# **Introduction**

With their integration with digital media, music cultures have been reconfigured in the 21st century. Online media saw the emergence of new musical cultures, sometimes appropriating from established genres, sometimes attracting attention for the originality of their aesthetics, always leaving digital traces (Beer, 2013). Over the last two decades, musical styles such as breakcore, witch house, SoundCloud rap, vaporwave, UK drill and others have developed, gaining popularity beyond online niches. Open digital archives of these genres function as resources, facilitating the development of further styles. These styles are largely produced by and in various ad-hoc networks and collectives - of artists and others engaged in their dissemination (online netlabels, amateur and professional writers, listeners and users active on Bandcamp, filesharing platforms and so on).

In the sociology of popular music, the dominant analytical tools describing these music cultures predate digital media, namely: ‘scenes’, ‘milieus’, ‘neo-tribes’, and ‘subcultures.’ How these terms differ is often discussed; their generative descriptive effects and their referential clarity are less frequently explored.

The argument we set out here advances two main points. The first is that, sociologically speaking, the dynamics of musical sociality warrant empirical scrutiny. Musical sociality is constituted by interactional forms, practices, discourses, and mediations. These are mechanisms by which music is produced and comes to us. They constitute genres and the social collectives formed around them. With widespread use of networked technology, these mechanics increasingly occur online and are documented as such. Traces are longer lasting and more horizontal in their production. The mediascape contributes to how these dynamics unfold, shaping genres and sociabilities. We therefore advocate for analysis of these practical activities, engaging with how they configure and reflect genre processes. We refer to these activities as ‘genre work’.

The second point is that the dominant sociological frameworks used to describe these forms of sociality nominate types of social grouping rather than describing these processes. This leads to limits which genre work seeks to move past. This is not only a critique of established frameworks: it highlights the theoretical bases of established forms of sociological description regarding music.

Terms like ‘subculture’ and ‘neo-tribe’ describe relatively stable social entities which, though diffuse, are seemingly isomorphic: consistent across demographics, geography, and time. The 2010s witch house scene is thereby ‘scenic’ in the same way the 1970s punk scene was. Once generated and found productive, these designators stabilise and shape sociological perceptions of diverse contexts. Processes of naming and categorisation, as cultural sociologists are aware, have generative effects. They make that which is so named seem as described, providing conceptual vehicles with which other such things (and even dissimilar things) can be described.

The argument is structured as follows. We first describe the analytical position we take. A discussion of neo-tribe and then scene follows, demonstrating where they miss opportunities to engage with the relationships between social practices and musical development we emphasize. We argue that scene and neo-tribe name and reify sociocultural processes, rather than analysing how they are configured. We sketch, in response, an account of genre work and what that term describes.

**1. *What* vs *how* questions**

The comparative conceptual work grounding this paper addresses the usually unexplicated agenda of inquiry in cultural sociology. By this agenda, description in terms of a *what* (‘what kind of sociality is this?’) dominates questions beginning with *how* (‘how is this sociality accomplished?’). The issue concerns what sociology *ought to focus on*. Research deemed valuable orients inquiry to *what* questions, with answers selected from a predetermined menu. The conventional view is that theorising is normatively good, and nomination and exposition around nomination are valued modes of theorising. Theory has cultural capital. ‘How should we understand and conceptualise this?’ becomes a *what* question about how a theoretical designator is applied to a social site. Answers, forms of sociological explanation, come in the form of ‘*x* practice can be productively viewed as (e.g.) a subculture’. Descriptive questions about the field site (most obviously: ‘how is this done, by whom?’) are relegated to support positions.

Answers to these *what* questions are considered indicative of broader social trends. These include the nature of contemporary urbanism, the role of the creative economy, the extent of class consciousness, the role of music in the expression of identity, the social and political significance of consumerism, the implications of neoliberalism, the potential for broader political change associated with the cultural practice, and so on. This is an underlying warrant for thismode of sociological inquiry: observations about ‘the scene’ afford diagnostics of the broader social order.

Progress in the field consists of transitions from one framework to the next: for example, from subculture to neo-tribe. Higher level work involves reviewing uses, for example of scene (Woo, Poyntz and Rennie, 2015) or of neo-tribe (e.g. Hardy, Bennett, and Robards, 2018), reflecting on the meanings and efficacy of the designator. Sometimes, the concrete political-economic contexts giving rise to these frameworks are explored, as when Muggleton (2005) observes how the 1990s post-subcultures debate coincided with a politically ascendant right-wing and the dissemination of ideas associated with postmodernism. Occasionally, theoretical origins are addressed, as with the significance of Gramsci and Kristeva to Hebdige’s canonical work (e.g. Blackman, 2020). Contemporary activity in the field, however, is largely around competing uses of these frameworks and demonstrations of their applicability across sites. This mode of sociological inquiry is oriented to developing a robust *what* designator. The term should be sufficiently generalisable that it can be applied across contexts, encompassing in a satisfying way (within the terms of this logic) the attributes of social collectives deemed salient. A designator with broader applicability is ‘better’. Widespread use of a term demonstrates its validity. As with other terminology (performativity, social capital, neoliberalism), the more promiscuous the use of conceptual terms, the more attenuated they become.

These critical observations are at a general level. They do not apply universally in the sociology of music. The work we are describing regularly features extensive and valuable description of social activities, but these descriptions usually service exposition around the *what* question. Readers familiar with this literature will recognise this, and recognise also that there is value in emphasizing the constitutive doings through *how* questions.

