

## **Being in Time: Heidegger, Handlability, Creative Research and Popular Music**

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Since 2005, I've been working in a polytechnic media arts department. My job is to assist students in writing and thinking. The major part of their work is practical—painters produce paintings, filmmakers films, musicians music. As a practicing musician and an academic, I feel that this is the ideal job for me as I can see perspectives of both the creative artist and critical researcher.

Polytechnic students often perceive theory as an intrusion into a predominantly practice-based qualification. Obviously it is my job to persuade students otherwise, but this has been a two-way process insofar as I have also learned something from them, namely that my background in cultural and media studies theory does not always seem relevant in the polytechnic context. More precisely, I was previously accustomed to looking at cultural work from the audience's point of view—interpreting and contextualising finished work as 'systems of signification'. I lacked theory that took the practitioner's point of view: eg 'systems of fabrication' (Bolt, 2004). This is not to say that critical interpretation is not useful for cultural practitioners, but it doesn't take much account of the processual and sometimes unpredictable nature of practice-led research. How does one interpret a work in progress?

In filling out research applications for practice-led work, I became aware of my own reluctance to do the very thing I was asking of my students. Used to working intuitively, I was reluctant to submit my musical projects to the standard format of

aims, methods and outcomes. Like my students, I was forced to admit that in practice-led research, I don't know what I am doing, and that my written proposals were transparent rationalisations to satisfy a set of criteria that were alien to my working process. Normatively, research is supposed to be about something other than the researcher. It aims to describe or analyse objectively a phenomenon which is 'outside', and this leads creative researchers to justify work in terms of it being about something else. This can be a particular problem in music, where the referential nature of the form is questionable, leading towards formal musicological analyses, approaches informed by identity - 'this music is about who I am' or genre "surveys". In my experience, popular music students struggle with cultural theory more than any other group.

So far I've identified two related problems: the need to find theories of making that students can engage with, and the necessity of finding a fit between creative, practice-led research and academia. When students say that they don't understand the relevance of theory, or the point of writing a research proposal when they just want to 'make stuff', it is important to understand and inhabit that position of not wanting to engage, rather than slipping into glib rhetoric about the Romantic conception of art as intuitive and ineffable.

Present models of research and learning are imposed to some degree by an educational administration which needs to demonstrate efficiency, accountability and measurability, effectively presupposing that learning can be largely predicted in advance (outcomes), or the efficiency of the process would be impossible to measure. For example, Bloom's taxonomy (1956), widely used in education, is a basically

linear model which starts with listing, describing and understanding phenomena, proceeds to analyse and reflect on them, and finally, in its highest mode, enables creativity-related functions relevant to the production of new work, such as synthesis and evaluation. Bloom's model envisions learning as an essentially mechanical process of building up an edifice of knowledge that can be eventually applied to make something else. But polytechnic arts students are always engaged in creative work, so this staircase model of learning needs to be rethought so that creativity is envisioned as a part of learning, rather than as a possible end product. Practice-led research does not give rise to predictable outcomes, rather it is more an exploration of possibilities, and this perhaps calls for an alternative, less instrumental, pedagogical methodology. This is not to deny that theoretical research is not also creative and may not also challenge models like Bloom's, but the normativity of written theoretical work in research funding models creates a power imbalance in which practice-led research typically struggles for recognition.

There is therefore a pragmatic aspect to this discussion: dealing with a situation in which students' practical and theoretical (written) work is assessed separately, despite my reservations about this distinction. As a result of this, I am focusing on theories that take a producer's view and assert (however paradoxically) the primacy of practice, in the hope that these prove useful to the students that I teach.

My search for more practitioner-friendly theory led me first to Jason Toyne's application of Bourdieu to popular music (Bourdieu, 1996; Toyne 2000). Toyne proposes that musicians' habitus (systems of dispositions) structure and are structured by 'fields', eg of cultural production (the world of musical agents) and works (music).

In creating new work, musicians ‘select’ from or strategise around existing materials to produce small creative acts, in ways that are both limited and enabled by the fields in which they are engaged (Toynbee, 2000: 36-7). Creativity arises from the mismatch between habitus and field—this is what produces new possibilities (2000: 38). This concept of social authorship is a useful corrective, on the one hand, to the artist as sovereign creator and, on the other, to the notion of the author as dead or irrelevant; however, there are a number of possible objections. Bourdieu’s model is based on literary production, a field which is both more institutionalised (he is reconstructing a historical process, but can this totalising approach be applied to emergent phenomena, like new musical styles?) and more obviously individualistic than popular music (Bourdieu, 1996). Toynbee’s examples (Ian Curtis’s dancing, James Last’s creation of a party ambience) are focused on moments of individual creativity, which certainly do occur, but this seems to me miss the way that popular music is generally made (2000: 34-5). Musicians typically work in groups or collaboratively at some level, so we’re actually talking about multiple habitus interacting with each other—to say that musicians ‘select’ strategies risks ascribing an intentionality which can only be deduced in retrospect. The idea that popular musicians always draw on a historically accreted reserve of previous ideas, practices and works is a useful explanation of creativity, but how does it relate to the phenomenological experience of making music? And in Toynbee’s discussion of Charles Mingus, even as a social author, I still get the idea that it took some kind of heroic individual to so successfully “select and combine” existing voices in the way described (2000: 46-53). Although I admire Toynbee’s work immensely, it seems to work better as an interpretive overview—it doesn’t get inside the creative process as such.

