also something that blocks our view.

Cultural theory in anglophone academia emerged from the growing recognition of the ideological underpinnings of putative scholarly 'objectivity'. My primary disciplinary base is literary studies, where the ascendancy of theory was a reaction against the what was basically the 'practical criticism' of IA Richards and his generation. Their insistence on the specificity of the text as the analytical focus, was regarded with justification as 'contextless', ahistorical and universalist. The excesses and fatuities that were uttered in the name of such authoritative figures as Richards, Eliot, Leavis (notwithstanding their significant differences) were based on such articles of faith as 'universal values' in human behaviour, and objective literary standards as embodied in the canon. They denied, in effect, the importance of culture and history in the experience of literature.

Without exactly articulating this to myself in the early 1970s, I found this highly irritating. It was such a relief to find alternative ways of approaching literature that I read almost all of Balzac's work in order to appreciate Lukacs. I discovered Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, and George Rude (which led me to deeply regret having skipped so many of his lectures as an undergraduate at the University of Adelaide). I gradually realised that I had discovered Marxism, and the idea of cultural theory. The foregoing underlined section will be replaced in the actual conference presentation by:

[From my primary disciplinary base in literary studies, my first entry into theory was a reaction against the ahistorical and contextless approach to literature that still prevailed well into the 1970s].

I became aware of alternatives such Lukacs, and Raymond Williams, and of major centres that took similar approaches. Following correspondence with Stuart Hall, was invited to the Bir-

mingham Centre (CCCS) as Visiting Lecturer during its most intense period of theorization of culture in 1975-76. Back in Australia I introduced cultural theory as a course in my own university, beginning with Marxist-derived models, and expanding the horizon to embrace various forms of post-structuralism as I watched a massive swing to theory from the late 1970s. By then, however, I was taking a very different position vis-à-vis theory.

Although I initiated the application of cultural theory to literary analysis in my own Department, through the 1980s I became increasingly dismayed as the specificity of literary works began to vanish behind theoretical grids. Any novel, poem, play could be neatly and fully accounted for as ‘ideology’ that was relevant to the particular academic. For the feminist, everything was fully explicable in terms of gender relations, for the post-colonialist it would be imperialism, for the Freudian-derived theorist, Lacan explained whatever was under inspection. At best, the specificity of a literary work disappeared as it became, like all the others, no more than an ideologically-driven narrative that gave further sustenance to a theory of culture and history. At worst, the actual text would be either cherry-picked so selectively, or implicitly falsified, that we lost sight altogether of what it actually was. The actuality of the text as a social production was deformed in the interests of a ‘theory’. The only point of interest to be found in a literary work was to confirm (rarely if ever to test) a theoretical presupposition. The subjects therefore tended to become an abstract homogenised mass.

By the 1980s, theory was becoming a new scholasticism, deducing ‘the world’ from a set of a priori suppositions. It came to be believed that all culture was ideologically constructed, and in order to confirm this, social practices, irrespective of their shape, were hammered into the spaces made by theory. A useful reference point for this is Laura Mulvey’s famous 1975 article, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’.¹ It is relevant here not only because it reflects precisely the profile I am sketching, but because its great influence proclaims the authority of theory. And, I add for later reference, because it is scopocentric.

From a foundation of feminist theory, and using the model of ‘the power of the gaze’, Mulvey argued cinema was shaped by the need to place the spectacle of woman before the gaze of men. The thesis was neat and timely, but to survive, it became necessary to falsify the cinema experience. Audiences had to be masculine, films populated centrally with women, and film became exclusively spectacle. There was no sound, no music, no heterogeneity, no industry or production context. The ‘theory’ was predicated on a deep simplification of social practice. It skated so lightly over its supposed subject as to achieve only the most schematic revelatory contact. It exemplifies the kind of approach warned of by Australian cultural researcher Meaghan Morris when she cautioned against ‘theorisations’ in cultural studies in which ‘no text is more bleached of cultural particularity than the one which relentlessly theorises “difference” without ever once stumbling over some stray, material fact – a poem, a press photo, a snatch of TV news – that could, in its everyday density, take “theory” by surprise’. Of later exemplifications of the ‘autonomisation’ of theory, Hans Hyssen, in *After the Great Divide* blamed the empirically unanchored theory on ‘a particularly North American tendency to present a poststructuralist approach as the latest ‘avant garde’ rather than simply a way of seeing, thus assuming ‘the kind of teleological posturing which [it] has done so much to criticise’.²