We are not advocating for descriptive accounts which stop short of ending up with answers to *what* questions. Rather, we argue that *how* questions as formulated here emerge from distinct traditions of sociological inquiry. They have distinct trajectories and agendas. We elaborate on this below: attending more closely to the origins of neo-tribe and scene, and describing how these concepts are applied.

**2. Musical sociability as ‘tribal’ affiliation**

Neo-tribe is an established concept in the sociological canon. Besides occurrences in scholarly literature, it also features in journalistic and in marketing language. Originating in the postmodern sociology of Maffesoli (1996; 2002), the concept has gained momentum over time, and been applied to numerous forms of cultural expression.

In relation to contemporary music, the concept has oriented analyses towards a focus on what is already present and available to consumers, who freely choose which ‘communal ambience’ they want to experience at a given moment. This approach does not account for the negotiations that take place to cement the conventions within those cultures. Despite its prominence in the field, neo-tribe raises more questions than it answers.

In this section, we briefly discuss the genealogy of the tribe concept, identifying some of its foundational principles and discussing how they have changed as the concept gained traction. Following this, we focus on what sociological analyses deploying the concept of neo-tribe tell us about engagements with music.

***2.1 The origin and trajectory of a disputed concept***

Theorists of postmodernity argue that we are witnessing the breakdown of mass culture, resulting in the emergence of new forms of sociality. Among them, Maffesoli (1996) contends that the monolith of ‘the social’ dissolves into ‘sociality’ as a process whereby collective groupings take the forms of ‘diffracted tribes.’ Tribe, Maffesoli writes, ‘refers more to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and form’ (1996, p. 98). To Maffesoli, tribes instantiate new forms of solidarity.

One objection directed at the concept is the use of the word *tribus* itself: its anthropological origins involve the construction of a distanced other, originating in the ongoing brutality of the colonial encounter (Augé, 1987). In turning from a geographically and culturally distanced other to a relatively close ‘other’, the appropriation of ‘tribe’ mirrors the older production of alterity, malforming the identification and definition of the social, and misconstruing the role and position of the social researcher. Another criticism relates to how postmodern forms of solidarity are never empirically observed by Maffesoli. Tribes rather draw on his ‘dreams’ (Gossiaux, 1987), raising questions about the methodological robustness of the concept.

The ambiguity of Maffesoli’s concept renders it malleable. It has gained momentum in contemporary research, particularly in its association to youth studies and digital cultures. With the prefix ‘neo’, the Maffesolian tribe is selectively assigned to loose-knit or emergent social groups (clubbers, young people on Facebook) which may carry positive social connotations (‘edginess’, cool), but not to others (Kmart Rewards members, Rotarians). It has become a hybrid and independent concept, distinct from Maffesoli’s *tribus* (in French), though ostensibly retaining the same gist. Neo-tribes, such as ‘musical effervescences’, protest groups, and terrorist groups, have ‘the same desire to break with a vertical, patriarchal, and civilized order that “knows” with certainty what is good and that seeks to impose this vision of the good onto the entire planet in a totalitarian fashion’ (Maffesoli, 2002, p. 288). Researchers drawing on neo-tribe mobilize Maffesoli’s original concept but sever it from its postmodern theoretical apparatus. The principal emphasis that adaptations of the concept maintain is its use to reject or downplay the significance of structural variables in cultural formations (Hesmondhalgh, 2005; 2007; Hollingworth, 2015).

***2.2 Neo-tribe or the celebration of music socialities***

Neo-tribe has been discussed in relation to music cultures since the 1990s. It has been primarily applied to electronic dance music (Bennett, 1999; Malbon, 1999; St John, 2003; Canosa and Bennett, 2021), but also to black metal (Spracklen, 2010; Hoad, 2014). Both Malbon (1999) and St John (2003) warn against applying neo-tribe indiscriminately to contemporary forms of music consumption. In its application to a range of music cultures, the conceptual tenets of neo-tribe have changed, and the agenda in music sociology has moved to accommodate the concept.

Neo-tribe originally highlighted the evanescent connections individuals make with music cultures: ‘In consuming popular music the individual is free to choose, not only between various musical styles and visual images, but also how such choices are lived out and what they are made to stand for’ (Bennett, 1999, p. 614). The concept breaks down the homological relationship stressed in sociology (such as the Bourdieusian approach) and in British cultural studies (with the focus on subcultures). The locus of explanation is the resonance between the individual and the music; the neo-tribal names this relation, emphasizing its portability. With neo-tribes, listeners move freely between different aesthetics. The social conditions of access to music either no longer matter, matter less than previously, or perhaps never really mattered. The application of neo-tribe is associated with qualitative empirical data, warranting a question (Hesmondhalgh, 2005): how can we be certain individuals move freely between neo-tribes if their engagement with only *one* tribe is investigated? The scholarship on neo-tribe does not scale to how individuals form preferences for a range of music styles. Rather, it celebrates a level of agency synonymous with omnivorous but transitory engagement with music genres.

Besides the disconnect from postmodern forms of solidarity, applications of neo-tribe also lose their ephemerality. The concept is frequently associated with notions implying longevity, such as identity and belonging. Malbon argues that ‘neo-tribes prioritise the here and now, the affectual and the tactile’ (1999, p. 57). Yet elsewhere, forms of ‘communal ambience’ serve as a basis for identity construction (Hoad, 2014; Canosa and Bennett, 2021). Fleeting engagements with music justify the description of collectives of listeners as tribal, though they individually find more resonance in one culture, and draw on it for identity construction. Neo-tribe is the starting point, but somehow also the conclusion. Neo-tribe as an answer to a *what* question is validated here as the cultural means by which individuals authentically find themselves and their sense of belonging.

