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Looking at Records¹

Philip Auslander

Intellectual property expert Paul Goldstein predicts that, in the very near future, recorded music and other entertainment commodities will be distributed by means of a system he calls the “Celestial Jukebox,” which he describes as “a technology-packed satellite orbiting thousands of miles above Earth, awaiting a subscriber’s order—like a nickel in the old jukebox, and the punch of a button—to connect him to any number of selections from a vast storehouse via a home or office receiver [...]” (1994:199). Goldstein concedes that the notion of a satellite is metaphoric but insists that some such delivery system, whether celestial or terrestrial, is the wave of the future.

The development of a new system of cultural distribution along the lines of the Celestial Jukebox is well underway; witness the popularity of downloaded MP3 files as musical commodities. This development will radically change our relationship to recorded music. Above all, it entails the dematerialization of the musical object, a change so fundamental as to constitute a paradigm shift. Throughout the history of recorded music, the consumption of music has been accomplished through the consumption of recordings as material objects. Arguably, the first such material object—though not strictly speaking a recording—was the mass-produced printed score, which became a consumer commodity in the 19th century with the increased popularity of domestic music production and the piano as a home appliance. Subsequent material objects associated with the consumption of music include the piano roll, the Edison cylinder, the 78 rpm disc, the LP, the 45 rpm single, the 12-inch single, the cassette, and, ultimately, the compact disc. For well over a century, the consumption of recorded music has meant the purchase and ownership of objects of this kind, the material supports for the music itself.

In the 20th century, the consumption of recorded music was often achieved through media that do not require ownership of a musical object, such as the traditional jukebox and radio. It is the case, however, that the primary function of these media is to create a market for musical recordings and, thus, to promote sales. The transaction that is initiated when a listener hears a recording on the radio is not complete until that listener has acquired a copy of the recording.²

Already, we are able to download music from the Internet onto a material support of our own choosing (e.g., hard drives, recordable CDs and DVDs or other large-capacity discs). When the Celestial Jukebox is fully developed, whether on the Internet or as a cable or satellite service, we will not need to record music at all, since the jukebox will feature a limitless library from which we can retrieve whatever we want whenever we want it, for immediate use.

Such a system of distribution will bring about a major change in consumer culture and cultural consumption. Recorded music will be consumed as a commodity in itself, apart from a specific material support. We will no longer need to buy and own a particular material object to have access to particular music.

The advent of recording technology brought about a crucial change in the sensory economy of music consumption that made hearing the dominant sensory mode in that subsector of cultural production.

Historically, one consequence of the reification of music in recordings is the century-old separation of the aural experience of music from its visual experience. Dave Laing indicates that the critical impact of the gramophone when it became widely available in the 1890s was “a vital shift in the experience of listening to music: the replacement of an audio-visual event with a primarily audio one, sound without vision” (1991:7–8). The advent of recording technology brought about a crucial change in the sensory economy of music consumption that made hearing the dominant sensory mode in that subsector of cultural production.

In this respect, the music industry is perhaps different from other subsectors of commodity capitalist economies. French Situationist theorist Guy Debord, who “grafted [...] antiocular discourse onto the Western Marxist totalizing critique of reification and fetishism” (Jay 1993:426), argues that sight is the central sensory trope of capitalist economies. In his major work, *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord argues that commodity capitalism works by substituting images for reality ([1967] 1995:sec. 6). In his most succinct definition of the spectacle, Debord states bluntly that, “The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image” (sec. 34). For Debord, “The spectacle’s function in society is the concrete manufacture of alienation” (sec. 32), which it achieves by presenting the social world as a visual object for the consumer’s contemplation rather than something upon which the individual can act:

The spectator’s alienation from and submission to the contemplated object works like this: the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. (sec. 30)

Because Debord focuses on the visual as the sensory mode of the society of the spectacle, his theory demands that all cultural production be assimilated to a visual model. It seems to me, however, that Debord’s model is not sufficiently fine-grained to account fully for the operation of reification and commodification in cultural subsectors that provide experiences appealing centrally to senses other than vision. Here, I shall examine musical recordings through the lens of Situationist social theory. My purpose in adopting Debord’s ideas as my framework is twofold. On the one hand, I wish to show how they can illuminate the workings of commodification within a particular subsector of cultural production. I also hope, however, to suggest a limitation to Debord’s totalizing condemnation of the visual as the central tool of commodity capitalism by proposing that the visual may prove to be a site of resistance in cases where cultural commodities primarily engage other senses.

