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Mediality and the Music Chart

Will Straw

One lingering, unresolved dimension of intermediality theory is the status of mediality itself. Typically, the concept of intermediality is offered as a challenge to the idea that media exist as "isolated monads" (Mueller 105); the task of the analyst then becomes that of thinking through the variety of relationships between them. The risk is that this conception of intermediality may work to hypostatize media as particular kinds of objects. In this hypostatization, work on intermediality has sometimes diverged in important ways from the ongoing development of ideas about mediality itself. Mediality is best seen, I would argue, not as a permanent and definitive property of objects or forms but as the occasional state of a wide variety of objects, including those not normally classed as "media."

Friedrich Kittler's deliberately simple typology of media functions provides one route into an expanded conceptualization of mediality. While the list of elements that constitute this typology varies slightly across his work, the key media functions he identifies are those of processing, transmission and storage (Griffin 711). The capacity of a given object (a cultural form or technology) to carry out one or more of these functions will define its mediality, as a state in and out of which such objects pass. The eyeglasses that "remember" the size of their owner's head, as a result of use and subsequent alteration, are medial in their storage of that information (and as a result of the "inscription" by which head size is marked upon them). Likewise, the bagel, whose central hole remembers the original circulation of bagels when they were carried by vendors on poles, transmits that original function as one of the historical features stored and expressed in its present form. There is little point, however, in gathering up eyeglasses and bagels within an ever-expanding list of media. Mediality is better seen as a distributed and intermittent property, the occasional (but not definitive) state of an object depending on its particular use at a given time or the prism through which it is viewed.

In this sense, then, intermediality is less the variety of possible relationships between objects pre-identified as media than a property of those assemblages in which the functions of media are extended or transformed. In what follows, I will develop some of these ideas by examining a minor, ephemeral cultural form. For several years, in a graduate seminar devoted to the study of popular music, I have invited my students to consider the mediality of those printed charts, like *Billboard* magazine's "Hot 100," which rank the popularity of musical recordings in a given week. It seems

unproductive to see the popularity chart as itself a medium in any strict sense, particularly insofar as it is one of the categories of content included within a number of widely-recognized genres of media, like the periodical or the website. At the same time, as I have suggested elsewhere, the popularity chart sits in an ambiguous relationship to materiality: it is the physical representation of that intangible phenomenon called popularity, but, at the same time, the simulacrum of a variety of material processes in which money and commodities are exchanged or by which music is consumed through the activation of technical devices and networks (Straw, "Music and Material Culture" 233).

We begin approaching the intermediality of the music chart by mobilizing Kittler's admittedly reductive typology of media functions. Gathering up a large number (typically 100 or 200) of musical recordings, in a list that both presumes and constructs a certain simultaneity, the chart *processes* a set of events (the various measurable acts by which a recording is consumed). In particular, it transforms the often erratic commercial life of a musical commodity into a curve of ascendant and descendant popularity, so as to endow that life with the legibility of both narrative and tabular form, as we shall see. At the same time, the chart serves as a *storage* technology, an archive of sorts, in which are contained tokens of the recordings deemed to be popular in a given period. Indeed, the chart, as I will argue later, is usefully seen as an instrument of remembering and forgetting. The results of this processing and storage are then disseminated through a *transmission* facilitated by the form of the chart – in particular, its wall-friendly dimensions and list-like character – to a variety of actors (radio programmers, streaming services, etc.). For these actors, it functions as a means of bringing order to an otherwise chaotic set of behaviors and commodities.

Even as it performs, intermittently and in partial ways, these medial functions, the chart participates in various relationships we might call intermedial. In the simplest of these relationships, the chart offers itself as a graphic and textual representation of the relative popularity of pieces of recorded music. The longstanding problem of how to "represent" music in non-musical form thus finds one of its responses here, in the cluster of printed details (name of recording artist, title of recording, etc.) that stand for the recording on the popularity chart. As Bernard Sève has suggested, lists in general enact the conversion of different semiotic and sensorial forms into written tokens that make possible their ordering in the legible form of the column (28). Like album cover art or video clips, popularity charts are part of the intermedial proliferation of forms through which musical recordings pass, or to which they become affixed, in the course of their commercial or cultural lives.