In a recent contribution (Canosa and Bennett, 2021), the Byron Bay ‘doof’ neo-tribe (Australia) is described as a counter-hegemonic site of identity expression for young people. Interviewing eight participants, Canosa and Bennett (2021) argue that ‘ongoing’ membership of the doof neo-tribe denotes ecological sensibilities. While there are references to how information about upcoming doofs is circulated, there is no mention of what kind of music is played or why, how sound systems are built, organised, and transported, sites located, or relations with the police, local communities, or Indigenous custodians negotiated. The doof is conceived of largely as a site of consumption. Interviewees (doof-goers rather than organisers) describe freedom and community. These descriptions are taken as reports on doof culture, rather than attributes of and contributions to it.

Rave activities (camping in the bush adjacent to an EDM sound system) are portrayed as a form of cultural resistance against hegemonic power. Although the subcultural framework was criticized for positing a monolithic dominant culture that subcultures opposed (Chaney, 2004, p. 47), it is unclear what the doof neo-tribe resists, beyond ‘imposed structures, rules and surveillance’ (Canosa and Bennett, 2021, p. 399). The concept of neo-tribe seems to replace what it was ostensibly introduced to transcend. The valorised features of contemporary neo-tribes are much the same as those of late 1970s subcultures.

***2.3 Missing* hows *in neo-tribal accounts***

Hollingworth (2015) and Cantillon (2018: 107-8) note that competitiveness and hierarchies are observable within musical spaces, with gender imbalance, discriminatory door policies, and gatekeeping around access. Neo-tribal research largely glosses over questions about where members come from (Hesmondhalgh, 2005), or how the signifiers of music cultures come to be cemented or disputed over time (XXXXXX and XXXXXX, 2018). Disinterest in the background of neo-tribe members is mirrored by indifference in structuring architectures (consumer markets, the state, the organization and allocation of labour and leisure, commercial technologies of intermediation and so on). This indifference tacitly endorses the status quo as a ground of voluntaristic self-fashioning. The neo-tribe is therefore readily characterised as a neoliberal project of identity construction, management, and satiation through consumption. Deployments of neo-tribe celebrate depoliticized play with the signifiers of social bondedness. As a mechanism for interrogating how the cultural politics and futures available to young people have become what they are now, the neo-tribe has limited efficacy. This criticism should not be read as implying that the commodification of everyday life is a bad location for the analysis of collective identity practices. Musical genres develop and change, and this is the result of social processes. How these processes are configured socially (for example, who is excluded from them) is simply not in the neo-tribe frame of analysis.

Empirically, the neo-tribe is a rather impoverished characterisation of the activities we are calling genre work (such as the discourses of freedom and community associated with the bush doof). Sociologically, the neo-tribe is not as robust as it could be in analysing the characteristics and implications of musical sociality.

Similarly, technologies and mediation play fundamental roles in the development of the musical field and the codification and negotiation of genre (see – among others – XXXXXX, 2008; XXXXXX, 2016; XXXXXX, 2014, 2016; Sterne, 2012; Hesmondhalgh and Meier, 2018) but musical mediation is remote from the neo-tribal perspective. As Cantillon notes: ‘there is more going on’ than neo-tribe would have us think (2018: 107).

We have discussed neo-tribe here because of its predominance in the field. Drawing attention to some of the limitations of the concept highlights opportunities for the sociology of music. In terms of sociological understanding of the social value and importance of music, neo-tribe does not provide effective analytical resources. This is partly due to the ontological *what* questions which drive the framework. We turn now to the other dominant conceptual apparatus in the field, the ‘scene’, to consider how musico-social activities fare when considered primarily in terms of spatial dynamics.

# **3. Situating musical sociability spatially**

‘Scene’ has a longstanding history in vernacular and academic discourse. In everyday and journalistic parlance, scene is used to identify the social groups or communities involved in a given cultural practice: the rave scene; the craft beer scene. It refers to the group, and (in an undifferentiated way) the practice in which that group participates. Scene has a significant resonance in discussions of popular music. It often involves situating the relation between the group and the practice relative to a (typically urban) space (the Detroit scene), style (the hip-hop scene), or both (Bristol trip-hop). The promise of scene is that it could engage with this relationship between people, space, and musical style, perhaps getting closer to music than neo-tribe. A significant literature in popular music studies uses the term scene. We attend here to some of the key aspects of this literature, to get a sense of the scope and limits of the term.

***3.1 Defining music ‘scene’***

‘Scene’ is heterogeneous: different authors use it differently. We can nonetheless draw out sufficient salient characteristics to get a sense of it. In this section we will sketch out three such characteristics: the indeterminacy, spectacularity, and spatiality of scene. In part due to the range of contexts to which the term has been applied, scene is rather porous or vague: ‘How useful is a term which designates both the effervescence of our favourite bar and the sum total of all global phenomena surrounding a subgenre of Heavy Metal music?’ (Straw 2001b, p. 248). This porosity or indeterminacy is sometimes flagged as an asset for the term. Scene is ambiguous: ‘indispensable and indefinite … indefinable and real’ (Blum, 2001, p. 33).

