# A Critical Review on the Conceptual Impact of Non-Representational Theory on 'Geographies of Music':

Question 10: Critically Review the Conceptual Impact of One of the Thematic Debates Covered in Term 1 Upon a Geographical Field of Your Choosing.

Stemming from Nash's (1968) exploration into 'Musical Regions and Regional Music', geographic research into the "spatial and environmental dimensions of music" (Carney, 1998: 2) is now commonplace within modern academia, particularly within the realms of 'Cultural Geography' and 'Geomusicology' [1]. However, the empiricist and positivist "orthodoxy of scientific method in geography" (Smith, 1994: 232) continually marginalised auditory experiences throughout the 20th century (Pocock, 1989; Kong, 1995), preferencing visual and textual/lyrical analytical methods. Largely thanks to the work of Smith (e.g.: 1994; 1997; 2000) and Carney (e.g.: 1990; 1998; Nash & Carney, 1996) *inter alios*, auditory experiences and musical performances have "become the stuff of social research" (Wood *et al.*, 2016: 867), with academics using music *[whether live or pre-recorded]* to engage with a variety of socio-political phenomena.

From Moss (1992; 2011) engaging with Bruce Springsteen's lyrics to understand the complexity of American citizenship and everyday socioeconomic life; Fraser (2012; Fraser & Ettlinger, 2008) highlighting the interdependent cultural economies which drive sub-cultural Electronic Dance Music communities; to Leyshon *et al.* (1995) exploring the association between *[popular]* music, space/place and identity; geographies of music have utilised a largely representational approach to "fix and objectify musical events in various ways" (Wood *et al.*, 2016: 868). In doing so, the immediate "creative and evanescent qualities" (*ibid.*) of music and performance are omitted, obscuring a "'different world' of meaning…made with the body" (Radley, 1995: 12). Whilst representational music research *held*, and since *maintained*, validity and importance within academia, the movement towards what is termed 'non-representational' research praxis endeavours to highlight the emotional and affective experiences which constitute our everyday practices and spaces (Whittaker & Peters, 2021; Thrift, 2000; 2004).

This essay reviews the impact of non-representational theory on the geographies of music, investigating the role of musical 'performance' in its broadest sense to include dance, sonic production and auditory consumption. This disposition reflects Smith's (1998) notion of 'musicking', which includes performer*[s]*, listener*[s]*, and all associated technologies which take part in a 'musical' event. Although there is a myriad of literature negotiating the semantics and physics of what 'makes sound into music' (e.g.: Reybrouck, 2013; Schmidt-Jones, 2004), this essay regards 'music' as the practice of "creating contexts in which creating sounds will be heard as musically interesting'' (Cook, 1990: 12). First, the underlying philosophical doctrines and theoretical links upon which non-representational theory is founded are discussed, before outlining the core tenets of non-representational theory in relation to musical performance [2]. Simultaneously, the conceptual impact which non-representational theory has had on the geographies of music will be evaluated, highlighting the immense importance of engaging with affective and non-representational phenomena

whilst negotiating the theoretical and methodological issues that such a mode of geographic knowledge production entails. Holistically, this essay recognises how non-representational theory has transformed paradigms in musical research, yet there remain issues in theoretical de-politicisation and methodological data collection. Thus, the term *more-than-representational* is preferred and argued for.

## Non-Representational Theory's Philosophical Underpinnings & Theoretical Interlocutions:

Most readily associated with the work of Nigel Thrift (e.g.: 1996, 1997, 2000, 2004, 2008), non-representational theory challenges and questions the periodically dominant 'representational' modes of thought within 1980s/1990s social and cultural geographies (Thrift & Dewsbury, 2000). Despite being a relatively new mode of geographical knowledge production, non-representational theory draws on a combination of longstanding philosophical traditions which subvert Platonic/Cartesian bifurcations of body and mind, theory and practice, thought and action *inter alia*.

