Scoring: Towards a material notion of making in compositional practice

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This paper offers preliminary ideas concerning a new theoretical infrastructure concerning the role of materiality in the making of a new piece of music, or even art more generally (although music remains my primary frame of reference for today).

It is important to note at the outset that I use the term ‘making’ to distinguish my subject from more pseudo-analytical outlines of ‘technique(s)’ – by which I mean the games by which composers (and other artists) derive and manipulate data – instead, I situate my enquiry within a wider, quasi-anthropological, frame. I am interested in subjecting the entangled polyvalent workflows that a journey from ideation to realisation entails to theoretical scrutiny, with particular attention to the materiality (or materialities) at play in the process. The methodology employed is part theoretical examination and part auto-ethnographical, bouncing between wider critical perspectives and my own experience as a composer.

I have come to call this infrastructure scoring and I wish for this word to be understood in a new and very particular sense, removed from the conventional use of ‘scoring’ in music to mean ‘to orchestrate’ (and so forth). The purpose of this paper is therefore to outline a preliminary outline this new definition. By means of an introduction, I invite you to think of scoring in the sense of scratching or etching. Two initial points here, (1) that scoring is an action, a verb; and (2) that scoring leaves a mark on the material world (a scratch, an etch, etc).

Crucially, in this particular sense of the word, scoring in itself is an activity, not a product. As such, this paper takes the position that the act of scoring be viewed as an innately material practice of doing. Such a position is, of course, not dissimilar to Christopher Small’s notion of ‘Musiking’ (Small 1998), where music in the wider sense is understood as an embodied practice of doing. Scoring could be said to be putting a specific subset of this world under further scrutiny. That said, scoring is not thusly concerned with the artistic products it makes per se but in its actions as an activity that brings an artwork is into material being. Put another way, the act of scoring comprises the actions by which an artist’s ideas are moved into, and therefore become part of, the material world. A materialisation, perhaps.

In music, perhaps an obvious example of this would be the slow manipulation of a piece of manuscript paper, or the clicking of a mouse on a computer screen. This initial image is satisfactory, although we must be sure to keep a broader set of circumstances in mind, including all possible material sites of operation. Scoring can, of course, produce a final paper draft, written in a composer’s hand, or it could, in the case of Meredith Monk, be a physical space of operation where the bodies of performers are worked-with directly, in situ.

I reiterate that I locate my scrutiny within the process of making, when a work is still in a liquid state, subject to redrafting, change, and development. The term can therefore be seen as related to but not interchangeable with wider notions of making, the latter term being understood in a far broader sense. I am further locating scoring in an active space, prior to any time when a notion of ‘complete work’ might be entextualised by its own materiality, where

Entextualisation is the “process of rendering a given instance of discourse as text, detachable from its local context” (Silverstein & Urban: 1992). Discourse is the unremarked and unremarked flow of utterances in which most human activities are bathed. Text is created when instances of discourse, by being rendered detachable from their immediate context of emission, are made available for repetition or re-creation in other contexts. In other words, they are stretches of discourse which can be reproduced and thus transmitted over time and space. (Barber 2007: 22)
Thusly, as will be further argued later in this paper, scoring is understood as a discursive act, a discourse with that which is emerging (note the present tense) in the material world, not merely mono-directional manipulation of it.

When I talk about scoring, I am therefore also talking about a maker’s relationship between their own sense of self and that which is materially emerging before them as they make in the present tense. As a maker scores, the actions of their self instigates changes in material world around them (through the movement of a pencil, as a perhaps all too easy example), the self observing these changes as being externalised from it. In this way, the maker ever-operates simultaneously as a reader as well as a writer. As Shane Butler points out, ‘the author does not move in a straight line but, rather, is always doubling back’ (Butler 2011: 21) (i.e. doubling back on what has just been written).

Of course, there are assumptions here to themselves warrant scrutiny. Ultimately what scoring posits mirrors the enquiry of J. Q. Davies, where the paradigm as to ‘how bodies define music’ is inverted to ask ‘how music defines bodies’ (Davies 2014: 2). In that sense, I am simultaneously asking how composer’s sense of self is forged through and of their interaction with material manifestations of their ideas in their acts of making.