One route through this vagueness is to ‘explode’ or totalize scene:

all musical and music-related activity takes place within a scene or scenes … the question ‘is this a scene?’ becomes redundant … Even the simple action of buying a CD means to become ‘involved’ in the scene (Kahn-Harris, 2007, pp. 21-22).

Despite the avowed constructedness of the concept, Kahn-Harris presupposes that scenes are ‘out there’, and that we wish to and are in a position to identify (or perhaps impute) them, even to such simple actions as purchasing CDs. Pursuing this constructedness further, scene is said to be a feature not of the world, but of the analytical gaze – an epistemological rather than an ontological category:

‘scene thinking’ represents a decision to treat a set of individuals, institutions and practices as if they constitute a scene. Arguably, this is what members themselves do, sweeping discrete people, places, events and artefacts up into what comes to be called a scene. (Woo, Rennie and Poyntz, 2015, p. 292)

Should analysts reproduce the logic of members, as we noted previously with neo-tribe narratives? We think it would make for better sociology to attend to that logic as a part of the analysis. It is true that community, neo-tribe, scene, subculture or any other such term is an analytical construct. These ways of skirting the issue of the indeterminacy of the concept are, however, less than satisfactory. It seems pre-emptive to write about distinct contexts ‘as if’ some assembly of features can be selected to constitute a scene, without widespread agreement about which features and why. Scenes are not self-evident, and it is not self-evident how aggregating practices under their sign is a sound sociological first step.

The second key attribute of scene is the fundamental role of the onlooker. The scene is produced through the gaze of the spectator (more specifically, the researcher). This aspect of scene is implied by the very term *scene* itself. It is spectacular, or dramaturgical, in that it instantiates itself for witnesses: they recognize it as ‘scenic’; they are the agents, parsing the scene. For example, in Blum (2001, p. 14):

The element of theatricality integral to the scene marks the importance of its site as an occasion for seeing: the scene is an occasion for seeing and being seen and so, for doing seeing and being scene.

Blum also describes the scene as ‘exhibitionist’ and ‘voyeuristic’. In Blum’s foundational work, scene signifies a shared sociocultural context in which participants mutually witness themselves. The origins of scene in its contemporary use are associated with particular forms of leisure consumption in urban spaces. The researcher here is an echo of the *flâneur*, a cultural connoisseur, rehabilitating the urban milieu by valorising its aesthetics.

The third and most important aspect of scene in our reading is its spatial boundedness (Kotarba and Lalone, 2014, p. 55-57). Like theatre, scenic events are durational – they begin and end – and scenes are located in delimited spaces: ‘The advantage of scene is that it locates musical practices in specific spatial and temporal locations’ (Kahn-Harris 2007, p. 19). Particular forms of (co-)presence are thereby privileged as constitutive to those phenomena assembled as scenic. The implications of this emphasis on boundedness become especially salient with respect to ‘virtual scenes’. One of the unsettling aspects of this interest in space is an issue of scale or footing. Figure and ground seem to be constantly shifting. Is the interest in this *metal* bar, or is it in *this* metal bar? Is it important that it is a bar, perhaps a locally iconic one, or that it somehow represents a possibly ‘imagined’ archetype – the ‘global metal scene’? Or, is it important that the broader locale has the capacity to sustain such a bar? Sometimes scene nominates some kinds of amenities or consumption spaces, at other times it refers to the expressive culture subtended by these spaces. Sometimes there is a troubling slide from one to the other, or an implication that the expressive is a kind of epiphenomenon providing the scene with contemporary flavour.

***3.2 Virtual music scene***

Scene is a feature of the onlooker’s ‘scene thinking’, rather than an inherent attribute of some particular context. Related to this, scene is structured by the (researcher’s) gaze; it is a spectacle. Scene is spatially oriented, and scene is not community (where that is a code for unfashionable class analysis of the kind associated with subculture).

These aspects have implications when the framework is carried over to the ‘virtual scene’. Here the scene framework gets closest to the kinds of mediated work we are interested in exploring as genre work. Bennett and Peterson’s influential collection (2004) was the first to develop an account of the virtual scene, juxtaposing it with ‘local’ and ‘translocal’ variants. In that collection, the virtual scene is described as follows:

Whereas a conventional local scene is kept in motion by a series of gigs, club nights, fairs, and similar events … the virtual scene involves direct net-mediated person-to-person communication between fans, and the scene is therefore much more nearly in the control of fans. This may involve, for example, the creation of chat-rooms or list-serves dedicated to the scene and may involve the trading of music and images online. (Bennett and Peterson, 2004, p. 11)

Nonvirtual scenes are characterized by events, evidently not so much in the control of fans. Virtual scenes, in contrast, are much more in the control of fans. In the same volume, Lee and Peterson (2004) describe an alt-country listserv, in a chapter demonstrating how the virtual scene is understood primarily as a *fan* space, despite the vocal presence within the virtual scene of what we could call ‘insider fans’ (people working in the music industry). These members, Lee and Peterson indicate, can shape and develop the genre, in terms of what music is heard and how it is described in the press (2004, pp. 201-202). Despite this, the productive capacity of the virtual scene is not explored further and is rarely credibly addressed in the scene literature that followed. Recent examples of the framework in action instead emphasise members’ circulation of media and memorabilia (as in Bennett and Strong, 2018). The antecedent offline scene, capable of producing such memorabilia, remains privileged.