The music popularity chart is subject to practices of presentation and semiotic expansion that challenge its status as an exclusively written form. Radio and television programs, from the British television show “Top of the Pops” to the U.S.-based radio program “American Top 40,” turn the static verticality of *Billboard’s* charts into a sequenced revelation of chart positions, reversing the printed chart’s ordering through the device of the oral countdown, borrowed from public events such as rocket launches and designed to instill suspense by delaying identification of any week’s most popular piece of music until a program’s end. Printed charts themselves have come to be adorned, in recent years, by portrait images of a song’s performers, which expand the visual field of the chart and nudge it closer to the status of the image gallery. In this, they began to resemble the sequences of busts or portrait paintings discussed by Sève, which trace, along the walls of public institutions, a pantheon of success or lineage of leadership while never fully escaping their primary function as lists of names (68). At present, as published popularity charts have come to contain links to sound files or music videos for the recordings listed upon them, they have joined the repertory of intermedial hinges (like *iTunes* listings) which lead – with a click of the mouse – from printed text to musical experience.

While music charts emanate from many different sources, and assume a variety of forms, I am concerned here with the “Hot 100” charts published (in both print and electronic form) by the U.S.-based music industry publication *Billboard*. This chart lists, in order of descending popularity, the most popular songs or musical tracks for a given week. The criteria used to determine musical popularity in compiling this chart have shifted over time. While the sale of single 45-rpm records in retail stores was once the main index of this popularity, the “Hot 100” chart has adapted to the collapse of sales of the musical commodity in physical form. The chart is now based on “radio airplay audience impressions as measured by Nielsen Music, sales data as compiled by Nielsen Music and streaming activity data provided by online music sources” (“How It Works”).

The music chart as processing device

When it introduced its first music popularity chart, near the turn of the twentieth century, *Billboard* magazine deemed the individual song to be the key carrier of popularity within the music industry. At that time, the magazine’s charts ranked songs according to the frequency of their performance by different artists within vaudeville theaters. As Anand and Peterson have shown, *Billboard’s* first charts were pieced together from reports sent by correspondents in three cities whose theaters were

considered to be key barometers of musical fashion (273-274). For much of the first half of the twentieth century, "sheet music," the printed document containing a musical score and a song's words, was the main commercial commodity within the music industries. The song itself, rather than any technically embedded performance, was the cultural form whose popularity was measured.

By the 1940s, the multiplication of media channels through which music passed had dispersed popularity across a variety of listening contexts and commodity forms. Recordings, in particular, established the close identification of a song with a specific performer and made each recorded performance a distinct commodity. A central function of popularity charts from the 1930s to the 1950s became that of comparing the relative popularity of different recorded versions of a song. At the same time, different media transmitted music according to their own temporalities of distribution across time and space. While a Hollywood film might render a song popular in the course of several months of staggered openings across the United States, national radio broadcasts could generate a more simultaneous and possibly short-lived popularity. Jukebox companies might follow radio airplay in their selection of repertory to be made available, or build their own, parallel, inventories of musical style and genre.

Until the 1950s, the industries associated with these different markets each produced their own popularity charts, which ranked songs or recordings relative to each other. "By the late 1940s," Anand and Peterson note, "record stores, publishers and music licensing agencies, record industry and broadcasting trade magazines, industry tip sheets, and jukebox distributors all generated lists of their most popular records" (273). Over the course of the 1950s, as these various sectors of the music industries came to focus their attention almost single-mindedly on the sale of recordings to retail consumers, their own measures of popularity became less significant than their role in contributing to such sales. Much of *Billboard's* authority as a source of information on musical popularity has come from its success, since the 1950s, in offering single charts (one each for songs and albums) which appear to combine all measures of popularity, within weekly tabulations that rank all current recordings in hierarchical relationships to each other (Ennis 195). The popularity chart thus "processes" the activity of other media, from digital tracks sold on line to the playing of songs by radio stations as part of their programming.