Adopting this discursive position (between maker and material) arises through recent critiques of hylomorphism, where form and matter are conceptually bifurcated. Within a hylomorphic understanding of making, form is imposed on to an inert and passive material world, which receives the form given to it as a neutral vessel. The discursive position adopted here acknowledges such critiques of this model offered by such thinkers as Judith Butler (Butler 1993). In a complex and detailed deconstruction of hylomorphism, Butler outlines the concept’s misogynist assumptions, presenting form as an operation of the phallus, matter (Butler notes the shared latin root mater, mother) the supressed feminine. Put simply, ‘sexual difference operates at the very formulation of matter’ (Butler 1993: 24).

Understanding the material world with a post-hylomorphic gaze has been the subject of much contemporary discussion surrounding materiality, particularly in the often-identified Twenty-first Century ‘material turn’ in critical theory (Barrett & Bolt 2013). Within such a new materialism

[M]atter is no longer imagined [...] as a massive, opaque plentitude but is recognized instead as indeterminate, constantly forming and reforming in unexpected ways. One could conclude accordingly that matter “becomes” rather than matter “is”. (Coole & Frost 2010: 10)

Crucially, such ideas often attribute an independent ‘vibrancy’ (Bennett 2010) to the material world, meaning

[T]he capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own. (Bennet 2010: p.viii)

This active vibrancy, the material world’s ability to act as a quasi-agent, is henceforth referred here to as an actancy, appropriating the Latourian term ‘actant’ from actor-network theory. The term is used here as an alternative for agency, as a way of acknowledging the nonhuman material world’s ability to act (which is the primary interest here), whilst avoiding the parallel discussion as to whether this actancy is philosophically equitable to the full status of agent (such discussion is left to other scholars for the time being).

Likewise, a post-hylomorphic position is claimed by many recent anthropologies of making.

Alfred Gell was perhaps the first to consider the discursive attributes in making. Structuralist in approach, Gell identifies four classes of participant within art-making (the bracketed definitions are my own summaries/examples) - artist (human maker, e.g. painter), index (material instance of making, e.g. the painting), prototype (external thing(s) to which the work might point, e.g. the person of a portrait), and recipient (the experiential viewer/listener of the work, e.g. audience) - and two roles that a participant can adopt – agent (active) and patient (passive). Permutating these creates an ‘art nexus’ from which sixteen possible kinds of discursive relationships can be identified (Gell 1998). Gell then uses these sixteen relationships as means of analysing the workflow of various art-making contexts, resulting in elaborate chains of relationships, where sub-relationships within the chain (denoted in Gell’s notation with brackets) themselves serve as co-agents on the next stage, each annotated with -A or -P within the notation to denote agent or patient roles. He calls this analytical frame hierarchical embedding, the example below could be understood as a map of making in portraiture, for example.

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[[\text{[Prototype-A] \rightarrow Artist-A} \rightarrow \text{Index-A}] \rightarrow \text{Recipient-P}]
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Figure X: Alfred Gell – Hierarchical Embedding of the Index in the Art Nexus (Gell 1998: 51)

Gell’s model it is both monodirectional and rigid. Activity flows from agent to patient in any one relationship pairing, and that pairing is static. Ironically, in attempting to acknowledge a discourse between participants, the resultant
framework is actually non-discursive – at no point is allowed to be acknowledged to flow bi-directionally within an identified relationship. As such, the hierarchical nature of Gell’s model still requires a phallic originator which implicitly upholds something of the hylomorphic perspective. Obviously, more recent ethnographies of creative practice have focussed on distributed models of creativity (e.g. Born 1995, Clarke & Doffman 2017). Perhaps one of the most endearing models emerging from such thought is the alternative to hylomorphic offered by composer Liza Lim. Lim describes a *hylaemorphism* in her practice, where *hylae* refers to the mycelial underground fibres of fungi that form a network of ‘fermentation, decomposition, diffusion and re-composition’ that connects ‘trees and other plants, decomposing matter [and] the soil’ (Lim 2014 p.2). By extension, we might extract from this a perspective whereby any notion of ‘work’ is merely the flowering part of a less visceral fossorial rhizome.

Set against the backdrop of an agential or vibrant materialism, where the world itself can be described as an entanglement of actancies, scoring is about acknowledging the non-sentient material components of these kinds of creative networks.

Discourse of this nature has obviously already begun in earnest. Tim Ingold’s notion of ‘intransitive production’ is perhaps a famous and oft-cited recent example. ‘[Intransitive production] is to set the verb ‘to produce’ alongside other intransitive verbs such as to hope, to grow and to dwell, as against such transitive verbs as to plan, to make and to build’ (Ingold 2011: 6). Through Ingold, making now appears as the result of a non-trajectorial entwinement with the actancy of materials. Formal end is now re-positioned as an emergence, created in dialogue between maker and material. Notions of (phallic) originator are dissolved into the entanglement of both parties. Yet I here argue that Ingold’s position is incomplete.