Although ubiquitous mobile access might warrant reconsideration of the online/offline binary, the virtual scene is consistently described as a kind of space, that is nonetheless secondary: an ‘extension’ or ‘overlay’ (Bennett and Rogers, 2016, p. 32). The spatial metaphor elides the political and economic infrastructures within which online scenic activity occurs. The internet is not an ‘innocent’ place, in the same way that local clubs or translocal events like festivals are not innocent. They too have underlying infrastructures, political economies, and dynamics of welcome and exclusion.

The overextension of the framework which the transposition of ‘scene’ to the ‘virtual’ domain entails exposes an important limitation. The privileging of copresence, space and spatial metaphors (‘virtual’ or otherwise) coincides with a lacklustre engagement with mediation, producing a hierarchical understanding of the scene. The unprecedented generative capacity of networked media is obscured by the distinction imposed between on- and offline, and the privileging of the latter as primary. An understanding of the virtual scene as essentially fannish leads to a contradictory and tiered depiction of media and mediation, whereby the virtual (fan discourses, pirated audio, etc.) is ‘secondary’ to more authoritative ‘primary’ scene media (e.g., commercially produced recordings). The ‘real’ or ‘IRL’ scene involves media held to be transparently indexical to the scene; the ‘virtual’ scene is mediated communication *about* that ‘real’ scene. This issue is acute with respect to the virtual scene, but symptomatic of the lack of engagement with mediation as fundamental to contemporary musical cultures (for example, the contemporary significance of Bandcamp or Spotify, or the proliferation of ‘born online’ genres).

The scene framework misconstrues the virtual scene as essentially a fandom (paradoxically also undervaluing fandoms in the process). Phenomena that could be fundamentally scenic are thereby simply not investigated as such. In the same way, the nature of the hardware and software by which the appearance of the virtual scene is made is not substantively addressed.

***3.3 After scene***

Much is taken for granted or not addressed at all in the literature on scene. Scene is primarily understood as an expressive or cultural phenomenon, although there is valuable and informative interest in the material and sometimes the administrative infrastructure of the scene (e.g., the layout, organisation, and daily running of the live music venue; licensing, zoning, and other legal contexts). Yet the experience of cleaning up a nightclub after closing, driving an Uber on weekend nights, filing tax returns for an independent bar, working in the markets for criminalized substances sometimes consumed in scene locations, spending long hours manipulating sound in a digital audio workstation, or whatever, are not really explored. Although Gallan and Gibson devote some time to a discussion of ‘cultural infrastructure’ (2013, p. 176), and Kahn-Harris rightly emphasizes ‘the dominant logic of mundane scenic involvement’ (2007, p. 65), the sheer hard work involved in reproducing the institutions, practices and artefacts which constitute the scene is oddly under-emphasized. That some people are literally *at work* in the scene, and that still others must be at work to make the scene possible, is rarely attended to: scene instead connotes ‘cosy intimacy’ (Straw, 2001, p. 248). Raced and gendered labour hierarchies and service work disappear: ‘a bar or club was as important as a record label, and audience members were as important as musicians, for they all made the scene together’ (Woo, Rennie and Poyntz, 2015, p. 287). The preoccupation with creative consumption and expression accords with the occlusion of stratification, labour, and boundary-making within the scene. At the same time, musical development fades from view. For these reasons, we now turn to an alternate framework, intended to highlight some of this work, broadly construed.

#

**4. Genre work: analysis in terms of *how* questions**

In his critique of the neo-tribe concept, Hesmondhalgh (2005, 2007) advocates for ‘genre’ as an alternative conceptual tool to analyse contemporary music cultures. Hesmondhalgh did not himself pursue this, leaving the task for others to take up. Here we take Hesmondhalgh’s recommendation on, suggesting that genre and musical sociability be explored as a joint *how* process.

Genre is a category that organizes experiences in exchange, discourse, and representation (Frith, 1996; Holt, 2007; Frow, 2015). Genre is a basic analytical category for types or styles of cultural practice. Genres, Frow writes:

create effects of reality and truth which are central to the different ways the world is understood in the writing of history or philosophy or science, or in painting or film or prayer or in everyday talk. The semiotic frames within which genres are embedded implicate and specify layered ontological domains – implicit realities which genres form as a pre-given reference, together with the effects of authority and plausibility which are specific to the genre. Genre, like formal structures generally, works at the level of semiosis – that is, of meaning-making – which is deeper and more forceful than that of the explicit ‘content’ of a text. (2015: 20)

Genre is cumbersome in verb form: ‘genre-ing’ describes the processes we are trying to get at, at the outset, by attending to ‘genre work’. A lot of the interactional, aesthetic, and discursive work around music is category work: assessments, claims and representational strategies about which category this or that instance belongs to, alongside evaluations of whether this or that participant is literate or legitimate to make such claims.

Genre work pertains to the ‘trajectory’ of genres (see Lena and Peterson, 2008): the negotiation of their conventions, their success and popularity, and their eventual decline. By tracing the work conducted within the ‘genre community’ (Lena, 2012), in a broad sense, it becomes possible to identify the discursive, material, and aesthetic elements that ‘stick’ with the musical form and explore how members mobilize these elements to define and develop it. The dynamic assemblage of these elements, emanating from producers, cultural intermediaries, fans and so on, coheres those members around the genre.

