

# Music-Genre Abstraction, Dissemination and Trajectories

## *Introduction*

Musical genres are fraught with issues of temporality. As noted by Eric Drott, the idea that genres are unstable and dynamic is virtually axiomatic in today's music scholarship, to the extent that the historicity of individual genres appears to be a truism, scarcely in need of belabouring (2014). Even volumes which detail the relation of multiple genres often do so in the form of historical explorations (e.g. Holt 2007; Brackett 2016), just as the phenomenon of genre as such is questioned on historical grounds (cf. Sandywell and Beer 2005; Rossman 2012; Drott 2014). In addition, musico-sociological approaches to genre often concern the role of genres as conventional patterns of prior musico-cultural activity in forming present and prospective music production and consumption (cf. Walser 1993; Frith 1996; Toynbee 2000; Martin 2006); and the generality inherent in the concept of genre implies not only synchronic similarities across repertoires of music or musical events, but also patterns of genre dissemination in time, their continuous (re)production or development in trajectories – for example, from margin to mainstream, local to globalised forms, avant-garde to establishment (cf. Lena 2012). As such, genres are not only in time, but – through their actual or imagined regulation or templates for musico-cultural development – productive of time (Born 2014; 2015), that is, productive of the very historicity remarked on by Drott.

It is the aim of this primarily theoretical article to discuss the relation of genre dissemination and trajectories, that is, how genres spread – temporospatially, from one situation to the next – and how this spreading comes to appear as patterned. Among the multitude of ways this relation may be addressed, I adopt a fundamentally constructivist approach, suggesting that genres are constructed in processes of *abstraction*, collectively performed by various agents in musical life. In both its etymological origin (in “to draw away”<sup>1</sup>) and current meanings (such as “the act of withdrawing” or “removing”<sup>2</sup>), the concept of abstraction carries a combined sense of reduction and movement. As I argue, this indicates the significance of processes of abstraction to genre dissemination. However, to substantiate this claim, I invoke a further specifica-

1 Cf. the root of abstraction in Latin *abstract* (*abstractio*), past participial stem of *abstrahere*: *ab(s)*- “away” and *trahere* “to draw” (“abstraction, n.” 2019; “abstract, v.”, 2019).

2 See “abstraction, n.” (2019).

tion asserting that processes of abstraction always imply efforts at singling out, symbolising and systematising (Winther 2014). In exploring the role of abstraction in genre dissemination and trajectories, I add to recent turns in musical genre theory in the direction of actor-network theory (ANT) and assemblage theory (Born 2011; Drott 2013; Brackett 2016; Haworth 2016; Krogh 2019a) in accordance with older influences from pragmatism and poststructuralism (e.g. Derrida [1980] 1992). The exploration of perspectives from this theoretical compound for doing genre theory is seminal to the conceptual development attempted here.

While being particularly interested in genre, I realise that processes of abstraction pertain to a broader field of musico-cultural generalisation – i.e. practices of categorisation, discrimination, labelling and so on involving notions of, for example, style, scene or streams. For this reason, I occasionally use “musico-generic assemblage” as an overarching term invoking the explicit context of assemblage theory.<sup>3</sup> However, I do not mean to imply that the discussion presented in this article applies unconditionally to music labelling or categorization as such.

It may be argued, as does Holt, that “[c]ategories of popular musics are particularly messy because they are rooted in vernacular discourse” (2007, 14-15). This messiness causes some scholars to discriminate systematically between analytically defined, etic concepts (such as genre, style or stream) and empirical instances of industry or folk taxonomy, i.e. emic concepts (cf. Lena 2012, 6-8); while others apply deliberately tentative concepts and theoretical distinctions in order not to let “scholarly definitions become the rule” (Holt 2007, 15). While I would certainly not want to commit the latter fallacy, in this article, though, I take a theoretical approach to discussing the relation of music-genre abstraction, dissemination and trajectories – making exemplified theoretical suggestions, as opposed to performing a comprehensive empirical investigation. Theorizing about genre does not necessarily conflict with sensitivity to observations, informants’ concepts or “artful practices” (DeNora 2014, 77). In fact, I find that both the aforementioned strategies suffer from a dualist understanding of what should be regarded as a continuum, namely the association of general concepts (or theory) with what is being conceptualised. As I will argue, this association is performed (or assembled) via minute translations (including the aforementioned processes of abstraction) within and across contexts – whether they be academic or vernacular.

In the following, I introduce some tenets of musical genre theory concerning the fundamental question: What is a musical genre? Answers to this question invoke various understandings of typology – from structuralist to performative accounts – which I connect to the aforementioned turn in musical genre studies in the direction of ANT and assemblage theory. I concern my-self primarily with studies of genre in popular music, adhering in this respect to Born and Haworth’s claim that this has been a particularly flourishing ground for developments in musical genre-theory (2017, 6) and without claiming to provide an exhaustive account. Rather, the outline serves to motivate the subsequent discussion.

3 The concept of musico-generic assemblages is developed in Krogh (2019a).

Secondly, I turn to the issue of abstraction in a context of genre dissemination. I consider abstraction as an aspect of genre labelling in accordance with Jacques Derrida's thinking on difference and communication – a central influence on performative accounts of genre. And by adding Brian Massumi's notion of "lived abstraction" (2011) I aim to achieve a broad experiential account of abstraction's significance to musico-generic assemblages. Next, this significance is concretised by invoking the aforementioned understanding of abstraction as singling out, symbolising and systematising, and by considering associated processes drawing on science and technology studies – specifically the work of Bruno Latour (1999). Simultaneously, I invoke examples pertaining to a range of musico-cultural settings – in particular the workings of The Echo Nest, a leading enterprise in the field of commercial music information retrieval. The discussion of abstraction in the context of genre dissemination presents the article's main argument as to the fundamental significance of abstraction to musico-generic assemblages and how this may be conceptualized.

Thirdly, I approach the issue of trajectories, i.e. patterns in the temporal dissemination of genres. Again, I revisit (popular) music genre theory – especially the work of Jenifer Lena on genres in twentieth-century US popular music – before suggesting an account of trajectories on the basis of assemblage theory and the previous discussion of abstraction in the context of genre dissemination. In doing so, I aim for a non-teleological understanding of the patterns entailed in musical genres' temporal dissemination.

### *What is a musical genre?*

According to Jim Samson – in his 2001 entry on genre in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* – two approaches have dominated musical genre studies. The first concerns systematic, parameter-based delimitations of individual genres or of various genres in comparison. Since antiquity, such efforts at typology have been a central aspect of Western philosophies on art, though in the late twentieth century they came under increasing pressure from developments in rhetorical, linguistic, cultural, literary and film theory encouraging studies of genre as "social practice".<sup>4</sup> In particular, popular music studies picked up this second trend,<sup>5</sup> enquiring about the musico-sociological ramifications of genres perceived as "set[s] of musical events (real or possible) whose course is governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules" (Fabbri 1982a, 52); or, in the words of another canonical definition, "systems of orientations, expectations and conventions that circulate between industry, text and subject" (Neale 1980, 19).<sup>6</sup> Focusing on musical events (rather than works), and on musico-

4 Cf. Todorov ([1978] 2000), Bakhtin ([1979] 2000), Neale (1980, [1990] 2012), Derrida ([1980] 1992); Fowler (1982), Miller ([1984] 1994); Harris (1995), Altman (1999). Introductions to this interdisciplinary field of genre studies may be found in Frow (2006) and Bawarshi and Reiff (2010).