1. Laura Mulvey (1975). ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’. *Screen*, 16/3: 6-18.

By the beginning of the 1980s, for various reasons my interests as a researcher were also turning towards popular music. I began to read academic discussions of jazz in particular, and found the ‘theoretical turn’ even more annoying. As a very active jazz musician at a professional level, my recurring objection was very simple: ‘That is not how it is’. Ascriptions of intention and design in a jazz composition or solo showed almost no understanding of what you think and feel when you play, or of the performance circumstances which affect jazz decision making and problem solving. A book by Frank Kovsky was driven by an aggressive vulgar Marxism which fuelled the argument that black jazz pioneers from bop onwards were militant black nationalists. Kovsky made quite a feast out of the title of Charlie Parker’s blues head ‘Now’s The Time’: Parker was an ardent black nationalist, and the title was a call for revolution now.³ There was no recognition in this ‘theory’ driven argument of what actually goes on at a jazz recording session, where blues heads are one of the standard gap-fillers, especially in bop. Not only are titles given in the most casual way, it is often the case that someone else in the post-production stage dreams one up when the session log is blank on the subject. And in any case, whoever attached the title, there are a great many things that ‘now’ could be the time for, including, more persuasively, a new approach to jazz. And where is the black revolutionary in the scores of other titles attributed to Bird, that could not be bent to his thesis? What would Kovsky make of ‘Klactovesedstene’, for example. When Parker was earnestly asked by someone documenting his work to explain what it meant, he replied, ‘It’s just a sound, man.’

Just a sound, evasive of theorisation about ideology.

Had Kovsky addressed the music as a sonic entity – ‘just a sound man’ – his subject would have been less obligingly amenable to the theoretical grid of black nationalism. Mulvey is talking about film, but Kovsky is talking about music. The problems I am describing are particularly acute when ‘theory’ is imported from a scopic regime into the study of sound. Kovsky’s Marxist ‘theory’ is derived from a visual discourse, in the sense that it is based on a body of texts. But even the score functions in much the same way. If we are talking about non-notated improvised music, then trying to ‘make sense’ of it by transcribing it as a score, is a form of ‘theorisation’. The score is an explanatory screen between us and a social practice, but which in fact tells us little about how it came to be, because the ‘theory’ itself is so distanced from a sonority far richer than the symbolic system, that theory can disclose. The more exclusively ‘sonic’ a piece of music is (folk, jazz improvisation, rock), the more inadequate the written score becomes as a basis for interpretation and theorisation.

My first major academic response to this was an article which tried to express the experience of making and hearing sounds that were called jazz. It began by adapting Parker’s comment: that before music is anything else it is a sound.⁴ Without its sonority, a jazz improvisation cannot

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2. Morris in *Ecstasy and Economies* p. 12, cited Duggan xviii.; Hyssen pp. 209-210, cited Duggan xviii. Theologian William James made a related comment about ‘rational’ explanations around the beginning of the 20th century: ‘Roundabout the accredited and ordinary fact of every science there ever floats a sort of dust cloud of exceptional observations, of occurrences [sic] minute and irregular and seldom met with, which it always proves more easy to ignore than to attend to’.
 3. Frank Kovsky (1970). *Black Nationalism and the Revolution in Music*. New York: Merit, pp. 54-57.
 4. Bruce Johnson (1994) “Klactovesedstene: Music, Soundscape and Me”, *Soundscape: Essays on Vroom and Moo*, ed. H. Järviuoma, trans. ed. B. Johnson (Department of Folk Tradition/Institute of Rhythm Music, Finland), pp.39-47.

exist, cannot be any kind of ideological statement, cannot be appropriated to a theory. So I became increasingly interested in sonority itself, how we hear, how we produce sounds. And in parallel with this enquiry I became increasingly doubtful as to just how useful theory is in the study of sound and unscored music.

