

# On the Redundancy of Music

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**Abstract:** This paper argues that recent transformations in the means of production and dissemination of recorded music have changed, not simply the ways in which music is consumed, but have also changed the way in which music can be understood, both epistemologically and ontologically. By epistemology in this case, I mean, not just what we know about music, but what we know through music. By ontology, I mean not just what music is, considered as content, but also what music is, considered as artefact.

The essay will proceed in three sections. The first part, drawing on Adorno, will argue that music has, at least potentially, the ability to de-familiarise the world and our sense of our subjectivity and its limits. I argue further that this has – and must have – a critical function.

The second part will argue that the advent of recorded music represented a significant ontological shift. The recording, as artefact and inscription, imported a fixity of exact timbral authority into musical types: put simply, in popular music, ‘the track’ replaces ‘the song’.

My final section attempts an analysis of how both of the above considerations have shifted with the general replacement of physical instantiations of recording by streaming of remotely stored content.

I conclude that: (1) streaming has decentred the notion of the ‘work’ that survived into the era of recording; (2) streaming has diminished the critical potential of popular music and, (3) that streaming and associated technologies have contributed to a potentially grievous ‘data-fication’ of subjectivity.

The paper draws largely on Adorno and the more recent work of Robin James, as well as some empirical research into contemporary musical consumption practices.

*Keywords:* Adorno, Robin James, streaming, ontology of music, epistemology and music

## I

We are sometimes not sure if a piece of music is supposed to be a police order, a teaching aid, or a medical prescription.<sup>1</sup>

Hanslick’s disdain for the notion that music might be instrumentalised is rooted in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*: the ‘uselessness’ of music its warrant of inclusion in the ranks of the beautiful. Adorno was equally dismissive of the notion that art might ‘give us something’:

Those who brag of having “got” something from an artwork transfer in philistine fashion the relation of possession which is strictly foreign to it.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, it is the very resistance of the artwork to this relation of possession, and the acquiescence of the ‘hit song’ to use value as ‘the backdrop for all kinds of psychological projections’ (AT 265) that distinguishes the art work from its culture industry produced imitation.

Music, in this formulation, is *supposed* to be redundant, irreducible to use value, and thus the guarantor, the gold standard to which subjectivity is indexed: it allows the bourgeois an intimation of a beyond, a metaphysics unmoored from religion.

Nevertheless, despite this history of mandarin resistance to both commodification and reduction to instrumental value, it remains the case that music and musical works have always been employed in the service of purposes beyond the parameters of philosophically approved aesthetic experience. As even Adorno admits, Kantian ‘disinterest’ hides ‘the wildest interest’, nothing less than providing the secure ideological foundation for bourgeois subjectivity as an alibi for its rootedness in exploitation. (AT 11) More pragmatically, the employment of music as, to use Tia De Nora’s phrase, ‘technologies of the self’ characterises how many of us orient ourselves to music and musical works.<sup>3</sup>

The susceptibility of music to instrumentalisation is thus a given: not only is music used ‘for dancing/ for relaxation/ for exercise’ but musical works are created explicitly to be so used and packaged as such. Nor is Adorno’s demarcation of the artwork and the debased products culture industry product along this diremption supportable, at least not in marketing terms. Classical works are routinely repackaged as meditative or even soporific aids.

One of the more obvious ways in which this reduction of music to use value proceeds is through the promotion of music as a promoter of wellbeing: Hanslick may have been joking when suggesting that music might be ‘prescribed’ but this now happens, and routinely.<sup>4</sup> The literature on the relation between music and ‘wellbeing’, itself a deeply problematic notion, is ever-growing and, if nothing else, provides a rationale for funding musical research.