5 Cf. Fabbri (1982a; 1982b), Walser (1993), Shuker (1994), Frith (1996), Negus (1998; 1999), Toynbee (2000), Moore (2001), Brackett (2002; 2005), Holt (2003; 2007).

6 This latter definition illustrates the influence from film theory on musical genre studies: Provided by film scholar Steve Neale, it was taken up by, among others, Negus (1998, 1999), Toynbee (2000), Hesmondhalgh (2005), Lena and Peterson (2008), Lena (2012), Haworth (2016).

cultural and institutional contexts for categorisation, studies of genre as social practice have manifested an increasingly pragmatic and processual orientation. Thus, whereas Fabbri's definition retains a sense of genre as a set of events marked by regularity – i.e. a structural phenomenon – later scholars have pushed for performative accounts of genre, embracing the fact that sets of musical events are always incomplete and that, for this reason, they should be understood as groupings, rather than as static or given groups.<sup>7</sup> David Brackett makes this point, stating that “the more that we examine a given grouping of texts, the more dissimilar individual texts begin to appear” and “[s]imilarly, the more closely one describes a genre in terms of its stylistic components, the fewer examples actually seem to fit” (2016, 3). Underlying Brackett's statement is Derrida's so-called law of genre, which implies that any categorical demarcation potentially implies transgression,<sup>8</sup> which is why individual texts are never completely absorbed by (and cannot be reduced to) a particular genre membership: “participation never amounts to belonging” (Derrida [1980] 1992, 230). Accordingly, Brackett states that: “genres are not static groupings of empirically verifiable musical characteristics, but rather associations of texts whose criteria of similarity may vary according to the uses to which the genre labels are put” (2016, 3-4). A similar insistence on genre performance is expressed by Lussier, who claims that “to understand genre one needs to understand the naming or labelling as mediation, as the genre's exposition [...] Through the practice of labelling, a togetherness or set is exposed and rendered existent” (2011, 111).

The post-structuralist implication in Brackett's turn to Derrida is also manifest in his adoption of the Deleuzian concept of assemblage, which is used to further underline the incomplete correlation of any individual text or other aspects of musical events to particular genres:

The notion that a genre [...] articulates together notions of musical style, identifications, visual images, ways of moving and talking, and myriad other factors is akin to the idea of the assemblage. In contrast to the notion of organic totalities, assemblages [...] are “wholes characterized by *relations of exteriority*. [...] The exteriority of relations implies a certain autonomy for the terms they relate.” [DeLanda 2006, 10-11] Thus, in the study of genre, the components [...] that may characterize a genre at a given point in time may also participate in other genres at the same time, or in the past or the future. The components are not part of a seamless, organic whole, and their meaning in a particular genre formation derives from their relations and interactions with each other over time. (2016, 10)

7 It should be noted that this “push” is to some extent anticipated by Fabbri (1982a, 62) and emphasised in later publications (e.g. Fabbri 2012; 2014).

8 This point is somewhat contrary to Todorov's statement that “[i]n order to exist as such, the transgression requires a law – precisely the one that is to be violated. The norm becomes visible – comes into existence – owing only to its transgressions” ([1978] 2000, 196). However, the processual view of genre that Brackett derives from Derrida corresponds to the pragmatic implication in Todorov's invocation of speech-act theory ([1978] 2000, 198), just as it resonates in literary genre theory with invocations of Wittgensteinian philosophy of language (language games and family resemblance; cf. Fowler 1982, 41). For this inspiration manifested in musical genre studies, see for example Rockwell (2012).

Assemblages consist in the “co-functioning” (Deleuze and Parnet [1987] 2002, 69) of non-reducible and, thus, semi-autonomous components, as explained by Brackets. They manifest a relational milieu or “middle” ([1987] 2002, 39). That is, an emergent territory of preliminary order or contingent unity ([1987] 2002, 69) which is, however, always open to de-territorialisation or so-called “lines of flight” ([1987] 2002, 36). Moreover, due to their reliance on the co-functioning of their elements, assemblages should be regarded as instances of activity (i.e. assembling), that is, events rather than entities, which is why the concept lends itself to the aforementioned push for performative understandings of genre – beyond the notions of sets or systems.

Another advocate of assemblage theory in musical genre studies, Georgina Born, brings up the contingency of genre participation in a discussion of musico-cultural identification. Born remarks that this contingency is insufficiently acknowledged by Keith Negus, who draws his understanding of genre from Neale. Negus emphasises the contingency of how genre distinctions relate to markets, media formats and wider cultural formations;

yet at other points he abandons contingency, highlighting “how genres operate as social categories; how rap cannot be separated from the politics of blackness, nor salsa from Latinness, nor country from whiteness and the enigma of the ‘South’” (Born 2011, 383; quoting Negus 1999).

The homogeneity ascribed to rap, salsa and country, as given sets of music, politics of race, ethnicity, and so on, results in reductive accounts of these genres in terms of their functioning in musical life (*in casu* the music industry). To encourage a better route for genre studies, Born suggests alternatively (by reference to Brackets 2005) that “genre works by projecting temporally, into the unruly, ongoing cauldron of alternative socio-cultural formations, potential moves and reconfigurations of those formations coded materially as aesthetic moves and transformations that are proffered as analogous to the social” (Born 2011, 383). As such, genre is, again, performed and not merely by articulation of already established systems of musical convention, but rather as retro-active projections, that is, assemblages of musical past and present aimed ahead.<sup>9</sup>

The emphasis on contingency in the context of performative understandings of genre contrasts with the hint of structural determination present in earlier accounts of genre as social practice – particularly the notion of “genre rules”.<sup>10</sup> Still, acts of performance or assemblage are not entirely voluntarist either. Just as genres are continuously assembled by human and non-human components, so agency or “the efficacy or effectivity to which that term has traditionally referred” should be regarded as “distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field” (Bennett 2010, 23), that is, as an emergent feature (in the midst) of bodies affecting and capable of being affected

9 This point resembles that of Fowler (1982, 50) or Todorov ([1978] 2000, 207) – or, in a musical context, Brennan (2017, 190) – though with a stronger emphasis on the prospective, temporalizing quality of genre formation (Born 2015). I return to this below.