For an account of music and recording, I turn to another *homme de gauche*, Jacques Attali. In *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, first published in 1977, 10 years after *The Society of the Spectacle*, Attali offers a brief history of music's reification and commodification that echoes Situationist themes. For Attali, as for Laing, the decisive turning point in this history is the use of sound recording technology to produce musical commodities. In Attali's historical account, this moment marks not only a change in the sensory experience of music, but also the end of music as a significant social discourse and initiates its relegation to the status of a mere commodity like any other:

[W]ith the stockpiling of music [in recordings], a radically new economic process got underway. [...] Stockpiling then becomes a substitute, not a preliminary condition, for use. People buy more records than they can listen to. They stockpile what they want to find the time to hear. Use-time and exchange-time destroy one another. [...] Music is no longer heard in silence. It is integrated into a whole. But as background noise to a way of life music can no longer endow with meaning. (1985:101)

For Attali, the way that music is objectified in recordings deprives music of its use-value. Musical recordings become objects to collect and stockpile, not to hear. Attali's analysis of music can be seen as a particular case of Debord's claim that in the society of the spectacle, "the totality of use has been bartered for the totality of abstract representation" ([1967] 1995:sec. 49). In Debord's terms, sound recordings are abstract representations of music, objects that become visual signs for music whose very proliferation subordinates the actual use of music to its status as commodity object.

In the realm of recorded music, Debordian contemplation—the passive act of perception that links the spectator to the commodity and robs the spectator of agency—takes the form of listening, not looking.

The question I wish to pose in relation to this Situationist analysis of recorded music is: What does it mean to look at records? (By "records" I mean all sound recording media, and I am referring to the objects themselves, not their packaging.) At first glance, the reification of music in sound recordings seems to be a perfect illustration of Debord's association of the ocular with commodification. Since, as Attali suggests, most consumers own more musical recordings than they have time to listen to, the recording becomes an object of exchange and contemplation: an image of music that substitutes for music itself. This analysis implicitly describes the process of commodification as a sensory conversion: recording subordinates music's existence as sound to its new existence as a visible object, and music thus enters the spectacular world of the commodity. When I think of my own practices as a lifelong record collector, I have to admit that this Situationist analysis seems accurate as far as it goes. I always look at my new acquisitions before playing them and derive pleasure from simply looking at them, a pleasure that is partly an anticipation of realizing the use-value contained in the recording, but also partly the unabashed pleasure of commodity ownership.³ This is surely contemplation in Debord's sense of the term—the visual experience of the sign of music that substitutes for a real experience of music, and an experience through which I surrender to the commodity.

But I do think there's more to this story. The Situationist analysis is concerned solely with the fact of music's having been objectified and made visible, not with the specific implications of that visibility in a cultural subsector whose primary sensory modality is the aural. In the realm of recorded music, Debordian contemplation—the passive act of perception that links the spectator to the commodity and robs the spectator of agency—takes the form of listening, not looking. It is this kind of alienated listening that Attali describes when he says that recorded music is now a part of everyday life, but only “as background noise to a way of life music can no longer endow with meaning.” In the context of commodified music, the ear more than the eye is implicated in subordinating the spectator to the spectacle.⁴

Even though to look at a record is to play into the hands of the spectacle in the way I discussed a moment ago, it is also a perverse act, given that the object of the gaze was produced as a commodity to be consumed through the ear. The nature of this perversity may become clear through a consideration of a few striking cases. In *The Recording Angel*, a collection of essays on the culture of recorded music, Evan Eisenberg describes an encounter with a man named Clarence, who lives in a tiny house filled from floor to ceiling with records. This is how Clarence describes one part of his collection: “I collect anything with [the name] ‘Clarence’ on it. I don’t like rock and roll, though I think the names are fabulous, but there’s a Negro rock and roller named Clarence and I have all his records” (1987:7). Clarence, it seems, buys these records for what might be called a literary characteristic: the appearance of a certain word on the labels. He has no interest in listening to the music on them, which he actively dislikes, only in seeing his own name on the labels.⁵ Clarence goes on to discuss another record collector, who has amassed an enormous collection of which Clarence is jealous. Eisenberg ends the piece with a dramatic essayist’s flourish: “The thing about this collector in Brooklyn. He’s deaf” (9). We cannot know, of course, why this deaf man collects records, but it’s clear that he’s not listening to them. Whatever pleasure he gains from records he must access through their visual and tactile qualities.