This took me to the history of such theorisations. I found it provocative that there was an efflorescence of scientific as opposed to humanist music theorisation, coinciding with the institutionalisation of science in the late 17th century:

In a study of this connection, Benjamin Wardhaugh summarise primary sources regarding music analysis from the late seventeenth to the early eighteenth centuries, that deploy mathematics, mechanics and experimentation. He documents the painstaking ingenuity with which music theorists of various persuasions tried to regularize and quantify pitch, and to apply mathematical principles of music perception.

These attempts were framed by ‘newly available classical and modern texts, new mathematical tools, new attitudes to mechanical explanation, and developments in the theory of hearing and the anatomical study of the ear’. Most fundamentally, these attempts foreground the perennial tensions between prescript and practice, of the way theory tries to shoulder its way between the listener and the music. If the latter is detached from sensuousness and is represented as the reflection of an abstract scheme (whether God or mathematics) it will sooner or later come into conflict with the pleasure and pain that music provides. In the words of Thomas Salmon:

‘Tis impossible to conceive how much so happy an union would conduce both to the glory and advancement of Musick ... when the serious Mathematician could be able to reduce his Speculations to practise; and agen the ... composer could render an account of his charms, in a Mathematick Theory. (cited p. 168)

Music-as-sensation remained evasive in the theoretical discourse of the period (p. 18). Music that defied theories of consonance nonetheless often ‘worked’, an inconvenience to theory that was often dismissed simply as evidence of the defectiveness in the ear of the listener, and of ‘modern music’ in general (p. 93), a charge all too familiar in twentieth century popular music.

These sources provide fascinating data for speculation about the wary *pas-de-deux* between sonic information and larger shifts in epistemologies and material culture. Elsewhere I have suggested that the politics of sound, for example, provides insights into emerging modernity and the relative status of auditory and visual information economies.⁵ There is therefore an instructive vibration in Wardhaugh’s comment that the ‘ear’s reliability, and its ability to produce knowledge, were questioned anew during the seventeenth century’ (p. 184). This comment resonates suggestively with the decline of oratory and formal rhetoric and the rise of print as the site of primary authority.

Similarly, the attempt to understand music through mathematics is to encompass it in the domain of the spatial/visual at the expense of the temporal/auditory. It is not surprising that such models would come into tension with the distinctive phenomenology of sound, and that theorists committed to them would prefer to ignore conflicting evidence based on the ear itself. It is instructive to reflect on the perennial reversion to the model of the string to illustrate pitch, most reductively in the form of a monochord suspended in a mathematical diagram.

5. See for example in Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan (2008), *Dark Side of the Tune: Popular Music and Violence* (Aldershot: Ashgate), pp. 31-47.

(OHP FROM p. 33).

This is the ‘instrument’ whose simplicity makes it most tractable to visual analytical diagramming, yet the least instructive in attempting to understand the complexity of music experience. The single string visually recalls the geometrical straight line which, as a hypothetical abstraction, is about as far from the sensuous sonority of music as you can get. Descartes is one of the writers reviewed in the study, and although Wardhaugh doesn’t develop this argument, the synchronous emergence of Cartesian mind/body dualism and its associated hierarchies, invites the speculation that a hidden agenda in these theory-driven accounts of disembodied music was to vindicate it by withdrawing from the corporeality of its power and to model it as cerebral.

Such ‘theorisations’ of sound were also conducted by the newly formed Royal Society, who developed the earlier work of Francis Bacon, including through the renovation of language in accord with the objectives of scientific enquiry. What makes the Society’s activities particularly instructive was its involvement with experiments in music and hearing, including comparisons between tuning by mathematics (ratios) and by the ear of a professional performer and teacher. Rather dismayingly, the ear failed to detect ‘errors’ in mathematical tuning of up to one quarter of a semitone (p. 105). A central puzzle was the ear’s ability ‘to recognize exact ratios when they are expressed in sound, and to tolerate considerable deviation from those ratios’ (p. 59). This brings to mind ethnomusicologist Charles Keil’s theory of ‘participatory discrepancies’, which suggests that minor discrepancies in, for example, pitch and timing, actually form the basis for the sensuous musical ‘groove’ ‘Music works sensuously precisely when it doesn’t fit an abstract ‘theory’ of what it should be. The point is illustrated in the case of early electronic muzak, the dullness of which is an outcome of its ‘mathematical’ correctness. Many synthesisers now have random discrepancies programmed into them to give the music warmth and ‘groove’.⁷