10 Fabbri (1982a, 1982b). See also Frith (1996), Moore (2001), Brackets (2002), Tagg (2013), Weisbard (2014).

(Deleuze and Parnet [1987] 2002, 60). Furthermore, one effect of assemblage – and in particular of its componential heterogeneity – may be a certain stability or persistence to relations. As explained by Drott:

It is by means of [...] material, institutional, and discursive inscription that certain groupings take on the appearance of substantial, objective, even “natural” entities. But while such inscriptions may help reify certain genres, encouraging the tendency to view them as ostensive *groups* rather than as performative *groupings*, this is only because it creates conditions conducive for their subsequent appropriation by others – that is, for their continual enactment and reenactment. (Drott 2013, 12)

Though Drott bases his reasoning on ANT, there is in my view a close affinity between the continual re-enactment of groups of which he writes and the activity of assemblage,<sup>11</sup> which according to American philosopher Manuel DeLanda always entails a dimension of territorialisation and de-territorialisation. That is, processes which, respectively, strengthen or weaken the internal homogeneity and delimitation of an assemblage (DeLanda 2006, 12). Again, this dimension underlines that assemblages are marked by contingency. However, even processual heterogeneity – i.e. the co-presence of territorialisation and de-territorialisation – may work to secure stability and persistence, as when, for example, the subsumption of a genre under a broader category (partial de-territorialisation) affirms, sharpens or cements its particular terms in relation to other (sub)genres (territorialisation). The addition, discussed by Regev (2013), of ethno-national genres to the global field of pop-rock throughout the second half of the twentieth century illustrates this point.<sup>12</sup>

Coming to the end of this preliminary outline of tenets in musical genre theory, I want briefly to return to the initial distinction between trends in music genre studies drawn by Samson. It is obvious that universalist typologies of musical works have been thoroughly challenged over recent decades to the point where genres not only comprise various aspects of social practice. Indeed, they are increasingly understood as contingent, non-reducible and non-exclusive phenomena, emergent within heterogeneous – sonic, social, discursive, material, institutional, visual, corporeal, technological – milieus due to processes of assemblage and, thus, continuously performed, embodied, territorialised, de-territorialised, and so on. This is in no small way due to the aforementioned inspirations from pragmatic and poststructuralist thinking along with recent turns to ANT and assemblage theory, which have afforded the push in musical genre studies towards processual and non-reductive accounts. However, in this genre theoretical scenario, typologies may, I argue, be regarded as a particular and impor-

11 The enacted or performed quality of actor-networks is stressed by Law (1999, 4), who also claims that “there is little difference between Deleuze’s *agencement* (awkwardly translated as ‘assemblage’ in English) and the term ‘actor-network’” (italics in original; Law 2009, 147). For an argument encouraging the combination of the two “schools” of thought see Müller and Schurr (2016). Moreover, for examples of the combination enacted, see Law (2004) and, in the context of music and media studies, Hondros (2018) and Krogh (2019a).

12 For a detailed demonstration of the same point in the context of Danish hip-hop and on the basis of assemblage theory, see Krogh (2015).



tant component of musico-generic assemblages, affording stability based on inscription and (often) owing to the implication or enrolment of wider theoretical complexes – related to, for example, music analysis (Samson 2001), corporate cultures of production (Negus 1999), or music information retrieval (Drott 2014). This implication of wider theoretical complexes or, for that matter, wider contexts of musico-cultural practice illustrates, in turn, a kind of reflective distancing – a “drawing away” from the immediate context of genre labelling, or what could be interpreted as a move of abstraction. In the following, I examine this move.

### *Abstraction in the context of genre dissemination*

It may be argued that issues of genre dissemination are, in fact, central to most of the genre theory already touched upon in this article. Certainly, the aforementioned ideas of genres as rule-bound sets, circulating systems of convention or, alternatively, processes of assemblage concern the propagation of genre in time and space. Moreover, if we regard genre labelling as an aspect of this propagation, then the relation of dissemination and abstraction has also been implicitly touched upon in the guise of Derrida’s principle of participation over belonging. This is evident from Derrida’s discussion of the impossible closure of any class (i.e. the impossibility of belonging) due to the very act of denomination. The identification, in any specification of genre, of a defining, common trait is performative, “[i]t gathers together the corpus”, but “at the same time, in the same blinking of an eye, [it] keeps it from closing, from identifying itself with itself” (Derrida [1980] 1992, 231). And the reason for this is that a “distinctive trait, a mark of belonging or inclusion, does not properly pertain to any genre or class” (Derrida [1980] 1992, 230). That is, by issuing a criterion of participation, the generic mark simultaneously issues a criterion of non-participation, i.e. an outside of exclusion. As Brackett points out, this view of genre correlates with Derrida’s view of language and communication beyond the context of art and literature (Brackett 2016, 12). In other words, all communication implies the possibility that an addressee will identify a pattern of meaning, i.e. repeatable marks of a code allowing interpretation. As Derrida has it: “The possibility of repeating, and therefore of identifying, marks is implied in every code, making of it a communicable, transmittable, decipherable grid that is iterable for a third party, and thus for any possible user in general” (Derrida 1982, 315). Even in contexts where participants are co-present, the inability of “conscious intention to be totally present and actually transparent for itself and others” (Derrida 1982, 327) makes coding a prerequisite for communication; and – as according to “The law of genre” – coding or the establishing of order through marks of identity or difference imply an outside, that is, a potential for transgression (or *différance*) (Derrida 1982, 12). Derrida speaks of this as the ability of the mark to “break with every given context and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion” (Derrida 1982, 320). In this respect, genre labelling would seem to imply not only a performative drawing of borders, but also an implicit potential for “drawing away” from the instantiated order, that is, a potential, re-contextualising move of abstraction.

This view of genre labelling may, I think, be fruitfully combined with the concept of “lived abstraction” detailed by Brian Massumi in his 2011 book *Semblance and Event*. Drawing on philosophers such as William James, Alfred North Whitehead and Gilles Deleuze, Massumi develops this concept by way of examples – including the experience of movement (e.g. “optical illusions” such as spiralling) in the design of decorative art:<sup>13</sup>

We see a *movement* that flows *through* the design. That’s what it is to see a motif. The forms aren’t moving, but we can’t not see movement when we look at them. That could be another definition of real: what we can’t not experience when we’re faced with it. Instead of calling it an illusion [...] why not just call it abstract? Real and abstract. The reality of this abstraction doesn’t replace what’s actually there. It supplements it. We see it *with* and *through* the actual form. It *takes off* from the actual form. [...] The actual form and the abstract dynamic are two sides of the same experiential coin. (Massumi 2011, 41)

In fact, as an immanent, immediate dimension of experience, this abstraction is at play in any experience we may have of objects – when, for example, impressions of colour, contour and resonance make objects appear voluminous or weighty: Just as movement in inert artworks is seen “*through* the actual form”, so is experience of these abilities derived from an abstract impressional coherence, rather than from the actual impressions in and of themselves. By extension, this makes abstraction seminal to any experience we may have of objects as identifiable, stable and coherent entities, holding potentials to be acted upon: “The potential we see in the object is a way our body has of being able to relate to the part of the world it happens to find itself in at this particular life’s moment. What we abstractly see [...] is *lived relation* – a life dynamic” (Massumi 2011, 42). According to Massumi, it is in this way, as an experiential engagement, that abstraction is lived. It manifests a lived relation to the world and, thus, “a life dynamic”.