We draw on work in actor network theory (ANT), such as that produced by Bowker and Star (1999), Latour (1999), and Law (2004), which has seen recent application to music cultures (Magaudda, 2020). From this perspective, the processes by which sociocultural phenomena are negotiated and stabilized become objects of analysis:

Someone, somewhere, must decide and argue over the minutiae of classifying and standardizing. The negotiations themselves form the basis for a fascinating practical ontology ... Whose voice will determine the outcome is sometimes an exercise of pure power ... sometimes the negotiations are more subtle. (Bowker and Star, 1999, p. 4)

ANT shares interests with the ethnomethodological tradition (Garfinkel, 1967). Ethnomethodological study of music-based youth cultures has drawn on both conversation analysis and membership categorization analysis (Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995). These approaches are methodologically significant in their commitment to granular analysis. They are also politically and theoretically consequential in their constructivism. Ethnomethodological approaches investigate the microsocial ‘members’ methods’ of everyday, situated practical reasoning and expression. These are the ‘ethnomethods’ by which durable sociocultural phenomena are ‘talked into being’ (Heritage and Clayman, 2010, p. 3). In ethnomethodological terms this is often explained by reference to the distinction between topic and resource. Approaches derived from ethnomethodology emphasize the importance of rendering the local processes which give rise to sociocultural formations – what we are calling genre work – a *topic* to research, rather than a *resource* from which to do research:

Beware of confounding the topic of one’s studies with the resources for studying them ... sociologists have naïvely taken for granted the self-same skills, practices and suppositions as members of the society. The confounding has the consequence ... of rendering sociology a folk discipline: sociology becomes naïvely ensnared in the very practices it ought to be describing. (Pollner, 2010, pp. xi-xii)

Ethnomethodologists seek to cultivate a high degree of reflexivity in how they manage this balance, and to engage closely with empirical material, rather than reproducing ethnographic narratives (from researchers or their interviewees) to substantiate their analysis and description (ten Have, 2002). To ethnomethodologists, interview accounts about the liberatory nature of the bush doof should not be taken as straightforward reports of the political potential of doof culture (resource). Rather, they should be treated as discursive and interactional contributions to that culture (topic); the kind of genre work which coheres and validates the cultural practice and the collectives engaging in it.

Membership categorization analysis (MCA), arising originally from work conducted by Sacks (1992), seeks to explicate how, in conversational practice, interlocutors produce indexical categories and associate morally inflected predicates with them. Thus, when hearing a category invoked, such as ‘student’, one has a sense of what ‘type’ to expect. Predicates ensue, associated to and thereby clarifying that category: anxious, exams, revision. The student in question begins to coalesce. The focus of MCA is not on categories as free-floating epistemic devices, but on how categories are *negotiated* in conversation, and how such negotiation makes vernacular ethnomethods visible (Jayyusi, 2013). MCA seeks to show how local and translocal orders are produced and navigated in interaction.

Contemporary genre work is conducted largely (but by no means exclusively) through mediated categorization practices: producing and circulating music and the paratextual material around it (song titles, album covers etc.), sourcing, listening to and discussing music; all of which exhibit and elicit cultural literacies. Through a kind of multimedia bootstrapping, genres come into view. The range of recordings marshalled as relevant, the range of readers or listeners brought into orbit, and the forms of labour which make those processes possible, are what provide the impression of a durable scene or neo-tribe. We do not see concrete social entities engaged in practices. We see agglomerations of practices which make social entities manifest only in the conduct of those practices.

We have previously defined genre work in the sample-based music genre vaporwave as involving

a wide range of practices: writing and otherwise communicating about and discussing music; producing archives and making them available; participating in collective projects which organise and evaluate releases; and, of course, the backstage creative and network labour of securing source material, putting albums and label catalogues together, designing album covers and so on. We consider these practices *as* genre work insofar as they function dialogically: making a topic out of the meaning of the genre, and responding to, inviting, or receiving further commentary accordingly. (XXXXXX, 2018: 452)

We find precedents akin to genre work in music scholarship emphasising the processual elements of musical formations. As with Widdicombe and Wooffitt (1995), research on youth cultures and on popular music has periodically deployed close analysis of this kind. Charles (2018) develops a multimodal form of analysis, utilizing musical, interactional and observational data, to conceptualize the genre of grime. Coates (2003), XXXXXX and XXXXXX (2008), Tófalvy (2014) and more recently Jóri (2020) all look specifically at the interactional practices of online communities devoted to music, across a range of platforms. Of course, none of these examples describe themselves as genre work, and they draw on a disparate range of theoretical resources. We gesture to this research to situate genre work on a trajectory, relative to a pluralistic tradition of empirical research.

We intend genre work as a useful and open form of analysis. We are not directive about what would be in or out of scope. Genre work is the boundary point, the practices which constitute the music and the communities around it. We have illustrated this idea elsewhere (XXXXXX and XXXXXX 2018). Our priority here has been to situate genre work relative to the established frameworks in the field. Nonetheless, we would like to illustrate the approach briefly. Here are two examples of metal reviews:

Coming from the American Heartland, Alpha-o-MAGA is a grindcore band in the great tradition of reactionaries and outsiders such as grind pioneers such as Napalm Death, Terrorizer, and modern crust punk. Absurdist, furious but surgical, Alpha-o-MAGA is a fist the [sic] face of hypocrisy and sycophants (newsteam, 2020).

The grindcore/groove metal lunacy of Corrupt Moral Altar returns for ‘Whiskey Sierra’; a new four track EP for fans of Confine, Oblivionized and War Wolf …

There’s a massive hook here that takes the form of a dual vocal scream of, “WHISKEY SIERRA!” This is such a simple inclusion that gives the band’s music and far more memorable quality that is then followed up with a punishing series of blast-beats. Corrupt Moral Altar have lost none of their edge by adding something as simple as a vocal hook but they’ve gained from it greatly (Clark, 2013).