‘Wellbeing’ itself is, or should be, a contested notion, but, as with many agreeable sounding bits of ideology that populate the ‘mind, body, spirit’ sections of bookshops, it slides all too easily into the slipstream of the neo-liberal curriculum. Academic workers feel the need to justify their existence in terms of the expanded market – the market within which mental health, rather than being a social problem, becomes the personal project of the subject-entrepreneur-consumer.<sup>5</sup>

Music in this world then, is not just valuable for the traditional, and not un-problematic reasons offered by traditional aesthetics. It is useful *and* therapeutic: but as therapy that is *an*-aesthetic, that reconciles the subjects to the indignities and inanities of the culture they inhabit and to which every act of consumption contributes.

For Adorno, of course, it was precisely the job of the artwork to act as an irritant *against* such a reconciliation: to hold open the crack in the totalising net of practice and discourse that closes around the subjects of ‘late’ capitalism. Music was the paradigmatic case of this: by its very ‘enigmaticalness’, music came close allowing access to, or at least awareness of, the occluded core of subjectivity – the ‘X’ the ‘thing that thinks’ that is the uncanny other of the public self. (AT 122) Music does not, in this view, ‘mean’ anything: rather, it identifies the limits of meaningfulness and the constructed-ness of all epistemologies. Music thus, for Adorno, ‘thinks’: and thinks beyond the capacity of philosophy. Music unfolds, not to reveal the ‘what’ of philosophy, to illustrate a point, to be an example: it unfolds *as* philosophy, rehearsing the processual quality of thinking, the necessity for one thing to follow another (AT 177), playing out in its own constructed time the essential insight that temporality is the unavoidable condition of any representation whatsoever – but also that it is not ‘real’ in the sense of being a predicate of things in the world. Things merely are: they exist *for us* in time (and space) because it is only as represented according to these conditions that we can apprehend anything. With music, we come closest to grasping this – musical time synthesises an imaginative world that shimmers with possibility: carrying with it a conviction of a truth that is otherwise than the empirical world of the understanding, but feels no less necessary. The *sensus communis* that Kant employs to underwrite the claims of taste translates, for Adorno, into the simpler, but perhaps more powerful, claim that ‘music says We directly, regardless of its intentions’ (AT 167).<sup>6</sup> This ‘We’ is not an appeal to anything as fluffy as a common humanity: rather ‘the force with which the private I is externalised in the work is the I’s collective essence’ (AT 167). This ‘essence’ is not some moral quality but more simply, perhaps, the orientation towards the making and apprehension of meaning that constitutes our social being: the engine that drives us to develop concepts by which we take up the sensorium. This ‘engine’ is at the same time the most opaque part of our mental

equipment and least individuated. If nothing else, this points to the illogic, or at least the limits, of the notion of 'personal taste' – it might be argued our own canons of 'meaningful songs' are breadcrumbs we drop on the journey through the forest of memory and association to arrive at the edge of the abyssal awareness of the oxymoronic 'necessary contingency' of such a trail.

It would be a mistake to see this 'engine' as a-historical, however: it is not an immutable organ of meaning gathering and generation that organises the world into concepts according to 'the categories'. This is where Adorno's Kantianism becomes Hegelian: as he writes 'the aesthetic We is a social whole on the horizon of a certain indeterminateness, though, granted, as determinate as the ruling productive forces and relations of an epoch' (AT 168). Art points to this 'social whole' while at the same time affirming its impossibility in the face of the fracturing of the relation between the atomised individual and the possibility of a collective existence 'beyond the spell of labour'.

Martin suggests, however, that though, following Kant 'we know our own subject only as appearance, not as it is in itself', the we/I that does the knowing can collect itself in such a way that the awareness of that unknowability ceases to terrify us.<sup>7</sup> Borrowing variously from Metzenger and Sellars, he arrives at a view of the 'self' as a necessary fiction that allows us to maintain a consistent perspective on the world, but one that is based on an objectification, or, in Sellarsian terms, a manifest image, that orders the intuitions we have of ourselves as objects in the world, in the same way as we sort and collect impressions of any other object.<sup>8</sup>

For Adorno, the function of the artwork, and *a fortiori* of music, in a time of crisis, was critique: not to say what was wrong, but to show, by the wound inflicted on its capacity for expression, the wrongness of the times. It is sometimes argued that Adorno objected to popular music because of its character as a commodity: this misses a crucial dialectical figure in *Aesthetic Theory*. 'The absolute artwork' he states 'converges with the absolute commodity'. (AT 21). In other words, just as the artwork's extreme subjectivity points to the limits of the subject as 'ultimate' (AT 169), so the very extremity of the artwork's 'commodity being' points to the limits of the commodity fetish. The sin of the popular song lies not in its commodity character, but in its acquiescence to the exchange principle as totality.