The moments at which I am looking at the record instead of listening to it are not just moments at which I am under the contemplative spell of the commodity; they are also moments at which I am consuming that commodity in a way that goes against the grain.

Both Clarence and the deaf man are obsessive collectors, and that makes them worthy of the essayist’s attention. But another aspect of these anecdotes is more relevant to my argument: we may feel that these men who collect records that they either have no interest in hearing or cannot hear are highly idiosyncratic individuals who buy records *for the wrong reasons*. That response in itself indicates that there is something perverse about insisting upon treating an aural commodity as if it were a visual or tactile one. Such individual redefinitions of the use-value of objects seem perverse because they challenge the spectacle that seeks to impose its own regimens of consumption on spectators; such individual redefinitions of use-value therefore constitute acts of resistance to the domination of the spectacle.

In 1961, Debord addressed a conference on everyday life by means of a tape recording of his presentation that was played at the event. He explained his choice in the following terms:

It is desirable to demonstrate, by a slight alteration of the usual procedures, that everyday life is right here. [...] This slight discomfoting break with accustomed routine could serve to bring directly into the field of questioning of everyday life [...] the conference itself, as well as any number of other forms of using time or objects, forms that are considered "normal" and not even noticed, and which ultimately condition us. (1961)

Debord's strategy of using the tape recorder was intended to throw into relief the conventions of normal conference procedure that go unnoticed and therefore remain unquestioned. I am suggesting that Clarence's and the deaf collector's perverse uses of aural commodities as visual objects function in much the same way: they are forms of consumption that throw into relief the ways in which we are conditioned, to use Debord's term, to accept that certain objects should be consumed only in certain ways, a conditioning that undoubtedly reinforces the power of the spectacle. I would further suggest that my own practice of looking at records, though perhaps less distinctive than the activities of a Clarence or a deaf record collector, involves the same implicit resistance. The moments at which I am looking at the record instead of listening to it are not just moments at which I am under the contemplative spell of the commodity; they are also moments at which I am consuming that commodity in a way that goes against the grain. Crucially, these acts of resistance to the spectacle engage the sense of sight, the very sensory modality that Debord places at the heart of the economy of the spectacle. A significant flaw in Debord's theory is that his totalizing anti-ocularcentrism renders his social theory insufficiently supple to account for sensory economies in which sight is not the dominant mode of reification and commodification. I contend that the visual can function as a site of resistance within those subsectors of the society of the spectacle where commodification and consumption are defined in terms of a sense other than vision.

Treated as visual objects, records offer other opportunities for resistant readings of the spectacle. One of Debord's central themes is that "The spectacle [...] is in effect a false consciousness of time" ([1967] 1995:sec. 158). Under the influence of the spectacle, time has lost its relationship to lived experience and has become a commodity in itself: "[T]he time of the spectacle [is] in the narrow sense, the time appropriate to the consumption of images, and, in the broadest sense [...] the image of the consumption of time" (sec. 153). Looking at vinyl records is germane to this issue, for the grooves on the surface of a vinyl record constitute a visual representation of time. Vinyl records reify time in that they make time tangible: in handling a record, one is handling a chunk of time, in a sense. The division of time into bands and its distribution over the two sides of a disc are other ways records transform time into something one can see and touch. Records also commodify time; as Attali points out, to buy a record is to buy musical use-time. In these ways, records are means by which time is rendered spectacular.