While space precludes us from a thoroughgoing analysis, we can see that an effort to describe a release commences by introducing other releases like that one to (‘in the great tradition of’, ‘for fans of’). This strategy obliges readers to self-select: they are familiar with those other releases, or they have some leads to follow up. Where a reviewed recording is approved of, it draws descriptors demonstrating how it has struck some balance:

‘furious but surgical’

‘lost none of their edge by adding something as simple as a vocal hook but they’ve gained from it greatly’

The category ‘good grindcore’ is predicated by this delicate balance: it is uncompromisingly noisy, and yet there must also be some differentiating variation belying originality (but not so much as to be ostentatious). There is a certain kind of democracy involved in this commitment to a restricted palette. We can also see how in these reviews the moral and the aesthetic are intertwined in descriptions celebrating the symbolic force of the music: as where it is ‘punishing’ or a ‘fist in the face’.

These kinds of reviews, written in this way, are ubiquitous, but they very rarely receive scholarly attention. Such reviews, like dance styles, modes of dress, or drumming techniques, are of a piece with the genres they ostensibly describe. The circulation of these kinds of texts is a mundane, ubiquitous practice, one among many characteristic forms of genre work.

# **Concluding thoughts: Musical sociability as genre work**

Scene and neo-tribe may be optimal for other researchers, who will doubtless have other objectives for such frameworks. Their effectiveness hinges on what the reader imagines such frameworks are for. We have argued that both concepts reify processes as collectives. They isolate specific practices from the routine entanglements of everyday cultural life, celebrating them as affective articulations of the social bond. In reproducing the sentiments participants have of their own scenes’ vitality, the sociological reasoning animating scene and neo-tribe research takes as a resource (the types of intellectual, affective, and other work involved in producing music-based forms of social interaction and exchange) what it could better treat as a topic.

The problem (a problem for the Birmingham School subculturalists, the neo-tribalists, the scenesters, and for Hesmondhalgh) is understood to be: what will count as an adequate sociological description capturing the relationship between a musical style or practice and a social group? What we are trying to get at is *not* an answer to this question, but rather, the genre work: the anterior discursive and sociomaterial practices which mutually cohere the musical style and the social group. Genre work is not about what renders the relationship between the style and the group sensibly and meaningfully expressive or how to best conceptualise that expressivity. It is about the processes of sociality by which the appearance of the style and the group are mutually co-constituted.

For us, the trouble with the scene and neo-tribe literatures is not too much emphasis on structure, or too much emphasis on individualism, or too much emphasis on consumption, although we might encounter all of these. It is rather that the question engine itself, in seeking to formulate overarching categories of sociality or relationality, is driven by a counterproductive social ontology. For us, neither neo-tribe nor scene represent adequate sociologies of the association of music and networked media. Such a sociology, we hope, would foreground analysis of mediated sociality as a process. Although difficult to define succinctly, what we intend is an open emphasis on the processual fabric of exchange which constitutes that social collectivity, an emphasis on the sociality of that context and how it is expressed, made durable or vulnerable to breakage, the idiom and mechanisms by which it is experienced and exhibited and so on. There are a whole range of methodological, interpretive, and analytical resources through which such emphasis can be put. The framing for such a sociology would be *how* questions, rather than *what* questions, making the work by which genres and the groups invested in them cohere visible for analysis.

# **References**

XXXXXX (2008)

XXXXXX (2016)

XXXXXX and XXXXXX (2014)

XXXXXX and XXXXXX (2016)

XXXXXX and XXXXXX (2018)

Augé, M. (1987). Qui est l’autre? Un itinéraire anthropologique. *L’Homme*, 103, 7-26.

Beer, D. (2013). Popular culture and new media: The politics of circulation. London: Palgrave.Bennett, A. (1999). Subcultures or neo-tribes? Rethinking the relationship between youth, style and musical taste. *Sociology*, 33, 599–617.

Bennett, A. (2004). Consolidating the music scenes perspective. *Poetics*, 32(3-4), 223-234.

Bennett, A. and Peterson, R. A. (2004). *Music scenes: Local, trans-local and virtual*. Nashville: University of Vanderbilt Press.

Bennett, A. and Rogers, I. (2016). *Popular music scenes and cultural memory*. Springer.

Bennett, A. and Strong, C. (2018). Popular music heritage, grass-roots activism and web 2.0: The case of the “Save the Palace” campaign. *Cultural Sociology*, *12*(3), 368-383.

Blackman, S. (2020). Scavenger and bricoleur: A critical analysis of Dick Hebdige’s repurposing of subculture through the intersection of biography and history. In K. Gildart, A. Gough-Yates and S. Lincoln (eds.), *Hebdige and Subculture in the Twenty-First Century* (pp. 29-50). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Blum, A. (2001). Scenes. *Public*, 22-23, 7-35.

Blum, A. (2003) *The imaginative structure of the city*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press.

Bowker, G. and Star, S. (1999). *Sorting things out: Classification and its consequences*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Canosa, A., & Bennett, A. (2021). Urban vibes in a rural setting: a study of the bush doof scene in Byron Shire. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *24*(3), 388-403.

Cantillon, Z. (2018). *Resort spatiality: Reimagining sites of mass tourism*. London: Routledge.