Within this wider context, the discursive attributes of scoring can be understood in more detail.

Returning to Shane Butler’s observation that “the author does not move in a straight line but, rather, is always doubling back” (Butler 2011: 21), in the act of scoring the maker is in perpetual discourse with the material presence of that which they are making. Yet that presence, now a part of the material world, now must be acknowledged as itself having a material actancy – independent to the maker - by virtue of being a part of that world. Scoring is thus a continual discursive entanglement between the agency of the maker and actancy (acting back on them) of that which they are making. Seemingly paradoxically, that which is being made is contributing to its own making.

In practical terms, that which this account might first offers is a materialist perspective on the phenomena, often described by artists, where, in the process of making, the artwork-in-production is described as as ‘telling them what it needs’, where an artist’s initial plans and schemata have to be changed and/or abandoned in favour of where the work ‘wants to go’. ‘I set out to make X, but Y emerged’. Could this result from the material agency of the instance?

The active vibrancy with which the material world is imbued within this lens quickly presents itself as a superabundant fabric of agencies, easily recognisable the rhizome in Deleuzian thought (Deleuze & Guatarri 2008: 1). Karen Barad offers her notion of ‘intra-action’ as a means of furthering the notion of this entanglement.

The neologism “intra-action” signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That is, in contrast to the usual “interaction,” which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. (Barad 2007: 33)

Barad uses the example of the famous double-slit experiment of Niels Bohr. As will be remembered from this foundational aspect of quantum mechanics, here, experimental *doings* create *both* knowledge and being. To offer a somewhat inelegant outline for the sake of time, the electron exists simultaneously as a wave and a particle – it is the nature of the act of viewing that actually changes the form the electron takes. Therefore the act of observation itself creates *both* a particular being and also knowledge of that being.

From this perspective, making operates not as an action on but an action from the material world. That is to posit that making does not emerge through a collision of maker and material (as perhaps Ingold my lead us to conclude), moreover those agencies are themselves a product of their own entwinement. Within these terms, the entangled agencies of maker and material exist nothing more but a non-delineable entanglement until the act of scoring intra-acts the agencies into palpably separated being.

Barad’s specific term for the conditions that permit observation, and thus intra-action, is apparatus.

*Apparatuses are the material conditions of possibility and impossibility of mattering; they enact what matters and what is excluded from mattering. Apparatuses enact agential cuts that produce determinate boundaries and properties of “entities” within phenomena, where “phenomena” are the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-acting components*. (Barad 2007: 148. Emphasis retained)
As such, scoring can itself be understood as a material apparatus in these terms, as an quasi-experimental set up that is creating the agencies and/or actancies that come to define its own being in the same way that Bohr’s double slit-experiment creates the formal being of the electron. Put another way, scoring is the apparatus through which the maker’s sense of self becomes.

It is this aspect that completes the model offered by Ingold. That a discourse between (human and nonhuman) agencies creates scoring is only one plane of operation. Through a Baradian lens –and paradoxically - it is simultaneously also the scoring that creates those discursive agencies. Simply by my setting out to produce a something, I am creating an intra-active frame within which that something is itself permitted a being.

Of course, such a notion could be expanded outwards into a broader socio-cultural domain. And to a certain extent it already has. Nina Eidsheim’s notion of ‘the figure of sound’ (Eidsheim 2015) re-positions our understanding of sound as a conceptual domain riddled with socio-cultural presumptions, as being transmitted by the air, as being heard by the ears (for example). One might extrapolate an Baradian reading of Jacques Lacan here (Lacan 2002), whereby simply by naming something, we have changed that which it is. Similarly, Sara Ahmed’s examination of the sociality (cum heteronormativity, cum gendernormativity) of the socio-spatial frame demonstrates the extent to which our material presence in the world changes our phenomenological relationship with it. Through scoring, therefore, that which has already been acknowledged in wider cultural analysis must now be acknowledged within the specific domain of the maker in the moment.

To summarise, scoring is making in the moment. It is an action that serves an apparatus of mattering, which not only moves by entwining the maker and material by, in the act of moving, creates these delineable entities. One is left to wonder the literal extent to which a maker is defined by that which they make.

REFERENCES