## II

Adorno was alive to the ontological transformation of music wrought by the advent of recording. He was materialist enough to see that the social meaning of music and the 'We' that constituted its subjectivity, were not immutable. Before returning to Adorno however, I would like to look in some detail as how music as recording, and in particular, popular music, differs from scored music.

There is, by now, a quite considerable body of work (Gracyk 1999, Davies 1991 etc.) concerning the ontology of popular – and usually, more specifically, rock – music. What is generally the topic of claim and counter-claim in this work is to do with the ontology of music and whether there is a decisive difference between the way in which 'classical' music 'is' and the way in which 'rock' (or recorded) music exists.

Before going into a little more detail about some of these claims, it might be worth rehearsing some of the basic theoretical frameworks within which these views operate. The first of these is the 'type/ token' distinction, generally considered to satisfactorily 'fix' the identity of a piece of 'serious' music. The 'type' of Beethoven's fifth symphony is either identical with the score, or else is an 'idea' of which the score, all its performances, and recordings, are tokens.<sup>9</sup>

The second major piece of theoretical scaffolding here is the distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' ontologies when it comes to music. On this reckoning, a 'thick' piece is one where, as close as possible to all the characteristics of a piece of music are determined in, usually, a score. Most works of the 'classical' tradition after about 1800 would be 'thick' in this sense; the score would outline all the events in the piece, itemise the instrumentation, and direct the conductor as to the pace and dynam-

ics of the work. Opposed to this, a work such as ‘Happy Birthday’ is relatively thin, since, as long as the melody and the words are present, it can be performed in an almost infinite number of ways without anyone feeling they have been defrauded of the genuine experience of the work.<sup>10</sup>

Gracyk argues that the ontology outlined above breaks down when we come to discuss rock music; he argues that ‘rock’ is not a genre, or at least it cannot be limited by such determinations – rather it may be understood ‘ontologically’ as music made to be recorded. Rock, in this sense of the term, is not to be understood as the offspring of the rhythm ‘n’ blues and country, assembled in studios in the south in the early fifties, and something that continues as it instantiates genre markings and song conventions that are at least distantly related to these antecedents. Rock is, rather, constructed in the recording studio, by the recording studio, and for the recording studio.

Rock is popular music of the second half of the twentieth century which is essentially dependent on recording technology for its inception and dissemination.<sup>11</sup>

This flips the platonic notion of the score – or the song – as the type of which the recording is a token or a manifestation. Instead, the recording becomes the original, and the live performance the derivative token. This, as has been subsequently argued, can be true, even of songs that have yet to be recorded, or are never recorded – because the *telos* remains the recording. Rock songs are written with the notion that they will be recorded, and live performance, even prior to that recording, is preparation for the eventual recorded incarnation.

Thus, the studio, and the act of recording, is not simply a ‘recording’, an act of mechanical reproduction: it becomes a creative act in itself, the production of an original that has no – or a limited – ‘real’ prototype. It is in this that Gracyk, and others locate the distinction between rock, in its heroic era, and jazz, blues, folk and so forth. Whereas, at least until the late fifties, the point of jazz recording was to capture, as far as possible, the excitement and invention of a live set, and the understanding of the genre among European fans, dependent on recordings seemed, even to themselves, to be deficient, with rock, the live performance could often fail to satisfactorily instantiate the inventiveness and hyper-realism – or un-realism – of the recording.