The work of charts is a work of intermedial consolidation in that the passage of music through various media channels is reduced to a single, quantifiable popularity which allows for a direct comparison among the 100 pieces of music considered at any moment to be the most popular among those recently released. Something else transpires within this

consolidation, however. The public life of the musical recording comes to be organized as a narrative of rise and fall, in which the distance traveled by a recording on the charts may vary, but the directionality of this movement, upwards and downwards in a single continuous arc, usually does not. While there are isolated cases in the recent history of *Billboard's* charts of songs rising a second time, after an initial ascent and decline, these are sufficiently rare and ascribable to unusual circumstances (such as the death of a currently popular performer, which may have the effect of rekindling interest in their music) that they do not challenge the prevailing model.

Changes over time in the methodology used to compile *Billboard's* charts have labored to smooth out this narrative of rise and fall and eliminate any eccentricities that might disrupt it. Since 1991, for example, *Billboard* has followed a policy by which recordings that remain more than 20 weeks in the lower reaches of the "Top 100" (so-called "recurrent" recordings) are dropped from the chart irrespective of any continued sales. This to ensure that the lower depths serve only as a pathway in or out of the charts, rather than a nether-region in which recordings may linger and be nudged upwards or downwards over long periods of time on the basis of lackluster but consistent sales ("Billboard Charts Legend"). It is crucial to the authority of *Billboard's* charts that they represent the often erratic commercial lifecycle of a musical recording as an arc of unbroken ascent and decline. However, this narrativization of the musical commodity's life is interwoven with the chart's tabular form, which sets the 100 top songs in any given week in a relationship of graphic simultaneity. If, as Philip Fisher has argued (668), the passage from narrative to tabulation is one hallmark of modern life, the popularity chart is able to perpetuate the melodrama of success and failure within the coldly unchanging (and modern) form of the list. The curve of a song's rise and fall endows its lifecycle with the romance of individual success and ultimate exhaustion, while the hierarchical verticality of the chart conveys the sense of all songs sitting in momentarily stable relationships within a homogeneous historical moment. This interweaving of the narrative and the tabular produces the peculiar paradox of the popularity chart: two songs sitting in close proximity on the chart may be in very different phases of their commercial lifecycle and have experienced very different degrees of success. Their adjacency is no confirmation of comparable popularity or commercial durability. A song may quickly reach no. 1, and then fall precipitously, while others just below it remain for several weeks at the chart's upper levels and are ultimately more successful.

Charts organize a song's lifecycle as smooth narrative, but they also respond to the sequential ordering of the media through which

music passes. In the 1970s, as I have shown elsewhere, the marketing of dance-oriented music rested on a presumed sequence that began with a DJ's playing of a record in dance clubs, then to the sales of recordings to subcultural consumers in specialty retail stores, from there to the adoption of songs by radio station music programmers and, ultimately, to the sale of records to mainstream buyers (Straw, "Value and Velocity"). These different media of dissemination – clubs, records and radio -- were thus imagined as an intermedial series through which a piece of music passed, its popularity in any one driving its passage into the next. Across this passage, audience "impressions" of a song were translated into commodity sales and these sales into new forms of media dissemination (on radio, in particular), which might stimulate more impressions and more sales. With the collapse of sales for physical recordings, the "impression" (the act of listening and recognition) has persisted as the key index of popularity. The contemporary emphasis on the "impression" springs from the need to transform a musical culture marked, more and more, by the simultaneous availability of wide bodies of music, into events whose discreteness may be measured and whose fluctuating frequency over time may be narrativized. Musical recordings now pass through convoluted media chains which begin with the exposure of songs in public places like restaurants, the immediate use by customers of smartphone-based music-recognition apps like *Shazam* to identify them, and subsequent replays on *YouTube* or streaming services such as *Spotify*. (This is the media chain that generated the popularity of the 2015 hit song by Meghan Trainor, "All About That Base," as recounted by Kurt Hanson).