Barbara Bolt's essay 'Heidegger, Handlability and Praxical Knowledge' (2004), although focused on the visual arts, contains concepts that apply to creative practice generally. 'Handlability' means that our primary access to the world is through 'handling'—conceived as an active engagement with the beings about us—whereas Western theories of knowledge privilege a disengaged, reflective mode of 'theoretical' understanding. 'World' is understood phenomenologically, not as a collection of objects or ideal forms outside consciousness, but as something we participate in, mostly in a habitual, almost unconscious way. So when someone says, 'the kids made me late for work today,' we understand that 'the kids' are his/her children, that 'made' is functioning abstractly (the kids didn't construct anything), and that work means 'this person's job'; we even understand what 'today' is. This kind of knowing is based on participation in a shared context, and is irreducible to a set of formulae or algorithms from which we deduce truths.

Worlds exist because we are involved in them through handling. Handling reveals a world, but a world that is shaped by our attitude to it, by our concern. For example, in using tools and materials, we discover the being of the things around us through entering into relationships with them, in this case one of 'use'. Absorbed in the process of using, we no longer think about tools as discrete objects but as invisible extensions of our capabilities. But this use presupposes skill or *techne*: in other words, know-how. There is a kind of associated knowledge that Heidegger terms *Umsicht* (circumspection or practical wisdom) which involves knowing how to do something without necessarily being able to explain it (Bolt 2004). This praxical knowledge is interpretive rather than theoretical, dependent not on eternally valid concepts but on a

historic and culturally specific language that arises from a particular kind of world-engagement.

To acquire or possess a skill is not necessarily to know how it may be used. Irit Rogoff (<http://summit.kein.org/node/191>, accessed 10 October 2008), discussing the place of creative research in academia, states that a skill is a kind of potential: a form of 'I can' distinguishable from the generalised sense of possibility that conventional learning is supposed to realise (ie 'education' in the general sense), but referring rather to what we can do with abilities and knowledge once we have them. To be capable implies also the possibility of being incapable: 'I can' is not the same as 'I do'. To even contemplate capability, one must necessarily 'be' potential, ie not have yet done the thing we might do. It is perhaps too easy in educational policy to collapse the difference so that being able to do something equates to doing it.

Another way of interpreting this last statement is that understanding (*Umsicht*) and explanation are two different things: understanding is being in the world, it is something we do all the time, and it is always provisional or contingent. Explanation is only possible with the luxury of hindsight. In contrast, a decision made at the time is based on "something not mastered ... [or] else it would never be a decision" (Heidegger, 1993: 180). If we knew in advance, our course of action would be inevitable. Theoretical models of knowledge tend to assume that understanding and explanation are the same, or that each can be expressed in terms of the other, but in practical learning situations, understanding is typically acquired through handling rather than in grasping in advance the totality of the significance of a set of apparatuses.

Praxical knowledge—everyday modes of being, knowing and doing—forms a kind of primary stratum on which the edifice of theoretical knowledge has been erected.

Accordingly, theories are shaky if abstracted from the historical and cultural specificity of their context-specific formation in particular sets of praxical engagements and circumstances. We could compare praxical knowledge with Bourdieu's habitus and field; however, there is an important difference, as unlike Bourdieu, Heidegger doubts that the structure of our understanding can ever be made explicit—that there can be a 'theory of theories'. That is, he seeks to "describe our understanding of being ... without attempting to make our grasp of entities theoretically clear" (Dreyfus, 1991: 4). This 'background of being' can only become explicit in retrospect, so that while I may understand, for example, my musical practice now as mainly relating to an indie guitar pop/rock scene, or historically that I was a participant in the Dunedin Sound, at the time 'indie guitar pop/rock' did not even exist as a concept, and the 'Dunedin Sound' was highly contested (Bannister, 2006).

Existing work on Heidegger and music has tended to be dismissive of popular music. David Lines, while commending Heidegger's 'open' approach to creative making, contrasts it with the objectification and commodification of popular music—mass culture critique, in other words (2005: 70). But Heidegger can be better employed to reconnect creative and technological making in terms of ways of revealing the world around us. It is definitely not a question of choosing one or the other, but rather of understanding our relationship to both as possibilities (Heidegger, 1993: 339).