Stephen Davies has disputed Gracyk primacy of the recording and suggested that rock songs have a priority over their recorded instantiation, even as they are works for recorded performance – which he recognises can be a special kind of non-simultaneous, ‘virtual’ –or ideal – performance. Davies’ other contribution to this debate comes in the ‘thick/ thin’ ontological distinction: he recognises that rock songs are ‘thin’, considered as compositions, but maybe be ‘thick’ in performance, where extremely fine distinctions of tone, inflection, dynamics and timbral qualities become defining and non-substitutable aspects of the work. Kania recasts this as follows, and somewhat departing from Davies’ position:

Rock tracks are [...] studio constructions: thick works that manifest thin songs, without being performances of them.<sup>12</sup>

To summarise: ‘rock’ music of the recording era that we might take to begin with the development of certain kinds of recording technology – multitrack tape etc. – and, more importantly, the time, the money and the expertise to use the technology to create music that exploited fully the potential offered, was not just qualitatively different from what preceded it, but ontologically different in that it turned the relation between the ‘song’ considered as a written piece and the track as a performance – and an instantiation – thereof, on its head; the song now became identical with its recording, and subsequent performances were derivative of the recording, and not the song.

Secondly, the recording was ‘thick’ ontologically, the identity of the track manifest in fine sonic detail.

This primacy of the ‘track’ emerged, as noted, with development in recording technology: but it was also contemporaneous with the primacy of the LP and with the unrivalled supremacy of the analogue.

It is worth pausing to note the peculiarity of this moment, given prior and subsequent development in recording and distribution. Popular music up to the middle of the century had been disseminated through radio, live performance (and live performance on the radio) and recordings. And, until rock migrated to the album format, music had been recorded with the radio in mind – because radio sold records. The contemporaneous rise of the LP, the affordable hi-fi and FM radio inverted the relationship – the radio began to mimic the form of the ideal listening experience; which was sitting in a comfortable chair, with speakers positioned optimally to present the ‘true’ stereo image.

The point of this is not to suggest that there was a golden era of recording and that everything that has happened since has represented a falling away. What I want to suggest is more along the lines of the following – ‘analogue’ recording had a particular ontology, reinforced by social practice that was not incidental to this ontology, that brought in its wake certain commitments that have been disrupted by subsequent recording practice, listening habits, and social transformations.

To return to Adorno, I would like to concentrate on three aspects of his critique of the phonograph. The first is that recording, as with radio, alters the space of music quite dramatically: all music becomes chamber music – it is domesticated. The second is a rather subtle point – Adorno laments the pathos of earlier gramophone recordings where ‘in their earlier phases, these technologies had the power to penetrate rationally the reigning artistic practice’. What I take Adorno to mean here is that whereas early recordings, by the very distance that the technique imbued the recordings with, attested to the ‘truth’ of the performance, the ‘fidelity’ of the more modern ‘electrical’ recording techniques makes the absence of the embodied performer all the more apparent. The final point I wish to draw out from these writing is to do with the form of the record itself, something with which Adorno is fascinated:

It is covered with curves, a delicately scribbled, utterly illegible writing.<sup>13</sup>

It is this illegibility, and more precisely, the immutability of this script, that I want to concentrate on. This ‘script’ the form of the groove, is, once inscribed, unchangeable and is a form of ‘writing’ that is only readable by the phonographic needle. Furthermore, this script can only be written by sound, and by sound captured by quite specific practices. Adorno does briefly toy with the notion that music might be created by writing ‘directly’ onto the platter; and certainly, with the development of turntablism, we have seen some of what he had in mind instantiated in practice.

Before developing this point a little further, it’s worth noting that Adorno also recognises the way in which recording alters the temporality of music and its relation to ordinary time: instead of the unified and heightened experience of the concert, the music of the gramophone era must accommodate itself to ‘the hours of domestic existence’ to which ‘dances composed of dull repetitions are more congenial’ as ‘one can turn them off at any point’.<sup>14</sup>

Adorno was, of course, mourning the vanishing ‘aura’ of the musical work in its domestication, the way in which the two dimensions of the record (although actually it is not two dimensional, but three) sacrificed the ‘height and depth’ of the music.