Meanwhile for the eighteenth century theorists, one intuitive solution to the puzzle of the discrepancies they documented was that certain kinds of hearing bypassed the reason, and the astronomer Kepler ascribed this process to what may be regarded as a more instinctive and less cerebral sensibility, that of a peasant (Wardhaugh p. 92). One thing missing from these speculations, however, was the question of what happens to sound once it passes beyond the visible ear. To have extended their enquiries further, both into the journey beyond the ear, and also outward into sound sources and textures, might have begun to unravel the puzzle of music experience. There are of course many good reasons why this was not possible, including an uncertainty as to where the music finished up: the brain or the heart (see for example p. 74), which was traditionally a competitor with the brain as a site of cognition (hence, to learn ‘by heart’). More generally, the mind/body binary underpinned the assumption that it was the latter that was the most legitimate subject for inspection by the former. In all these writings there is no apparent appreciation of the importance of what happens to sound after it proceeds beyond the ear. Twentieth century neuro-science has identified evidence for two pathways through the brain as sound proceeds to the center of emotion and music affect, the amygdala.⁸ One of these paths corre-

6. See for example Charles Keil (1995), ‘The Theory of Participatory Discrepancies: a Progress Report’, in *Ethnomusicology: Journal of the Society for Ethnomusicology*, 39/1, Winter, pp 97-104.

7. Ibid, in the ‘Rejoinders’ section, by PL Proegler.

8. See for example Joseph LeDoux (1998), *The Emotional Brain* (London: Phoenix), and Bruce Johnson (2008), ‘“Quick and Dirty”: Sonic Mediations and Affect’, in Carolyn Birdsall and Anthony Emms (eds), *Sonic Mediations: Body, Sound, Technology* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing), pp. 43-60.

sponds to the image of ‘bypassing the reason’, and suggests that there are indeed at least two forms of musical hearing. I will return to this.

More generally, the ‘puzzle’ of music is a further reminder of its distinctive phenomenology and its ability to confound neat theoretical categorisations. I am interested in the hypothesis that noise itself refutes the orderliness conferred by theory. Sounding and hearing constitute a distinctive phenomenology which are, finally, dangerously resistant to scopocentric models of analysis. Once released, sound passes beyond control. It floods external space, and internally the physiological relationship between sonic signals and the amygdala, the clearing house for emotion and affect, is decisively different from visual processing. In particular sonority destabilises the distinction between cognition and biology, culture and nature. And in the modern era sound technologies have transformed the social dynamic of increasingly dense aggregations of strangers. All of these conspire to sabotage the various quasi-positivistic categorisations upon which theory rests and which it seeks to defend. Sound in the contemporary world demolishes distinctions which are deployed by power blocs to preserve their hegemony. Sound blurs public and private space, mind and body, objective and subjective, art and nature, aesthetics and sociology. Such categories are an impediment to understanding hearing, as the work of seventeenth and eighteenth century theorists demonstrates. You have to surrender the categories, or radically deform the phenomenology.

One point implicit in the foregoing discussion is that sound studies seem to be well situated to problematise positivist binaries and theoretical categories that have been pampered in scopocentric cultural analysis. I am suggesting here that the selective focus of “reading” as both an activity and as a trope for attentiveness, makes it easier to ignore the inconvenient material datum than does “listening” in a sonic flood. Acoustic orders are characterised by leakages within and between material and intellectual spaces.