The potential we see in the object may be consciously realised – as in the attentive experience of movement in inert art. However, to denote the way potentials may also be sensed without actually being realised, as a virtual “more” to the present situation, Massumi takes up the concept of semblance:

I started with a decorative example [cf. above], but the point I wanted to make was not that art is decorative but rather that even decorative art is a creative event, however modest. It creates a semblance. A semblance is a placeholder in present perception of a potential “more” to life. (2011, 49)

As one example of how this semblance may emerge, he notes the ability of any feature of an object to be taken as a mark of an alternative entity, namely that of its form, kind, style or, indeed, genre. In experience, anything may be doubled by its own likeness – due to recollection of similar phenomena or anticipation of future ones: “The likeness is the invisible sign of a continuing. This puts a certain distance between the

13 Adding to Massumi’s visual example, which is inferred from Susanne Langer, I think musical phenomena such as melody or rhythm make equally adequate illustrations of his point.



object and itself. A kind of self-abstraction" (Massumi 2011, 49). This self-abstraction makes, in Massumi's terminology, of each particular a "singular-generic" (2011, 50). That is, it installs in experience a "dispositional continuum" (2011, 50) or a tending towards relays or categorical shifts. Another way of saying this – reminiscent of Derrida – is that any feature which is experienced as pertaining to an object of a certain kind (or genre) indicates at the same time a potential relay into alternative orders (other genres), i.e. infinite de-contextualisation.

I take this aspect of Massumi's thinking to illustrate the experiential significance of abstraction for a theory of genre in accordance with Derrida's famous law and, by extension, for the performative accounts of musical genre developed by Brackett and others. Additionally, however, Massumi takes us beyond the textual or communicative context of Derrida's thinking and into a motley ecology of "relational-qualitative goings on" (Massumi 2011, 28). Indeed, according to Massumi, the concept of experience should not be reserved for humans' apprehension of their surroundings. Just as objects rely on abstraction – "objectification itself is abstraction" (Whitehead in Massumi 2011, 15) – so the subjective is "the self-occurring form of the event. The dynamic unity of an occasion of experience is its "subjective form"" (Massumi 2011, 8). In fact, humans as well as non-humans exist as events, inflicting or "expressing" themselves for other events to "take account" of (the term used by Whitehead to define perception; Massumi 2011, 25). This view accords with the concept of distributed agency, which is central to assemblage theory, just as Massumi stresses an idea of irreducible emergence (2011, 20), which accords with the principle of the externality of relations to their terms.<sup>14</sup>

Thinking with assemblage theory, one might say that the concept of semblance indicates how any element may catalyse lines of flight leading from one assemblage to another, illustrating the multiplicity of any assemblage. In particular, the "singular-generic" seems to be an adequate term to describe the infinite potential for creating generic marks (cf. Derrida), that is, the assemblage of any musical element or event into a range of genre formations that is in principle infinite – an infinite potential for "immanent typology" (Massumi 2011, 83). As such, the concept of semblance specifies the act of musico-generic assemblage as, indeed, an act of abstraction.

To further develop and concretise this idea, I think a fruitful explanatory move may be made beyond the work of Massumi, though without abandoning his pragmatist inspirations. Thus, according to philosopher Rasmus Grønfeldt Winther (2014), the idea of abstraction advanced by William James (e.g. [1890] 1981), as well as that of his philosophical fellow John Dewey (e.g. 1929), may be summarised in three phases corresponding to the tripartite specification of the term mentioned at the outset of this article. Here are the phases explained by Winther:

1. *Singling out*. Abstraction first identifies and emphasizes a single predicate, part, stage or object of a complex whole, whether the whole be material, ideal or both.
2. *Symbolizing*. Abstraction conceptualizes the predicate (etc.) as belonging to a single kind – a concept, a sign, a mathematical object or func-

14 Massumi talks in this respect about "relation[s]-of-nonrelation" (2011, 20).

tion, in short, a symbol. 3. *Systematizing*. Abstraction associates (James) and relates (Dewey) the single symbol to a system of symbols, a system that is fallible, disunified, and one among many. (2014, 3)

These phases make, I think, sense if we consider the example which was noted in the article's introduction, namely that of The Echo Nest. Though it was acquired by Spotify in 2014, to power the platform's algorithmic recommendations, the company's website continues to list a range of (prior) customers including Rdio, BBC, VEVO, and MTV, just as its accomplishments with regard to "music intelligence" are advertised: More than 1.3 trillion data points concerning almost 40 million songs and 4.5 million artists have been collected.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, more than 3,600 genres are systematically correlated in the company's so-called *Every Noise at Once* map,<sup>16</sup> and these numbers are continually rising. The underlying work of analysis consists of both "machine listening", that is, computer-based analysis of the digital signature of various sonic parameters (such as tempo, acoustic-ness, energy, danceability) across various songs; and analysis of what is written about music online, that is, an information "trawl" of music websites and social media (Vanderbilt 2014; Morris 2015; Eriksson 2016; Prey 2016; Drott 2018; Eriksson et al. 2019). In both sorts of analysis, computers (1) single out patterns, which are then (2) researched and conceptualised (i.e. symbolised) by employees, to assert whether patterns add to existing genres (e.g. in the form of subdivisions) and/or whether a new genre entry should be added to the map. Such addition (3) implies a systematisation not only of labels (e.g. a juxtaposition of pop, gauze pop, etherpop, and indie fuzz pop as opposed to, for example, terrorcore, thrash core or grindcore), but also of the identified patterns according to various parameters. For example, in the current layout of *Every Noise at Once*, "down is more organic, up is more mechanical and electric; left is denser and more atmospheric, right is spikier and bouncier."<sup>17</sup>

As illustrated, in the pragmatic understanding of James/Dewey, abstraction may involve non-human actors (*in casu* computers), implying a distributed notion of agency accordant with assemblage theory or of experience as understood by Massumi. It may also imply translations which are not only symbolic but also, for example, spatial, material or sonic – this is again illustrated by the *Every Noise at Once* map which allows users to access music examples by clicking genre entries, that is, to navigate the map as a topology of sound.

Another important point is that abstraction in this sense implies some kind of impetus – an intention, anticipation or unfolding momentum (Massumi 2011, 3) – just as the three phases are not necessarily as clearly distinguishable as Winther's list and my example might imply. The Echo Nest's mapping of genres is, of course, not only highly dependent on commercial and, to some extent, scholarly interests. It is also performed within a framework of established criteria for machine listening, for identifying sonic similarities, and for sorting keywords in the online information trawl.