What I would like to suggest here is that the illegibility and irreversibility of the ‘scribbled’ writing of the groove is the clue to survival of the aura of the musical work in era of analogue recording on tape, according to the practices outlined above as concomitant with the creation of ‘a track’ and to the authority of such works. Recording in this way, and the dissemination of such music on vinyl, no matter how protracted, or how distanced from the ideal of live recording the process is, sooner or later produces a definitive track, something that functions as the type, an ontologically thick, and more importantly, singular work, works that, once they enter their world, become fixed.

Digitally recorded and distributed music, on the other hand, is infinitely rewritable and mutable, beyond the recording event. In place of the illegible scribble in the groove of the record, we get binary code, code that, unlike the immutable analogue script, can be rewritten beyond the time of original inscription. I would argue that this represents not simply a trivial alteration in the means of

recording: it is an ontological transformation, one that critically changes the way in which we conceive of music and musical experience.

The subsequent uncoupling of the means of dissemination of recordings from, first vinyl and by now, any necessary physical incarnation has transformed the nature of recorded music: it is now ‘content’, part of a larger set of practice of cultural production, that can fill any digital space available – accommodated, *qua* Adorno, to the hours of digital existence.

### III

Robin James describes her method in *Resilience and Melancholy* as ‘both philosophy of music and philosophy *through* music’, a formulation that echoes Adorno. She continues:

The former type asks: what philosophical assumptions and ideas are embedded in musical works, performances and aesthetics? And the latter asks: how do specific pieces of music articulate, revise and critique philosophical concepts? (...) Musical works do more than just *reflect* dominant concepts, ideals and structures. They also respond to, critique, and rework them, just as any philosophical text would.<sup>15</sup>

James’ key point of departure from Adorno is connected to her historical perspective: she sees ‘neoliberalism’ – her word for the current phase of capitalism – as distinct from, and in many ways, more totalising, than Adorno’s ‘late’ capitalism. Her other key conceptual framing device is that of ‘biopolitics’: following Foucault, she considers an ‘ideology of health, vitality, and sustainable flourishing’.<sup>16</sup> While the totality that Adorno contests is predicated on atomisation and estrangement, it is, according to James’ (and others) less complete than the dispensation that has replaced it. To put it this way: while Adorno saw in the culture industry as a commodification of ‘free-time’ and the enrolment of one’s time off within the economy of work, and this is surely a model that continues, for James, the biopolitical/ neoliberal subject does not just find her time sliced up into opportunities for consumption, but is herself a commodity packaged according to a logic, not of exchange, but of competition.

James sees the key regulatory apparatus of this new dispensation as an apparent *de-regulation*: everything ‘biology, psychology, sociality, aesthetics’ works like a ‘free’ market.<sup>17</sup> This switch is accompanied by a translation from exchange- value to resilience as a measure of adaptation to the world: not, as previously, the ability to sell your labour power, but now, the ability to adopt *all* of one’s powers, faculties, and affordances to a ceaseless competition for the leveraging of minimal advantages. The distinction may be best understood as follows: where, for Adorno, leisure became consumption, to be paid for by the fruits of one’s labour, now, leisure is *production*: every click-through on social media, every pause or skip on a streaming services is an instance of value production.

What are the consequences of this for the critical capacity of music? Where once, for Adorno, it was possible for ‘the new music’ to maintain a critical relation to society and to critique, by indirection, the order of a damaged and damaging world, for James, the subsumption of everything, including the most challenging of noises within the same seamless and boundless ecology of music production, dissemination, and consumption – themselves distinctions that are losing their meaning<sup>18</sup> has eliminated any notion of an ‘outside’.