Bolt asks the question “what makes art a special case of handling?” Most handling is so habitual as to be almost unconscious. Creative work might be viewed as engaged and absorbed in use, but it is not just an absorption in everydayness. Isn’t there more of a process of oscillation between practice and reflection than in everyday handling? This is where *Umsicht* comes in again, as an enhancement of skill. Some skill could be mainly instrumental—employed to achieve a particular end. But there is something else here that may be foregrounded in creativity: care or concern. Skill presumes some kind of care, such as a respect for the materials we are using. In creative making, this concern is foregrounded to a greater degree; we do not simply use materials and tools, but acknowledge and engage with their being in a more dialogic manner. Bolt coins the phrase “concernful dealings” to describe the way that materials and tools have a kind of life of their own. Creative work acknowledges this to some degree, and by extension challenges traditional models which attribute primary causality to the human agent or creator—the artist. Bolt appropriates Heidegger’s discussion of causality to emphasise the collaborative aspect of creative work: “Tools are no longer conceived of as a means to an end, but are rather co-responsible ... for bringing forth something” (Bolt 2004).

To discuss these ideas in relation to musical practice, improvisation may serve as an example. Imagine I am recording a song and want to add a guitar solo. Sometimes I may have figured out a solo in advance, but quite often I just ‘busk’, that is, improvise along with the track. Clearly, not everyone has this kind of ability—improvisation has to be learned, although it is not necessary to know the names of the notes one is playing. The formal knowledge that I have in this context mainly supplies a starting point: these are the kinds of licks one might play to this kind of track. It also helps if



you're 'in the groove'; that is, you've already been working on the track for a while and you're rhythmically attuned to it. But beyond that, there is a good deal of happenstance and simple good luck. An improvised solo is like a dialogue with the existing musical elements. One is adding a voice to pre-existing voices in the hope of making the conversation take a new turn. As in a conversation, one cannot simply say what one thinks, but adjusts one's tone to the context, interacting with the existing musical environment. Too close a focus on what one is saying and the dialogic element is lost. In terms of potentiality, one is also choosing not to play—the gaps are necessary because they present a kind of listening, which is as important as responding. Alternatively, it can be like negotiating a slightly tricky task (say, cycling across a very narrow bridge): if one thought too closely about the narrowness of the bridge, the possibility of falling, one would never do it. As a result, a light touch, a measure of disengagement in one's engagement, is required. The other musical elements are co-respondents in this process—they have a kind of being of their own. It is not a case of simply imposing an idea on the material because the material 'talks back'. Obviously this insight is not restricted only to material, as making popular music is a collaborative process. Playing in a band, it is important to respect other agents just as one respects 'materials'. Practical wisdom in managing group dynamics is just as important to the creative process as producing 'great works' (present assessment methods are problematic if they assign primary responsibility to one individual). "Artistic practice involves a particular responsiveness to, or conjunction with, other contributing elements that make up the particular art ensemble" (Bolt, 2004).

There is a case for considering the whole creative process as an improvisation (this is not to say, however, that this process is equally open to everyone—clearly being a young white male is a huge advantage in popular music). I doubt if my band’s (Sneaky Feelings) first record, *Send You* (1984), would have been nearly as successful (commercially or artistically) if it had not been part of the ‘Dunedin Sound’ and if we had not found a sympathetic producer in Phil Yule, who had the bright idea of smoothing our tinny guitar sounds with a harmoniser, thereby giving the record its distinctive sheen (and again this could hardly have been predicted as Phil’s main background was in radio and recording NZ reggae band Herbs). This process of making is governed not by a conscious subject, but is a collaborative process in which causality is understood not as carrying through an intention, but rather as “indebtedness”—that to which something else “owes thanks” (Bolt, 2004). (Thanks, Phil.) But the overall point is that in creative practice we are collaborating with people, materials and media technologies to perform possibilities—possibilities not entirely within our control. Gadamer’s (1995) concept of creativity as ‘play’ provides a useful supplement to Heidegger at this point, especially for musicians. Play suggests freedom, but always within a structure; indeed it creates that structure, as ‘the rules of the game’ are not real unless someone is playing. We can both ‘play with’ and ‘play at’ something, as play is both collaborative but also about producing a performance. Intention is suspended in play—granted, there may be a goal in mind, such as producing a performance or winning a game—but how that is achieved is beyond intention.

If there is one clear theme that emerges from this paper, it is the importance of collaboration. Heidegger provides a way of re-visioning the creative process so that

materials and agents, rather than being means to an end (the production of work), become active and of equal importance to the ‘artist’. Heidegger’s phenomenological approach breaks down the subject/object binaries that tend to instrumentalise the creative process. Practically speaking, media are about working with other people and materials and negotiating meaningful relationships with them. In music, Keil and Feld’s “participatory discrepancies” provides an example of how, in music-making, different elements in the musical mix play off each other. For example the interaction in jazz between a laid back drummer and an on-top-of-the-beat bassist creates “vital drive” or swing (1994: 60-66); at the other extreme, amateur music-makers (say in a camp-fire sing-along) also ‘make’ music. Even where there is a formal model (a score or remembered text, eg a song), what emerges in these processes is (hopefully) something that cannot be measured by fidelity to an abstract, which negotiates between all those competing voices, all participating, none exactly on the beat or in tune, but precisely because of this slight variation, always producing something new.

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