15 See <http://the.echonest.com>, accessed 7 November 2019.

16 See <http://everynoise.com/engenremap.html>, accessed 7 November 2019.

17 Cf. <http://everynoise.com/engenremap.html>, accessed 7 November 2019.

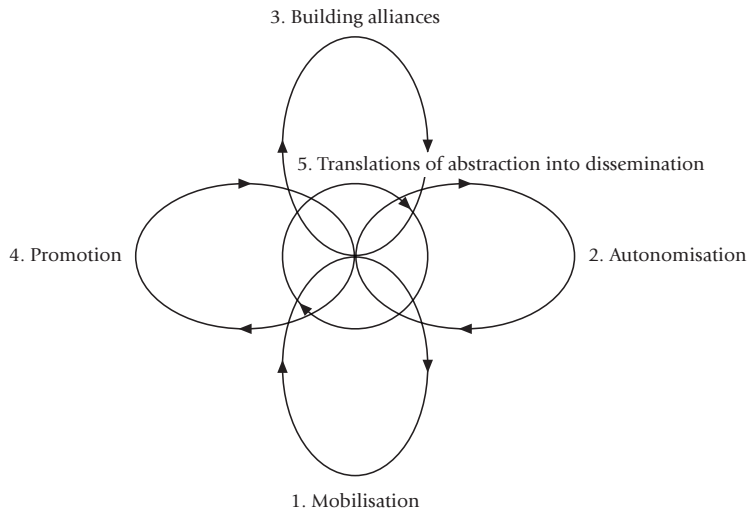


Figure 1.: Processes intertwined with genre abstraction (derived from Latour's loops in the circulation of scientific facts; 1999, 100). The circling arrows imply that all processes (loops) are to some extent continuous. They intertwine, as particularly evident with No 5, "Translations of abstraction into dissemination", which may be regarded as the combined (or co-operating) assemblage of processes No 1-4, as explained below.

This framework affords the identification of new generic patterns while, simultaneously, the system of established symbols is enfolded in the act of singling out. Thus, while the three phases might be supplied with a preceding and subsequent phase concerning preconditions and outcome (in the manner of Tia DeNora's model of musical events; 2003, 49), it might be better to do away with the implicit chronology of the phase metaphor and talk of dimensions instead – that is, dimensions of abstraction active in the musico-generic assemblage.<sup>18</sup>

To further elaborate the role of interests, framing or – in a wider sense – the distributed understanding of agency, noted above, in musico-generic abstraction, I think the perspective of assemblage theory may be supplemented with ideas from ANT or, to be precise, with ideas derived from the writings of French philosopher Bruno Latour on the production of scientific facts (1999).<sup>19</sup> According to Latour, this production involves five loops connecting various contexts and actors (human and non-human) through various kinds of activity. In the following, I take these loops as a starting point for considering five processes, which are – I argue – intertwined with genre abstraction (in its various dimensions). In his account, Latour uses a model (1999, 100), which I have adapted (in terms of the labels used<sup>20</sup>) to make it fit present purposes (see figure 1).

18 For a reflection of DeNora's model along similar lines, see Krogh 2019b.

19 I have already remarked how ANT and assemblage theory are combined by among others Law (2004, 2009). And though, for example, DeLanda objects to the fundamental relationism inherent in ANT (Harman 2010, 176), I think there is enough of a common ground to allow insights to be fruitfully combined. In this respect, I follow Müller and Schurr (2016).

20 The only exception is "Autonomisation". In Latour's account, the remaining loops are: "Mobilization of the World (instruments)", "Alliances (allies)", "Public Representation", and "Links and Knots" (1999, 98-108).

The model is, however, only meant to provide a preliminary and rudimentary idea about the intertwinement of the five processes that it names, as their implications and relations are elaborated in the main text.

To coin a new musical genre or to engage in genre labelling implies *mobilisation* – of musical works, performances, events, scenes, other genres, and so on. This is true in the banal sense that genre labels are often used to talk about or explained by reference to such concrete instances of music culture. Yet, it also follows from the way genre, as I have argued, relies on abstraction – recall Massumi’s notion of the singular-generic, that is, the experience of genre as an immanent though abstract feature of concrete particulars. However, for mobilisation to work, associations have to be made – as clearly demonstrated by the activities of The Echo Nest, where associations between “the world of music” (Anon 2013) and entries in the *Every Noise at Once* genre map are forged by way of hardware (computers), software (for machine listening and information trawling) and judgements by employees. The company’s singling out of generic patterns implies, as Latour writes, a “moving toward the world, making it mobile, bringing it to the site of controversy, keeping it engaged, and making it available for arguments” (1999, 100). The authority of The Echo Nest’s slogan – “We know music...”<sup>21</sup> – rests, thus, on its access to and harvest of trillions of data points which are synthesised and transformed into musical understanding. Synthesisation – via symbolisation and systematisation – makes quite literally “the world of music” assemble in the genre map, whereby it becomes manageable: It may be looked at and navigated on a screen. The abstracted, symbolic translation of songs and online writings on music allows subsequent arguments (e.g. about genre relations or patterns of genre-related taste) to retain a connection to the world (a sense that The Echo Nest are speaking on behalf of songs, artists, listeners, communities); even though arguments may imply connections that would never have been experienced by anyone, had it not been for the map and its possible uses – for example, the point that deep opera and deep tech house are the genres furthest apart in “the world of music” (positioned at opposite ends of the map).<sup>22</sup>

It may be that The Echo Nest’s endeavour is particularly evident in its mobilisation of “the world of music”. However, similar points could be made about the way charts mobilise sales numbers, streams, downloads, airplay time or listener approval along generic lines; or the historical dependency of radio formats – i.e. generically delimited channel profiles – on listener surveys, questionnaires, phone ins, and so on (cf. Rossman 2012; Brackett 2016). In fact, even a casual bar conversation about the genre credentials of some rapper or upcoming rock band would, to some extent, require mnemonic instruments to access and conceptual tools to address events (e.g. of experiencing said rapper or band) in order to support the argument being made. In this respect, first-hand concert experience or, even better, smartphone video recordings of a gig may, for example, outdo hearsay or reviews as a means of mobilisation.

If mobilisation translates the world into manageable reference points in a context of argument, it simultaneously installs a difference or distance between the world

21 See <http://the.echonest.com>, accessed 25 November 2016.

22 See <http://everynoise.com/engenremap.html>, accessed 1 December 2017.

("out there") to be referenced and the site or situation of argument ("in here") (Law 2004, 42). As such, mobilisation entails not only a translation of events but, as an aspect of this, a de- and subsequent re-contextualisation. This is, again, illustrated by The Echo Nest's genre map: the addition of an entry to the map not only mobilises yet another fraction of "the world of music", it also confirms the parameters or the generic system to which the entry is added, just as it confirms the professional capability of The Echo Nest's "machine for sorting music".<sup>23</sup> Latour refers to the latter effect as *autonomisation*, explaining that "it concerns the way in which a discipline, a profession, a clique, or an 'invisible college' becomes independent and forms its own criteria of evaluation and relevance" (1999, 102). Maintaining autonomy takes continuous reaffirmation of both independence and criteria. This may be illustrated if we turn from The Echo Nest to the academic discipline of music theory – at least according to new-musicology critiques of the discipline as being content with exercising its own "scientific language and symbol systems" (including typologies of genre), making "theory and analysis [...] increasingly technical, increasingly incomprehensible to anyone except specialists" (Cook 1998, 93). Moreover, autonomisation concerns not only the self-determination of disciplinary practitioners, but also the status of theoretical schemes, concepts, typologies, and in a wider sense the acknowledgement of a disciplinary subject matter as independent (i.e. existent, self-contained and in possession of explanatory power rather than having to be explained by something else).