Primarily, non-representational theory adopts a phenomenological approach, seeking to understand the world in its purest, experiential terms. Consistent with Heidegger's (1962) existential phenomenology [3] of 'Being-in-the-World' *[Dasein]*, our innate and inseparable entanglement with the world is disclosive, meaning that reasoning/representational thought does not fully characterise the rich nature of immersive practice (Dewsbury *et al*., 2002; Cadman, 2009). In musical performance, analysing a score or lyric sheet omits the comportments *[Verhaltens]* and embodied interactions which "reflect a responsiveness to the meaning or sense" of a piece of music (Wrathall, 2021: 167); thus limiting analysis to solely reflexive understandings, rather than performative (Wood *et al.*, 2016). Later, Deleuzian and Guattarian neovitalist philosophies offered "tools for those geographers who want to escape phenomenology's largely human-centered understanding of *[embodied]* practice" *[sic]* (Cadman, 2009: 457) [4], consequently allowing post-humanist and more-than-human non-representational investigation into the holistic "musical ecosystem" rather than just human/social relations (Payne, 2018: 108; Laidlaw & Beer, 2018; Love, 2017). Moreover, Derrida's (1981) post-structuralist critique of logo/phonocentrism and deconstructivist epistemological approach creates space for non-representational knowledge production by highlighting how 'meaning' is always in flux and subject to multiple interpretations. Hence, non-representational theory is founded on a philosophical core which critiques post-Cartesian epistemological and metaphysical assumptions over realism and idealism (Cadman, 2009). Borrowing the language of actor-network theory, this allows non-representational theory to question the 'black box' paradigms in *[geographical]* knowledge production and configure thought as a "series of infinite 'ands' which add to the world rather than extract stable representations from it" (*ibid.*: 456).

From this philosophical base, non-representational theory can be related to wider traditions of thought within contemporary theory. In moving away from representational theories and textual accounts, non-representational theory explores the "intertwined and interacting material and social world" (Nash, 2000: 661). Consequently, Thrift (1996) references the link between non-representational theory and actor-network theory, given the focus on everyday, affective networks and immediate translations of interests (Latour, 2005; Callon, 1986). However, despite his theory recognising the importance of non-human actors, human and

non-human actors are not treated as symmetrical in non-representational theory, with greater focus placed on "human body-subjects" as the main affective force (Cadman, 2009: 458). This nuance predisposes non-representational theory to musical analysis as a focus on the *[human]* body in a wider "dance of agency" (Pickering, 2008: 6) allows for both emotional and affective data to be captured. Following the 'emotional turn' within geography, increased focus on the body and the ubiquity of emotion in everyday life has linked non-representational theory with wider emotional geographies. Specifically, Thrift (2004) explores how emotions can be manipulated through various forms of power and performance, with music/musical performance providing an immediate avenue for "experiencing and expressing the full range of human emotions" (Wood & Smith, 2004: 536).

The most immediate theoretical synoptic link is between non-representational theory and performance studies. The interplay between artistic performance and everyday performance has provided non-representational theory with a core methodology and vernacular which is used to explore the limitless potentiality of the present through the lens of pre/non-cognitive bodily movements (Cresswell, 2012; Nash, 2000). Correspondingly, the doctrines of non-representational theory will be subsequently explained in relation to musical performance studies, echoing Thrift's (1997: 145) exploration of the "peculiar invisibility of dance" within periodically contemporary social science research.

## Non-Representational Theory & *[Musical]* Performance:

In their review of 'The Seven Themes of Music Geography', Nash & Carney (1996) discuss the main interdependent themes within musical research of the 1990s, investigating the spatial dimensions of music through 'Location Analysis' among other representational approaches [5]. Whilst engagement with such approaches produces an array of important research, it presents a very static approach to musical analysis and ignores the 'everyday' spatialities and practices of music. When articulating the rationality behind non-representational theory, Thrift is less concerned with the "'true' nature of what something is contemplatively" (Shotter, 1996: 2. In: Thrift, 1997: 127), but instead focuses on the performative presentations, encounters and experiences at the nexus of everyday life.