James argues that ‘intension’ has replaced ‘extension’ as the boundary of musical practice and invention.<sup>18</sup> Where once, tonal music was structured around the flirtation with dissonance and harmonic adventure, only to return to the centre, and thus affirm the regulatory power of aesthetic pleasure, understood as at least potentially and universally accessible, modern popular music imports noise into the equation and, instead of the Adornian correspondence between the whole and the part, we get an assemblage of instability, elements that collide and jar, but do so in ways that are intended to fuel resilience.

If the intensification of musical content, and its consequent instability is an index of the ideological imperative towards resilience, the means of dissemination of musical content – streaming – may be understood not just as a change in the technology of musical reproduction, but as a determinative



condition of the production of music. Two examples will help illustrate this. In a prescient article written for the *Baffler* in 2018, Liz Pelly identified what she called ‘Spotify-core’, delineating a set of practices where the platform dictated the form of composition designed, not to capture the attention so much as to avoid the skip button:

Music trends produced in the streaming era are inherently connected to attention, whether it is hard-and-fast attention grabbing hooks, pop drops and chorus-loops engineered for the pleasure centre of our brains, or music that strategically requires no attention at all – the background music, the emotional wallpaper, the chill-pop-sad-vibe playlist fodder. . . . all this cater to an economy [...] where the most precious commodity is polarized human attention [...] And where success is determined, almost in advance, by data.<sup>19</sup>

In other words, ‘Spotify-core’ appeals, not because it *commands* attention, but because it can be half-attended to – or because it is inoffensive enough not to be skipped.

An even more stark illustration of the economy of inattention is provided by Vulfpack’s silent album. The band, a funk-rock outfit from Ann Arbor, Michigan, were looking for a way to fund a tour. They uploaded an album called *Sleepify* to the streaming service Spotify. The album consisted of ten tracks, each 30 seconds long, and each one completely silent. Spotify will only pay a royalty if 30 seconds or more of a track is played. The band asked fans to stream it on repeat as they slept. While the revenue from each play of the album is minimal, if a fan of the band were to stream it for 8 hours, \$4.80 would accrue to the band. Over a two month period, before Spotify took it down, it earned the band something in the region of \$20,000.<sup>20</sup>

There is a more than superficial resemblance between the Vulfpack work and John Cage’s 4’33". Both are limit cases, where silence is inserted into a context where music would be expected. In the case of 4’33" however, one is forced to listen to the silence, whereas with *Sleepify*, the ‘music’ is designed not only not to be listened to, but to be slept through. It is created to produce data which can then be monetised. Functionally, it is no different to any other set of tracks uploaded to a streaming service – and indeed, as we shall see, there are millions of tracks uploaded that do contain music, but that no one has ever listened to.

My argument here is that the shift from the analogue to the ‘digital’ realm of musical commodification is more than a format shift. Taylor has argued that:

We can consider music to exist in different regimes of commodification, all of which are still with us, though some are residual, some dominant, some emergent: music as published score, music as live sound at a public concert, and music as recorded in the form of player piano rolls or audio recordings in many other formats, analogue or digital.<sup>21</sup>

For Rasmus Fleischer, the shift is more fundamental:

The de-commodification of individual recordings (at the consumer side) now coincides with the re-commodification of music as experience.<sup>22</sup>

The question then becomes: what do we mean by ‘experience’?

Listening, as Nylund-Hagen argues, is no longer a distinct experiential moment, one separate from ‘ordinary’ experience: it is, instead, for the modern listener, part of the warp and weft of the normal, unremarkable everyday: what she calls ‘ubiquitous listening’:

[...] The act of listening as a simultaneous or secondary activity shaped to cope with the constant presence of music in modern life, using, for example, smartphone apps or streaming services.<sup>23</sup>