Interestingly, this harks back to musical genre theory, specifically the relational understanding of genre that Brackett identifies as an aspect of Fabbri's thinking:

By invoking (via implication) Ferdinand de Saussure's notion of meaning as created through a system of difference without positive value, Fabbri strongly suggests that musical genres become meaningful only in relation to one another, as part of a "musical system." (Brackett 2016, 7)

A Saussurian structure is a self-contained system, irreducible to anything beyond itself. By analogy, the "musical system" noted by Brackett comes to epitomise an understanding of genres as autonomised – as asserting their own, relational logic, while being detached from any musical events *in particular*. In a subsequent passage Brackett comments on the "collective, impersonal nature of how genres are formed" (2016, 12), noting that "once the citation (or non-literal quotation) of socio-musical conventions acquires relative stability and is associated repeatedly with a genre label, it can be quoted (literally) out of context with the quotation then being recognised as a generic reference" (2016, 13) – such as when country stereotypes are quoted in a pop song. This situation, in turn, makes any "attempt to establish a prototypical example of a genre that functions as a point of origin [...] appear] as an act of constant deferral" (2016, 13). Again, this non-referability of genre to any example (i.e. any musical events) in particular illustrates an autonomised state, but now explained as an effect of gradually

23 Cf. Glenn McDonald's presentation "The Genre Grinder's Song (What It's Like to Run a Machine for Sorting Music)" at the "Genre and Music: New Directions" conference, McGill University, Montreal, 27-28 September 2014.

acquired “general citationality” (2016, 13). And though it may be claimed that abstraction by means of iteration is a virtual treat trait of any experience (recall Massumi’s concept of the singular-generic), I agree with Brackett’s emphasis on the signification of a wider context of musico-cultural labelling, quotations or, indeed, musico-generic assemblage for explaining how autonomation is achieved and maintained.<sup>24</sup>

The de- and re-contextualisation implied in the autonomisation of genres concern not only their relation to mobilised musical events, but also their prospective appropriation in future events. The blogposts, whitepapers, charts, applications, services, and so on, in which The Echo Nest presents its systematisation of genres (including the *Every Noise at Once* map); or the strategic descriptions of genre delimitations involved in format radio (e.g. as manifest in scheduling software such as RCS’s Selector); or the encyclopaedic or analytic accounts of genre typologies circulating in music theory – these various instantiations or “documents” illustrate what anthropologist Karin Barber terms acts of entextualisation, that is, “of rendering an instance of discourse as text, detachable from its local context” (Silverstein and Urban quoted in Barber 2007, 22). Entextualisation mediates discourse into durable, object-like entities (texts in a broad sense), capable of dissemination and of re-embedding in other contexts. Indeed, for users of genre labels or typologies, such dissemination may afford the experience of distance (“out-there-ness”, Barber 2007, 100) or of being liberated from the mobilised context of genre formation. This may especially be the case if one adds to entextualisation the reduced or simplified character of genre following from its abstraction (i.e. from the implied act of singling out). As such, autonomisation not only affirms the existence of genres apart from any musical events in particular, but also accelerates their dissemination and amplifies their potential re-embedding in alternative contexts of use.

The third loop according to Latour’s scheme concerns the enrolment of allies or the process of *building alliances* that may provide recourses or remedies for both mobilisation and autonomisation. For example, consider the way The Echo Nest depends on computational systems and mathematical algorithms developed beyond the field of MIR, or the way format radio utilises methods of audience research and lifestyle analysis developed in a wider context of sociology and media studies. Accordingly, authority in genre labelling depends not only on the mobilisation of certain musical events, repertoires, and so on, but equally on how this is done and by reference to whom – that is, on the status of implied methods derived, for example, from the natural or social sciences. In fact, even in the context of everyday discussions about genre, appeals to allies – such as reviewers or fellow fans – may obviously strengthen claims being made.

The enrolment of allies implies a certain alignment to these parties’ aims, interests, standards, and so on. In this respect, the process of building alliances could be regarded as somewhat opposed to the process of autonomisation (Latour 1999, 104) – as would, for example, be the case if genre typologies produced in the context of formal music analysis were considered merely instances of music theory. This, again, points

24 This is in keeping with my comments on distributed agency in connection with Massumi’s concept of experience above.



to the difficulties of delimiting musico-generic assemblages or, to be precise, the condition of concurrent territorialisation and de-territorialisation pertaining to any assemblage. Indeed, the process of autonomisation is in many ways equivalent to the process of territorialisation, which allies may assist or counteract.

Next is the process of *promotion*, which relates to the way genre labelling always implies addressees. The latter point is made by Lussier, who states that:

[t]he use of a label matters in a strategic way. It is embedded in an action toward a kind of self-recognition (undertaken by people to organise themselves, to secure resources, to share information), media recognition (through better press coverage, radio quotas etc.) and state recognition (through dedicated founding programmes, transformations in state organisations etc.). (2011, 116)

Whereas the action towards self-recognition resembles the autonomisation of a community as noted above (by way of Latour), the aim of media and state recognition illustrates an appeal in genre labelling to a wider context of actors and institutions in musical life. Such actors may be potential allies offering remedies to the assemblage of labels or typologies beyond the mobilisation of musical events, that is, their onward dissemination. However, since the use of a genre label, of course, never merely reflects the given label's prior formation elsewhere, its strategic directedness should primarily be considered a prospective aspect of labelling. That is, a loop of promotional work intertwined with the three dimensions of abstraction and the processes considered above.

With The Echo Nest promotion is a key issue (Drott 2018). This is signalled by the company's website, which despite the corporate merger with Spotify in 2014 continues to advertise the company's services. Indeed, even the *Every Noise at Once* map may be interpreted as an illustration of the company's analytic powers designed to attract clients to various "solutions" offered on the company's website in terms of "Music Discovery and personalization", "Dynamic Music data", "Audio Fingerprinting" and more.<sup>25</sup> A common problem implied by these solutions is the challenge for clients (e.g. music streaming services) to optimise listener or fan experience. That is, to curate the right selection and sequence of music to particular end-users (Morris 2015). In this respect, in a white paper from 2013, The Echo Nest promises not only the identification of taste patterns but also prediction of future listener behaviour: "The Echo Nest can use music taste to predict a listener's future value; services can maximise ARPU [Average revenue per user] by focusing on monetizing the likely high-value users" (2013). Hereby the company illustrates the pertinence of aligning music and listeners via genre labelling – and, as Brackett notes, "no ideas about popular music genres have occasioned more discussion and debate than the question of how they evoke, respond to, correspond to, or connote specific audiences" (2016, 16). However, as noted by Born (2011, 383), such connotations work prospectively, affording expectations or, as in the case of The Echo Nest, outright predictions. Thus, when a listener

25 Cf. <http://the.echonest.com/solutions/>, accessed 7 November 2019.

or company responds to a label – by identification, rejection or with a belief in prospective outcomes – this illustrates the relay of promotion into continued dissemination of the musico-generic assemblage.