Non-representational theory's understanding of everyday life is heavily influenced by processual philosophies, subverting the underlying metaphysical assumptions driving neo-Kantian research (Dewsbury *et al.,* 2002; Cadman, 2009). Everyday practices are constantly unfolding through a *[neo-]*vitalist-inspired "processual register of experience" (Dewsbury *et al.,* 2002: 437) in a wider "field of emergence" of actual and/or virtual experiential forces (Massumi, 2002: 9). This experiential and fluid understanding brings a greater focus to the pre-individual, pre-cognitive and human/non-human encounters *[including the imagined intentionalities in Heidegger's existential phenomenology (1962)]* which constitute life. Consequently, non-representational theory moves away from modernist knowledge production in preferencing a relational understanding of time/space, underpinned by the Deleuzian concept of virtuality to indicate the multiplicity of time/space experience. At the cynosure of this is the body-subject, yet Thrift is careful to clarify his nuanced position as a "radically decentred" subject which requires a thin-centred and quasi-more-than-human approach to highlight the constant unfolding of networks which constitute performances (Thrift, 1996: 127). As non-representational theory "trades in modes of perception which are not subject-based" (Thrift, 2007: 7), everyday life is explored through the notion of 'practice'

concerned with what the body 'can do' in its encounters and co-evolution with other non-human actors (Thrift, 1996; 1997; Cadman, 2009). This allows non-representational theory to explore everyday life in its excessive nature, highlighting the rich and affective nature of *events* as they take place (Dewsbury *et al.,* 2002).

In terms of topographical spatiality, the notion of 'everyday life' does not limit the implementation of non-representational theory to mundane spaces, instead highlighting the importance of pre/non-cognitive embodied action in creating the moment of now. Nevertheless, non-representational theory *has* been utilised in musical geographies to explore the profoundly mundane and habitual spaces and practices, with Anderson's (2002) exploration into the role of pre-recorded music in the home, elucidating its potentiality for creating 'immanent utopias' of hope; relating the theory to a wider Spinozo-Deleuzian 'ethics of joy' through emancipatory action (Thrift, 2007). Moreover, additional work undertaken by Anderson (2004) and Jones (2005) has elucidated the importance of music in bringing greater vibrancy to monotonous routine-driven life, noting how the performative practice of listening involves us with "others and objects in a world continually in process" (Nash, 2000: 655). Highlighting the relational and performative practices which constitute everyday routine practices opens domains of investigation into the various improvisational, *playful* and affective actions which are often overlooked in representative research (Dewsbury *et al.,* 2002; Thrift, 2004). Consequently, non-representational theory also elucidates the complexity of various bodily practices and "forms of experience and movement that are not only or never cognitive" (Nash, 2000: 655), with music/musical performance often cited as a primary example in contributing to "the (re)enchantment of everyday life" (Cadman, 2009: 459; Thrift, 2007).

Derived from the multiplicity and plurality of everyday practice, non-representational theory is bound up with the language of performance and performativity explored through the terms 'play' and the 'event' (Thrift, 1997; 2004). Thrift uses the term 'play' in relation to dance to denote "a process of performative experiment" (*ibid.*: 145), allowing the body-subject to create "a different world of meaning" through relational encounters with other bodies, spaces and objects (Radley, 1995: 12). Thus, non-representational approaches configure musical performances as unpredictable in constant states of flux, revealing the "pre-discursive dimensions of experience that are not necessarily bound up with discourse and meaning" (Kruse, 2019: 771). This has led to a proliferating body of work on the 'unspeakable' or 'tacit' geographies of music consumption (Wood *et al.*, 2016), highlighting the intimate and trans-subjective power that music has in eliciting emotional and affective responses from listeners and performers (e.g.: Wood & Smith, 2004; Smith, 2000). Kruse (2019) provides an explicit exploration of the non-representational and affective power of music through his discussion of John Cage's music. Cage's live compositions are marked by long silences, uncontrolled environmental soundscapes and no overarching 'meaning', with his randomised performance placing greater focus on 'process' rather than 'outcome' as the works cannot be reproduced. Thus, the audience is invited to "listen and be affected by the sonic and visual assemblages" (*ibid.*: 777) to create their own individualised experiences; echoing the tendency for non-representational theory to regard experience as a process in-and-of-itself.