‘We may claim that special modes of conscious experience such as emotional responses to music listening, a habitus of listening, emerges as a phenotypic feature of humankind, as a biological development in the evolution of the species, emerging from genetic and environmental influences. Music and emotion, viewed as evolving together in the interaction of each individual wit performances throughout his or her life, dissolves intractable dichotomies concerning nature versus culture, and scientific universalism versus cultural particularism.’ [fn: Becker, Judith, 2001. ‘Anthropological Perspectives on Music and Emotion’, in Sloboda, John A., and Patrik N. Juslin (eds), *Music and Emotion: Theory and Research* (Oxford: OUP), pp. 135 – 160: 154.

Why? Because cultural theory becomes detached from the body. It is culturalist, in that it posits meanings and social practices as cultural constructs. Mulvey and Kovsky exemplify the ascription of meanings to ideology in film and music respectively. Cultural theory almost invariably leaves out physiology. That elision defines its limits, and in the study of sound, those limits are most glaring. Sonic affect is in the first and irrevocable instance, biological. Sonic affect is a sticky, inextricable compound of ‘culture’ and ‘biology’, nurture and nature. But the biological has priority. Our response to sonic information that informs us of our material and cognitive position in the world is at some levels transculturally hard-wired. This possibility is almost entirely unrecognised in cultural studies. Elizabeth Wilson commented that feminist studies, for example, think of ‘bodily transformation ideationally and symbolically, without reference to biological constraints. That is, to think about the body as if anatomy did not exist.’ (Wilson, “Gut Feminism”, 69).

Resituating the body into the processes of sonic affect and aesthetics invites consideration of a “foundation/scaffolding” model. The former, the body, limits but does not determine what might be built on it. The physiology of a sonic signal and how it is processed creates various kinds of foundation, and a scaffolding of specific material and intellectual/cognitive cultures will amplify and shape what is built on it, in various ways. In a recent conference I discussed the ‘affect’ of low register sounds, and put forward the arguments from neuro-science that there are two paths from the ear to the amygdala, site of affect and emotion. One path passes through the cortex, which in conjunction with the memory, gives culturally specific articulation to the emotional response to sound. The other, a ‘Quick and Dirty’ path, proceeds direct to the amygdala and because of biological factors, arouses an immediate ‘survival instinct’ assessment of the nature of the sound – is it reassuring, or threatening? So, for example, a low register sound will mean ‘danger’ for the physiological reasons I have defined, and that will circumscribe but not fully determine the cultural ‘scaffolding’. That ‘scaffolding’ will then shape itself from culturally learned specific images of danger - marauding horsemen, an earthquake, tsunami, tanks, motor cycle gangs. Culture is the shared making of meanings. But a sonic approach to cultural analysis tells us that possible meanings are already restricted by biology. The political is not, as Jamieson claimed, the ‘absolute horizon of interpretation’ (*The Political Unconscious*, p. 1). The body is. Ideology is formed by a convergence of the physiological and the cognitive, and sonic studies challenge even that distinction. Culture is also nature.

In sonic affect, by the time ‘culture’ intervenes to interpret the meaning of a sound, the interpretive range has already been sharply circumscribed by an involuntary physiological reaction to the nature of the sound. If ‘gender’ is, as theory argues, a cultural construct, what it has to say about sonic affect is limited to the scaffolding. Gender studies cannot account for the platform, which precedes ideology. Gender studies cannot explain how it functions and how it constrains meaning. If ideology is culturally constructed, it can have only very limited and misleading explanatory power in the analysis of sonic affect.

I can’t appear before anyone in domestic or public space without visible ideological baggage. It is possible to ‘explain’ visible conduct – dress, posture, gesture - in terms of a cultural theory derived from, say, gender, race, ethnicity, postcolonialism. Even if I am naked, this becomes a culturally specific message amenable to a theorisation. But I can make a sound that is ‘just a sound’. If it is confusing, it is precisely because it is inexplicable – yet there it is, a component of social practice. We all make sounds which are primal, which rely not on culture or history for their affect. *In extremis* we sob, scream, sigh. We make what is ‘just a sound’, unlexical, but profoundly expressive. That expressiveness is explicable in terms of sonic physiology, not culture, and indeed that expressive sound confounds the distinction. If we begin our study of music by recognising its essential sonority, then we begin well. It will be quite some distance down the track before we need theory.