The chart as storage device

If the chart is not in itself a medium in any commonly understood sense of the term, it nonetheless partakes of mediality in the ways in which it acts upon aggregates of information in order to stabilize that information in consistent forms. Through this stabilization, the chart may also be seen as a particular kind of storage device, a device for capturing and holding a range of disparate musical phenomena for a certain period of time. Insofar as it contains 100 records at widely varying stages of their lifecycles, the chart possesses a thickness of overlaid temporalities. Each song, accompanied by information noting its current chart position, its position the previous week, and the number of weeks it has appeared on the charts, carries alongside it the narrative of its popularity. The chart, in turn, is a compendium of 100 such narratives, each of which is at a different point in its unfolding.

Like music retail stores or individual mp3 collections, though with a more restricted historical range, the popularity chart is an archival space

engaged simultaneously in the remembering and forgetting of music. Writing of popular musical culture in the United States in the 1950s, Ennis notes how the culture of high school during this period functioned as a deep inventory in which music accumulated and moved: "The American high school of the 1950s was a four-year container of records, songs, dances, and performers that constituted a slowly moving whole. Through its weightier mass, the momentary hit parade wiggled" (Ennis 199). This sense of the "mediality" of high school culture – its status as container – captures the profound layering of temporalities which existed within it, as some songs and musical styles moved quickly towards being forgotten while others lingered. The popularity chart, which new songs are always entering, and from which older songs are forever departing, has as its middle that "weightier mass" of music that acts as ballast, stabilizing it against the turbulence at either end. While the popularity chart was designed to register and display the dynamism and turbulence of popular musical culture, the size of its repertory and statistical regularity of movement in its middle ranges enhance the impression it conveys of a slowly shifting storage device.

In the history of *Billboard's* popularity charts, different periods may be distinguished by the velocity with which charts seem to cast off recordings – to "forget" them, in a sense – or retain and "remember" them. As noted, *Billboard's* charts indicate the number of "Weeks on Chart" for each listed recording, and through these we may observe significant variations across recent history in the typical duration of any title's presence within the space of measured popularity. This is particularly the case for the "Top 200" albums chart which, in the mid 1990s, was full of titles (by performers like Van Halen, Snoop Doggy Dog, Tom Petty, or Mariah Carey) that lingered on the charts for 100 weeks or more. In contrast, the same chart, for the early months of 2015, contained few titles that had spent more than 50 or 60 weeks in the "Top 200." While these differences correspond in part to changes in the ways in which charts are compiled, it is difficult to avoid judgments as to the character of popular music culture in each of the two periods compared here. The cultural moment of the mid-1990s appears to be marked by the convergence of preferences and consumer decisions around a limited, consensual group of proven titles. The mid-2000s, in contrast, seem to be characterized by a taste for short-term novelty and dispersed attention. Whether or not these differences are rooted in real characteristics of the markets for popular music, the status of the chart as a storage device has shifted considerably over these two decades. By including recordings over longer periods of time, the mid-1990s chart extended their presence in a space of public (or at least institutional) visibility and thus prolonged the time in which they were "remembered." In

contrast, the 2015 chart, by replacing its inventory more rapidly, appears to be an instrument of forgetting. Through this particular economy of memory, the popularity chart enacts one of the longstanding functions of mediality, that of organizing a sense of cultural time.

In their construction of time, popularity charts invite moral judgments as to the investment of musical culture in novelty and its commitment to enduring values. *Billboard's* charts for 1994, for example, suggest a year of durable values, of music that appealed across several different demographic groups and therefore came to seem, in some sense, classic. We might also see 1994 as a year of conservatism, in which a few bloated successes clogged the flow of music through the charts, blocking innovation and change. In turn, we might see the field of popular music in 2015 as one marked by short-term, shallow fads, in which very few titles endure on the charts because their appeal is only superficial, to fans whose loyalty is fleeting and whose attention spans are short. Alternately, we might also see 2015 as a year of significant innovation, in which openness to change and experimentation has led to a constant displacement of the recently popular in favor of the new.