However, non-representational theory's focus on performance as 'play' and 'in-itself-ness' has been criticised by Nash (2000) for its ignorance of wider socio-cultural power relations and re-establishment of binary dualisms between body and mind incompatible with the theory's

deconstructivist approach. As music "is a cultural form and practice especially susceptible to essentialist readings of 'natural' rhythm and instinctive aptitude" (*ibid.*: 657), constructing musical performance as free, experiential and playful obscures the influence of underlying power relations which, in part, govern embodied movement. Cresswell (2012) and Saldanha (2005) have explored the intersection between representational and non-representational æffective [6] forces in relation to ballroom dancing and Goa rave music respectively, discussing how socio-cultural formulations of 'correct' dance praxis (*cf.* Franko, 1996) and relational micro-politics axiomatically affect embodied movements, re-establishing a dualism between mind and body stemming from a preference of practice over logo/phonocentrism (Nash, 2000). Thus, a *wholly* non-representational approach "does not easily provide a model for effective political strategy nor a useful cultural politics" (*ibid.*: 657). This tension has been echoed in wider debates over the role of non-representational theory, with some geographers preferencing the term *more-than-representational* to account both divergent viewpoints (*cf.* Lorimer, 2005; Vannini, 2015). Cresswell negotiates this issue, exploring ballroom dancing through an implicit *more-than-representational* approach focused on the interpretivist cultural politics of dancing and individual mobility. Consequently, developments from other non-representational theorists have extended and politically mobilised Thrift's disposition, with more-than-representational approaches providing a nuanced and holistic approach to musical geographies of performance.

## More-Than-Representational Spatialities of Music:

In the discussed literature, non-representational theory tends to align itself with a specific type of musical performance which is: live *[i.e. held in a venue]*, embodied, improvisatory and marked by an audience-performer divide (Wood *et al.*, 2016; Nash, 2000). However, more-than-representational approaches extend the applicability of non-representational approaches to include different spatialities of consumption and rehearsal. With both the subject and space having "a potential: a thing that is performed and always in the making" (*ibid.*, 2016: 869), investigating the co-action of non-representational performance in the context representational venue design elucidates the complex power relations and practices at play during musical performances. When discussing the design of Drum & Bass *[DnB]* 'raves' [7], Fraser (2012) notes how targeted stage design using "lighting, smoke machines, and of course sound equipment" (502) plays a pivotal role in mobilising a uniform audience performativity centred around collective hedonistic abandonment *whilst* retaining an emergent and ephemeral spatiality of relational self-fulfilment. Wood *et al.* (2016) argue for greater attention to the physical spaces of performance, as apparently 'free' and 'playful' experiences are "shaped by the practices, aspirations, and indeed power relations of those involved in organising and arranging musical events" (871). Such approaches recognise the relational experience of music outside of Thrift's "prelinguistic and presocial bodily experience" *[sic]* (Nash, 2000: 658) to include the wider power relations and more-than-human ecologies which affect performances. However, this does work to de-centre the human from musical analysis, considering wider affective phenomena and their role in constructing musical performances (Revill, 2004; Capellà-Miternique & Dopico, 2023); thus endorsing a nuanced more-than-representational approach.

Moreover, more-than-representational approaches reconfigure conceptions of musical performance, elucidating the importance of spaces of sounding and rehearsal integral to 'correct' performances (Cresswell, 2012; Payne, 2013). Music is innately something which is

practised, with more-than-representational research focusing on the interplay between non-representational sensing and more-than-human technical ecologies. Payne (2013) discusses the affective networks between humans and technologies whilst retaining the necessary representational, composer-centric discussion and textual/notational analysis. In rehearsals, Payne discussed the co-action of humans and technology in perfecting musical routines, acknowledging the unpredictable and transient nature of performance [8]. This disposition homogenises representational, non-representational and more-than-human discourses in musical geographies into a succinct explanation, retaining the political *and* practical nature of music production; yet there remains more fundamental issues over the collection and presentation of such affective/non-representational phenomena.