Looked at from another angle, however, vinyl records also offer a resistant reading of spectacular time. It is significant that there is no consistent relationship between the visual representation of time on a vinyl record and the actual use-time of the music. Side six of George Harrison's album *The Concert for Bangla Desh* (1972), for example, contains only two songs totaling just over seven minutes of music, yet it looks the same as other discs containing up to four times as much music, or more. (In fact, the grooves on side six of the same album occupy more surface area than those on side four, which contains almost five more minutes of music!) In other words, the grooves on the surface of a vinyl record do not constitute a rational representation of use-time: on the surface of an LP, seven minutes of use-time can look identical to 25 minutes of use-time. Since

there is no direct correlation between the musical use-time of an album and its visual appearance, the visual representation of time on a vinyl record asserts itself as arbitrary, abstract, and capricious. Understood in this way, the surface of a vinyl record makes visible the means by which the spectacle induces false consciousness of time through images of time purveyed by commodities.

The prospect of looking at the music side of a CD raises a different but related issue. When we look at the shiny side of a CD, we see ourselves looking back, mirrored by the commodity. Looking at a CD, we both contemplate the commodity and see ourselves contemplating the commodity. The look of contemplation reflected back by the shiny surface of the commodity dramatizes “the spectator’s alienation from and submission to the contemplated object.” The way this musical commodity reflects our contemplative gaze back upon us offers the possibility of self-consciousness concerning that gaze and its implications. Again, this effect is possible because to look into a CD is to use the object in a perverse way that invokes a sensory modality other than the one for which it was produced. To look into a mirror one has purchased would not create the same effect.

The CD is also an important development in the last issue I will take up here, the issue of the dematerialization of the musical commodity with which I began this article. To look at the progression of the material forms of music media—from shellac or vinyl discs to CDs to direct downloading from the Internet or the Celestial Jukebox—is to witness the progressive dematerialization of the musical object. The general historical progression of music media has been in the direction of disappearance: the trend has been toward smaller and smaller objects (78 rpm disc to 45 rpm disc to cassette to CD) and now to no specific object at all. If my suggestion here that treating music recordings as visual objects allows for consumer practices and readings that resist the domination of the spectacle, then it would stand to reason—especially if one is willing to indulge in a bit of Situationist paranoia—that the spectacle would have an interest in seeing to it that musical commodities disappear from the visual realm. I’d like to conclude, however, with a different point, one that further challenges Debord’s anti-ocularcentrism. As we have seen (a word I use advisedly!), Debord’s anti-ocularcentrism stems from his premise that reification and commodity fetishism operate through the conversion of reality into images that are deployed as if they were real, inducing false consciousness in the spectator. The conversion of music, which exists first as intangible sound, into visible objects is an example of this process. But the historical progression of music media constitutes a serious problem for Debord’s anti-ocularcentrism. I would argue that the trend we are seeing now toward the disappearance of specific physical objects and the consumption of music as pure digital information (MP3 files and such) constitutes a *hypercommodification* of music in which musical sound becomes a commodity in itself, unmoored from physical support in a way that was never previously possible. That this process of hypercommodification entails the disappearance of music—its removal from the realm of the spectacular object—presents a major challenge to Debord’s thesis that commodification is an ocular phenomenon.

Notes

1. This essay is a revision of a paper I presented at the “Uncommon Senses” conference in Montreal, hosted by Concordia University in April 2000.
2. For a useful discussion of the historical emplacement of radio as a means of promoting musical recordings, see Attali (1985:95–100).
3. The pleasure of looking at records also entails the pleasure of looking at their packaging, including LP covers and CD booklets. To a certain extent, this packaging, too, can fuel the anticipation of hearing the music by providing images associated with those

who made it. But I am focusing here on the less-acknowledged practice of looking at the recording itself. Lest it be thought that my practice of looking at records is purely idiosyncratic, I hasten to add that anecdotal evidence gathered from many collectors of musical recordings suggests that I am far from alone in looking at records before or in place of listening to them. I am interested in this activity because looking at a recording represents a way of consuming the object that challenges its sensory economy; looking at the packaging offers no such challenge. To look at an album cover is to use and consume that cover the way one is supposed to—as a visual object. To look at a record is to use and consume it against the intended use. I discuss the implications of that misuse immediately below.

4. The continuing importance of radio as a means of promoting recorded music even in the age of music video evidences how deeply the process of commodification implicates the ear in this subsector of cultural production.
5. I must confess to having done the same thing. Once I heard that the rock group Living Colour had recorded a song called “Ausländer” (1993), I had to acquire it. I bought a 12-inch vinyl disc featuring several dance remixes of “Ausländer.” My name is proudly emblazoned on both the record’s label and its sleeve.

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