The loops examined so far intertwine. In many respects, they may be considered aspects of the same affairs and, thus, hard to differentiate. Nevertheless, they concretise how genre performance involves circuits of cooperation – distributing the act of abstraction (in its various dimensions) beyond a limited notion of experience and into wider contexts of musico-generic assemblage (in accordance with Massumi's broad notion of experience).

In Latour's scheme, the previous loops are connected by a fifth, which I call *translations of abstraction into dissemination* (see figure 1), but which he terms "Links and Knots". These terms are explained as an alternative to the idea of "conceptual content" as the key outcome of scientific work, stating that "[t]he content of a science is not something contained; it is itself a *container*. Indeed, if etymology is any help, its *concepts*, its *Begriffe* [...], are what hold a collective together" (Latour 1999, 108). As such, the fifth loop simply denominates the collective which is responsible for the production of scientific facts, that is, the actor-network collaborating on the prior loops. This, of course, merely restates their intertwinement. However, in my view what should be noted is the obvious parallel between the significance of concepts in the context of science and the context of genre respectively. Indeed, the systematic and comparative ascription of "content" to various conceptual categories is exactly what characterises (or characterised) musical genre studies in the guise of typology (cf. Samson); and Latour's thinking is, thus, compatible with the performative turn in genre studies advanced by Brackett and others. In my reading, Latour not merely suggests circuits for the circulation (mobilisation, autonomisation etc.) of conventions and so on (cf. Neale's definition of genre). He does this in a manner compatible with the constant relay of genre iteration (cf. Brackett), that is, the irreducibility of musico-generic assemblage.

Consequently, the fifth loop may also be understood as encircling the heterogeneity of such assemblages. Not only in the sense that various processes are "held together", but also in the sense that oppositions between these processes are connected and mutually translated. There are obvious contradictions in mobilising the world in order to assert the autonomy of genre labels and systems; in "moving toward" concrete instances of musical life while creating distance; in singling out patterns while sweepingly claiming to know "the world of music"; in coining concepts by alliance to others' terms; in "speaking on behalf" of sources, asserting transparent representation in order to strategically promote; or, simply, in looking back in order to look ahead. However, such inconsistencies in genre performance should, I think, be regarded as affirming Latour's claim that "[s]trength does not come from concentration, purity and unity, but from dissemination, heterogeneity and the careful plaiting of weak ties" (1996, 370). It may be that mobilisation authorises the present or prospective use of genre labels and typologies; but for this use to occur, labels have to be perceived as sufficiently autonomous to be identified as concepts apart from "the world of music", that is, for

their implied reference to be experienced as virtual – holding a potential for projection into future situations. Likewise, musical repertoires or events may be mobilised by detailed reference to specific features (tempo, acoustic-ness, energy, danceability etc. as in the case of The Echo Nest); but “zooming in” on something simultaneously asserts distance, just as singling out implies simplification. I have argued that these aspects of abstraction afford a sense of leeway, which means that forward projections or the promotion of genre is again facilitated by the interweaving of oppositions. Such translation is, I suggest, a fundamental feature of musico-generic assemblages, affording their continued dissemination into ever new situations. Abstraction (in its various dimensions) permeates this work, which means that abstraction should be regarded as a key component in genre dissemination.

### *Trajectories*

The idea of genre trajectories is, as noted, closely related to genre dissemination and, thus, to the range of issues discussed above. Indeed, trajectories may basically be regarded as patterns in the dissemination of genres in time and space – as in, for example, Jennifer Lena’s comprehensive study of sixty genres of 20<sup>th</sup> century US popular music.<sup>26</sup> Within this vast generic landscape she identifies four distinct genre forms: avant-garde (Ag), scene-based (S), industry-based (I) and traditionalist (T). These differ according to dimensions such as organisational form, scale and locus, sources of income for artists, ideals, codification of performance conventions, technology and so on; and, as Lena is able to establish, the vast majority of genres conform to either an AgSIT or an IST pattern (2012, 67). However, within these dominant trajectories,<sup>27</sup> not all genres acquire all genre forms, leaving out for instance the development of a traditionalist state (as in the case of grunge) or starting off from a scene-based form (as in the case of swing). Both this and the plain difference of trajectories illustrate that Lena’s genre forms are not phases with a necessary or given order. They may alternate variously and could perhaps be taken as a kind of macro-level manifestation of the heterogeneity inherent in musico-generic assemblages. However, contrary to such an interpretation, Lena asserts a kind of structural causality at odds with the basic contingency of any assemblage. Boundaries between phases of genre forms are, she states, “defined by shifts in the amount and kind of resources used by musical communities” (2012, 63); and while noting that “these should not be considered necessary or sufficient conditions for development” (2012, 63), she nevertheless contends that:

If it were possible to get high-quality data on the pace at which music communities acquired various resources, a very sophisticated model of genre trajectories could be developed. With these sequences, and a careful measurement of

26 For other accounts of genre trajectories, cf. Holt (2007), Fabbri (2012), Regev (2013) and Born (2014).

27 Lena’s definition of a trajectory is drawn from Aminzade, who states that trajectories are “a cumulative [...] sequence of linked events, suggesting a certain directionality to change” (Aminzade quoted in Lena 2012, 65).

contextual influences, we would be able to generate a *predictive* model of musical development. (2012, 110; my emphasis)

All reservations notwithstanding, this assertion about the predictability of musical development borders on structural determinism and, thus, it reproduces the understanding of genres as social regularities regulating musico-cultural practice which has been criticised by Brackett, Born and others. To accommodate this critique, I will continue along the theoretical path established in this article, just as I will continue to enquire into the importance of processes of abstraction.

If genres are events – as implied by assemblage theory – then trajectories concern the temporal logic of these events, that is, their temporal unfolding or emergent temporality (Born 2014, 3). In Massumi's terms, this makes trajectories virtual aspects of genre in the same way that genres may be regarded as virtually present in musical events (perceived as singular-generics). For example, the experience of a musical performance may entail a sense not only of a particular genre but also of commemoration and, thus, traditionalism (cf. Lena). While the sense of genre implies abstraction, so does the sense of temporality in how this generic quality is experienced. This makes trajectories entail a kind of "double" abstraction. That is, a semblance of the semblance of musical events or, more concretely, a sense of likeness, generality or even order in the way musical events invoke genre (this invocation in itself being perceived as a singular-generic). I note this, wishing simultaneously to remind the reader of the "dispositional continuum" that Massumi talks about in relation to singular-generics, and which I compared above to Derrida's idea of infinite relay or transgression (*différance*). This implies that the relation of musical event–genre–trajectory should not be understood as nested layers of abstraction but rather as an emergent generic multiplicity – i.e. lines of flight virtually invoking multiple co-existent planes of abstraction and, thus, multiple musico-generic assemblages from within the event.