## Methodological Implications:

To escape the "curious vampirism" of representational modes of thinking (Dewsbury *et al.,* 2002: 437), non-representational theory's focus on the excessive nature of musical experience poses an immediate challenge to the ontological and epistemological assumptions [9] behind the *[non-exhaustive]* 'Seven Themes of Music Geography' and their underlying methodologies. Within musical research, non-representational approaches centre around the notion of performance (Whittaker & Peters, 2021; Wood *et al.*, 2016; Dewsbury, 2018), encouraging participants to 'do' music through various practices of 'musicking' (Smith, 1998). This is seen most effectively in Geraint Rhys Whittaker's [10] work, where music and video are used to communicate socio-political struggles of resistance (Whittaker & Peters, 2021), with Wood *et al.* (2016) additionally promoting the use of multimedia data presentations alongside the more traditional experiential 'toolkit' of on-the-spot interviews and participant sensing. However, non-representational theory holistically falls short of a methodological prescription, as there is "no method as such for non-representational research, nor has there been much sustained engagement as to how nonrepresentational theory might reconfigure the collection of fieldwork" (Cadman, 2020: 461). Wood *et al.* (2016) echo this in their paper, stating that "[t]here's certainly not enough literature engaging with the sonic experience of music… [as] engaging with sound is far more of a challenge". Consequently, non-representational musical research continues to rely on largely representational methods, congruent with the theoretical approach of more-than-representational research given the specialised mode of knowledge production which the theory denotes. However, that is not to say that non-representational theory has had no effect on research methodologies, with numerous papers creating new methods of how to "work with and through practices of musicking: to develop ways of expressing the `unspeakable geographies' of music" (*ibid.*: 885).

## Conclusion:

The impact of non-representational theory on geography as an academic discipline has been immense, reconfiguring the ontological and epistemological basis of knowledge production and raising important questions over contested metaphysical assumptions. Musical geographies have been revolutionised by the input of non-representational theory, elucidating the various everyday practices and embodied performances which contribute to the, at times, ephemeral and unspeakable experience of music. This essay has explored non-representational theory from its philosophical basis, highlighting how solely representational approaches have had a deadening effect on research and stressed the importance of processual networks of affective phenomena in curating human body-subject performances. However, there remain significant occlusions in a purely non-representational approach,

explicitly explored through the issues of de-politicisation of the body and methodological ‘representation’. As non-representational theory is so concerned with the description and presentation of ‘life’, musical geographies must consistently engage with non-/more-than-representational approaches to better understand the tacit geographies at play; especially when, as Louis Armstrong said, “music is life itself”.

## Endnotes:

1. *Music is also used across a variety of other geographic sub-disciplines, in addition to being a mainstay in other disciplines. Famously, Carl Jung stated: 'music should be an essential part of every analysis'.*

2. *This approach is commonly undertaken by non-representational theorists, particularly Thrift's (1997) exploration into 'resistance, expressive embodiment and dance'. This particular literature is engaged with throughout.*

3. *Although Heidegger's existential phenomenology is described as a "useful starting point for non-representational geographies" (Cadman, 2009: 456), non-representational theory is not fully developed from a Heideggerian disposition. This section subjectively references the most 'important' thinkers who have contributed to non-representational theory, meaning it should not be read as an exhaustive list.*

4. *Wider post-humanist and more-than-human geographical traditions were initially developed in a more general sense by Haraway (2003), Latour (1991), Ingold (2013) inter alios.*

5. *The full seven themes are listed below, with language taken directly from the paper:*

   *'Origins', 'World Distribution and Types', 'Location Analysis', 'Source Areas of Musical Activities', 'Trends Based on Electricity', 'Impact of Music on Landscapes'.*

   *An additional eighth theme was proposed as: 'Technological Innovations'.*

6. *Language taken from Duncombe (2016), to represent both the affective and effective potentiality of actors within wider networks.*

7. *Fraser is careful to note that such technological augmentation is usually only seen in legal and commercialised raves, echoed by Smith & Maughan (1998).*

8. *The proposed eighth theme of the 'Seven Themes of Music Geography' - 'Technological Innovations' - does somewhat implicitly refer to the topic discussed here. However, there are major differences in approach, as Payne adopts a more post-human/more-than-human theory of affect towards the technological [co-]actions.*

9. *Note that Thrift did not attempt to create an alternative epistemological or ontological structure/methodology, instead constructing a whole new mode of geographical thinking.*

10. *Whilst Geraint Rhys Whittaker's work is the most immediate and fully-configured example, it is not necessarily academic. He produces the films for a variety of contexts [featured here on his website: https://www.geraintrhys.com], and, although being a rather facile point, including these in traditionally published academic journals would come with great difficulty. However, work is being done to promote multi-media forms of data representation/analysis, especially given the digital nature of numerous journals.*

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