Chaney, D. (2004). Fragmented culture and subcultures. In A. Bennett and K. Kahn-Harris (eds.), *After Subculture: Critical Studies in Contemporary Youth Culture* (pp. 36-48). Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Charles, M. (2018). MDA as a research method of generic musical analysis for the social sciences: Sifting through grime (music) as an SFT case study. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 17(1),<https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406918797021>.

Clark, L. (2013). Review: Corrupt Moral Altar’s *Whiskey Sierra*. *UK Scumscene*. Retrieved from <https://ukscumscene.wordpress.com/2013/11/25/review-corrupt-moral-altars-whiskey-sierra/>.

Coates, N. (2003). Can't we just talk about music?: Rock and gender on the internet. *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 15(1), 65-94.

Frow, E. (2015). *Genre*. London: Routledge.

Gallan, B. and Gibson, C. (2013). Mild-mannered bistro by day, eclectic freak-land at night: memories of an Australian music venue. *Journal of Australian Studies*, 37(2), 174-193

Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Gossiaux, J-F. (1987). Les notaires et le promoteur ou les rêveries d'un sociologue. *Etudes Rurales*, 107-8, 251-6.

Hardy, A., Robards, B. and Bennett, A. (2018). *Neo-tribes: Consumption, leisure, and tourism*. London: Palgrave.

Heritage, J., and Clayman, S. (2010). *Talk-in-action: Identities, interaction and institutions*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.

Hesmondhalgh, D. (2005). Subcultures, scenes or tribes? None of the above. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 8(1), 21-40.

Hesmondhalgh, D. (2007). Recent concepts in youth cultural studies: Critical reflections from the sociology of music. In P. Hodkinson and W. Deicke (eds.), *Youth cultures: Scenes, subcultures and tribes* (pp. 47-60). London: Routledge.

Hesmondhalgh, D., and Meier, L. M. (2018). What the digitalisation of music tells us about capitalism, culture and the power of the information technology sector. *Information, Communication & Society*, *21*(11), 1555-1570.

Hoad, C. (2014). ‘Ons is saam’: Afrikaans metal and rebuilding whiteness in the Rainbow Nation. *International Journal of Community Music*, *7*(2), 189-204.

Hollingworth, S. (2015). Performances of social class, race and gender through youth subculture: Putting structure back in to youth subcultural studies. *Journal of Youth Studies*, *18*(10), 1237-1256.

Jayyusi, L. (2013). *Categorization and the moral order*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Jóri, A. (2020). The discourse community of electronic dance music through the example of the TB-303 Owners Club. In A. Jóri and M. Lücke (eds.), *The new age of electronic dance music and club culture* (pp. 117-131). Cham: Springer.

Kahn-Harris, K. (2007). *Extreme metal: Music and culture on the edge*. Oxford: Berg.

Kotarba, J. and Lalone, N. (2004). The scene: A conceptual template for an interactionist approach to contemporary music. *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, 42, 53-68.

Latour, B. (1999). *Pandora’s hope: Essays on the reality of science studies*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Law, J. (2004). *After method: Mess in social science research*. New York: Routledge.

Lee, S. and Peterson, R. (2004). Internet-based virtual music scenes: The case of P2 in alt.country music. In A. Bennett and R. Peterson (eds.), *Music scenes: Local, translocal, and virtual* (pp. 187-204). Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press.

Lena, J. (2012). *Banding together: How communities create genres in popular music*. Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Lena, J. and Peterson, R. (2008). Classification as culture: Types and trajectories of music genres. *American Sociological Review*, 73, 697-718.

Maffesoli, M. (1996). *The time of the tribes: the decline of individualism in mass society*. London: Sage.

Maffesoli, M. (2002). The advent of the tragic. *Space and Culture*, 5(3), 287-9.

Magaudda, P. (2020). Music scenes as infrastructures: From live venues to algorithmic data. In T. Tofalvy and E. Barna (eds.), *Popular music, technology, and the changing media ecosystem* (pp. 23-41). Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

newsteam (2020). Exclusive premiere: Alpha-o-MAGA – ‘Americunt’. *Ghost Cult Magazine*. Retrieved from <https://www.ghostcultmag.com/exclusive-premiere-alpha-o-maga-americunt/>.

Pollner, M. (2010). *Mundane reason: Reality in everyday and sociological discourse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Robards, B. and Bennett, A. (2011). MyTribe: post-subcultural manifestations of belonging on social network sites. *Sociology*, 45(2), 303-17.

Sacks, H. (1992). *Lectures on conversation Volume 1*. Malden: Blackwell.

Spracklen, K. (2010), True aryan black metal: The meaning of leisure, belonging and the construction of whiteness in black metal music. In N. Scott (ed.), *Metal void: First gatherings* (pp. 81–92). Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press,.

St John, G. (2003). Post-rave technotribalism and the carnival of protest. In D. Muggleton and R. Weinzierl (eds.), *The post-subcultural reader* (pp. 65-82). Oxford: Berg.

Sterne, J. (2012). *MP3: The meaning of a format*, London: Duke University Press.

Straw, W. (2001). Scenes and sensibilities. *Public*, 22/23, 245-257.

Tófalvy, T. (2014). ‘MySpace bands’ and ‘tagging wars’: Conflicts of genre, work ethic and media platforms in an extreme music scene. *First Monday*, 19(9),<https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v19i9.4354>.

Widdicombe, S. and Wooffitt, R. (1995). *The language of youth subcultures: Social identity in action*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Woo, B., Rennie, J. and Poyntz, S. (2015). Scene thinking. *Cultural Studies*, 29(3), 285-97.