Considering genre trajectories as implying a kind of "double" (or multiple) abstraction suggests a further avenue of enquiry and concretion along the Latourian lines considered above. Indeed, the comprehensive work by Lena may, I think, be regarded as exemplifying the five loops of musico-generic abstraction, which I have discussed, at work in a context of music history and social science. Her study mobilises "over three hundred primary and secondary texts" (Lena 2012, 8) as the basis for singling out genre dimensions and forms. Like any academic work – including this article – it allies with various theoretical positions (concerning genre, social science etc.) and promotes profound insights which, as it happens, highlight the process of autonomisation: While encouraging "thick histories" (2012, 5), Lena notes the potential of her study as "a system of sociocultural classification that can be applied to a wide range of phenomena" (2012, 4-5), that is "an instrument" (2012, 170) with a potential for use even beyond the world of music. The actualisation of this potential is, of course, afforded by entextualisation and the implied distancing of the comprehensive source material and complex historical settings which the study talks about. The temporal logics thus promoted relate not only to shifts across genre forms (trajectories such as

AgSIT or IST), but also to genre developments within these phases – for example, the progressive temporality celebrated in contexts of avant-garde music production versus the conservative stasis of traditionalism.<sup>28</sup>

Looking beyond academia, genre trajectories are also produced by way of abstraction in musico-cultural contexts such as the music and media industries – as demonstrated by Negus' study of music genres and corporate culture (1999). Indeed, the various temporalities implied by Lena's genre forms may, I think, be conceived as aspects of the portfolio management, which Negus regards as prominent in the way corporations integrate labels and deal with artists. So, for example, "cash cows" distinguish themselves by offering stable income. Negus notes that this is a feature of techno and alternative rock (according to his informants; 1999, 48), but it could also be seen as a mark of genres listed by Lena as traditionalist – e.g. soul or funk. Similarly, the unpredictability of avant-garde genres according to Lena (2012, 32) may be likened to the portfolio notion of "wild cats". In either case, portfolio management relies on monitoring (i.e. a mobilisation of sales numbers, popularity ratings, airplay figures etc.) as a basis for grouping artists and genres according to the categories prescribed by the Boston Consulting Group. This latter process illustrates both an alliance with a certain school of management theory and an autonomisation of genres (re)conceived as positions within the company's portfolio (Negus 1999, 49), which are, thus, ready for "remote judging" (1999, 50). That is, management from company headquarters at a distance from the messy world of music culture. This "makes business sense" (1999, 47). That is, it promotes the temporalities or prospected trajectories of implied genres within the corporate realm.

Even in the context of everyday musical practices, musico-generic trajectories may be abstracted, for example, when music is used as a means of self-narration and remembrance. As detailed by Tia DeNora (2000), music may function as a tool for arranging past events into public or personal narratives. However, this activity involves both a singling out of associations among past events and their (re)conception in terms of schemes such as genre. As such, remembrance involves abstraction – a narrative "meta-continuity", whereby the actual discontinuity between drops of experience is passed over (Massumi 2011, 66) – enabling music users to "cope with contingency", that is, the uncertainty of "an unpredictable life environment" (DeNora 2003, 146-147, commenting on Bull 2000). Thus, in this context of self-narration, abstraction involves the assemblage of personal and generic trajectories in the prospect of future events.

This retroactive prospectiveness characterises all the examples provided here of how trajectories are assembled via processes of abstraction. It connects these trajectories to the issues of genre dissemination discussed above. Indeed, this relation of trajectories to genre dissemination may be of particular pertinence, in that trajectories add to dissemination not merely a certain pattern, but a sense (or semblance) of determination. If, as Born suggests, "genre is understood as a radically contingent [...]"

28 I should like to stress that if processes of abstraction are seminal to genre, and considering the connection of my account to Latour's study of the production of scientific facts, then it should be possible to identify these processes in most academic genre studies – including this article.

process [...] oriented to the production of teleology and thus the erasure of its own contingency" (2011, 384),<sup>29</sup> then the "double" abstraction of genre trajectories may be seen as key to this endeavour. The assemblage of trajectories in the context of musical genre endows events, which are and remain contingent, with a sense of direction – a temporal territorialisation or "[b]ecoming, determined" (Massumi 2011, 100) which is present as a virtual property of such events.

### *In conclusion*

The issues of temporality adhering to musical genres and permeating musical genre studies call for theories to be developed of the production of genres in time, but also of their production of time (Born 2014). To this end, musical genre studies will have to refrain from reductive explanations and overly linear accounts of the development of genres by reference to, for example, social, economic or technological conditions. Moreover, genre studies have to reconsider established notions of the temporospatial dissemination of genres in terms of conventional regularity and regulation. In this article, I have taken preliminary steps towards such a reconsideration, building on prior efforts among music scholars at thinking about genre in terms of performativity and assemblage. The addition to these efforts made in this article consists in highlighting the role of abstraction as key to both genre dissemination and trajectories. Though abstraction is basic to experience, as claimed by Massumi, I have suggested how it may be thought of in the context of musico-generic assemblage as a distributed phenomenon, emerging in the co-functioning of various elements (agents, institutions, repertoires, technologies, and so on). At least three actional dimensions should be noted in this respect – singling out, conceptualising, and systematising – and processes of abstraction should, furthermore, be regarded as intertwined with a range of other processes: the mobilisation of musical events, autonomisation of genre labels and typologies, building of alliances and promotion. Though it may seem a long stride to shift from Derrida and Massumi's fundamental ideas about communication and experience to the circling loops of Latour's science studies, I think this shift makes sense on the basis of assemblage theory – not least if assemblage is taken as an ethos (Anderson and McFarlane 2011) as much as an ontological descriptor. Hopefully, the musico-generic assemblage performed in this article may inspire further steps towards non-reductive and non-teleological musical genre studies.

29 As noted, in the quoted article Born is concerned with the relation of genre to musico-cultural identification. However, as I read her suggestion, it has ramifications beyond this specific topic of relevance to present purposes.



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*Abstract*

Musical genres are fraught with issues of temporality. Commonly conceived as musico-cultural regularities regulating practice across musical life, they are nevertheless inherently unstable, making non-reductivist accounts of the temporospatial dissemination of genres a persistent challenge to musical genre studies. In this, primarily theoretical article, I engage with this challenge by discussing the relation of genre abstraction, dissemination and trajectories. In keeping with recent developments in musical genre studies, I combine an account of genre drawing on post-structuralism and pragmatism along with inspirations from assemblage theory and actor-network theory. On these grounds, it is argued that a distributed understanding of abstraction – specified as the combined act of singling out, symbolising and systematising and interlinked with processes of mobilisation, autonomisation, building alliances and promotion – is key to the temporospatial assemblage of genres in a directed sense, i.e. their dissemination and trajectories.