We might ask another question concerning the difference between *Billboard's* "Top 200" albums charts of the mid-1990s and those of twenty years later: May we distinguish between periods in which dominant styles are crystalized in a small number of massively popular recordings and others in which they are dispersed across a variety of more minor titles? The popularity of country or hip-hop music in the mid-1990s seemed to be condensed within the massive popularity of a limited number of performers (such as Tim McGraw and Snoop Doggy Dog, respectively) whose records dominated the charts. In other periods, the popularity of these genres has been dispersed across a wider array of titles. We might usefully invoke the language of network theory here to capture the ways in which the popularity chart holds a variety of actants in more or less stable relationships to each other. The chart is a technological object in the sense that Madeleine Akrich has defined the term, as that which builds, maintains and stabilizes "a structure of links between diverse actants" (206). These actants themselves form smaller groupings in which the presence of particular genres or styles is organized. This "structure of links" is network-like in that it endows a set of events – the acts of consumption to which each recording is subject, and on whose basis its popularity is determined – with the legibility of diagrammatic simultaneity. Each music popularity chart offers the image of a variety of styles and genres dispersed across discrete recordings and differentiated chart positions. As Liam Young suggests in a recent text, speaking of lists (of which the chart is a variant), "[w]e can conceive of the list as a network because

before anything else it draws things together – it collects, translates, abstracts, and places words and things in relation to one another.” As such, the chart captures the ways in which the field of popular music, at any given moment, is a network of differences and affinities. The chart is also, to invoke the language of the cultural anthropologist Alfred Gell, an image of “distributed creativity,” of the dispersion of styles and forms across an array of texts, a dispersion that the chart organizes in graphic form (see Born).

Transmission

The intermediality of the popularity chart is also a function of the transmission of information in which it engages. As Vismann has shown, “[l]ists sort and engender circulation” (6). Musical performances themselves are transmitted “through” the chart, represented by minimal textual information that moves up and down the lists of popular recordings. The chart itself, with its multiple overlaid narratives of success and failure, becomes an efficient transmission device by reducing these narratives to the barest of informational tokens. The light weight of this information, relative to the weighty expressive substance of the music itself, allows the chart to be copied, displayed and summarized across multiple media forms (blogs, newspaper articles, the walls of music shops), where it both represents and constructs the field of musical popularity.

The circulation of music across media and social space is marked by broad differences in the semiotic and informational weightiness of the forms in which music is carried. Between the data-heavy video clip and the low-quality mp3 file, music is adapted for wide-ranging velocities of movement and adorned with complexes of sound, image and textual information that are of variable thickness and complexity. The popularity chart, throughout most of its history, has contained little more than words or phrases whose length is typically less than that of the sentence. In this, it is one of the lightest of those cultural forms through which constituent parts of the musical commodity are transmitted. The ingenuity of the chart resides in the ways its schematic and crudely literal form – which represents declining popularity as movement down a page – belies the rich dynamism of the processes captured within it. With its inventory always restricted to the same number of titles, the chart disguises, through its formal flatness, the thickness of temporalities contained within it, just as it obscures, in its static tabulation, the busy movement through time of its constituent parts.

Conclusion

One dominant strain of intermediality theory has been preoccupied with what Werner Wolf calls “the transgression of boundaries between conventionally distinct media” (3). Our concern here with the intermittently “medial” functions of cultural objects is meant to shift attention from the interpenetration or overlaying of media forms to the place of cultural objects in the circulation of information. If the terms “function” and “information” both risk sounding like crude concretizations of complex aesthetic processes, each nevertheless encourages a systemic view which captures the matrices through which cultural expression travels and is transformed.

Clearly, the music popularity chart is not intermedial in the sense of storing, processing or transmitting music itself in any obvious sense. Nevertheless, it is a form that accrues to itself aspects of the musical text (its title and performer, its currency and popularity), and transmits these through cultural space, along trajectories that diverge from those along which music itself passes. The intermedial life of popular music can be grasped by following the variety of cultural forms which break the musical text into its constituent elements – its title, corporate identification, visual paratexts and so on – then process, store and transmit these elements across different media pathways and within fluctuating assemblages of expressive form.

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