The shift to streaming as the dominant means by which recorded music is experienced has, then, three significant consequences. The first one is the dethroning of the individual ‘work’. As we saw, the advent of recording facilitated, to Adorno’s apparent dismay, the dismembering of the work and its segmentation into three minute ‘excerpts’. The recording era did, however, as we have also seen, lead to a reformulation of the work as ‘the track’, a fixed and authoritative version of a song, an

authority that relied, not on the accurate replication of a score, but on an irreducible and unreproducible timbral signature. Streaming, as the word suggests, is a continuum, a way of listening to – or at least, hearing – music that is continuous and expects seamless transitions between tracks to facilitate the construction or intensification of mood. This expectation collapses the unity and authority of the ‘track’: its timbral signature and extensive unity replaced by, as James says, intensification – an assemblage of hooks, soars, and drops, each event potentially extractable and discrete, ready to be reformatted and sampled.

More crucially, at least for my argument, streaming evacuates any critical potential that music might have. As suggested above, music, by its very oddness and, as Adorno termed it ‘enigmaticalness’, was able to point to, though not explain, the constructed-ness and contingency of all experience. It exposed the limits of our subjectivity and opened us up to the ‘is-ness’ of objects, their excess in contradistinction to our wish to dominate through rational agency. It opened up the possibility of letting things be.

Streaming, and ubiquitous listening more generally, re-places the subject at the centre of the experience of music. Music becomes an adjunct to our mood, a technology of the self, end-directed, whether that end be mood regulation, ‘wellbeing’ or simply distraction. As a consequence, the ‘occluded core of subjectivity’ discussed earlier, the intimation of the ‘X, the thing that thinks’ recedes, and ‘the subject that is not ultimate’ assumes an illusory sovereignty.

The final consequence is the what we might call ‘data – fication’ of this subject: Kant was clear that the *sensus communis* of which he spoke, was not the ‘average’ of what people think or feel, but rather a universal feeling (*allgemeine Stimme*) or more precisely, a feeling *for* universalizability: a confidence that what we feel and think must be sharable precisely because of the undetermined ‘X’ that underwrites our specificity.<sup>24</sup> We have now arrived at the inverse of that fictional, but aspirational, ‘common sense’: what we think and feel, with regard to what we listen to and watch, becomes part of a technological *sensus communis*. This version of the *sensus* is able to compare what we ‘think and feel’ to what everyone else thinks and feels, and construct a normative version of the self which it can feed back to the individuated cluster of data points that it understands as the individual through recommendation algorithms. This intensification of the specificity of individuals and of their ‘personal taste’ has the paradoxical effect of evacuating any understanding of the limits of subjectivity of which music might have provided a trace.

A last thought: the sheer quantity of available music on streaming services produces a redundancy of a different kind. There is simply too much, and the mind is defeated by the notion of all that remains unheard. Active, aesthetic attention of the kind that Adorno privileges was perhaps never entirely achievable, but at least part of its lure was the possibility of the heightened awareness that comes with the new, with music that extends our sense of what it can do, or be. Somewhere, perhaps, in Spotify’s near infinite reservoir of ‘content’, there might be something transformational – but we will never hear it.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Hanslick (1986), p. 5.  
<sup>2</sup> Adorno (1997), p. 266. (hereafter AT in text).  
<sup>3</sup> DeNora (2000).  
<sup>4</sup> See, for example, DeNora (2014) and many more.  
<sup>5</sup> See Fisher (2011) for more on this.  
<sup>6</sup> Kant (1987), pp. 87-90 ( 5:238- 240 in *Akademie* pagination).  
<sup>7</sup> Kant (1929), p. 169 (B159 in *Akademie* Pagination).  
<sup>8</sup> Mattin (2021).  
<sup>9</sup> For a useful summary of an extensive literature, see Dodds and Letts (2017).  
<sup>10</sup> Davies (2020).  
<sup>11</sup> Gracyk (1999), p. 56.  
<sup>12</sup> Kania (2006).  
<sup>13</sup> Adorno (1990), p. 52.  
<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 49.  
<sup>15</sup> James (2014), pp. 21-22.  
<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8.  
<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9.  
<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 26 et passim.  
<sup>19</sup> Pelly (2018).  
<sup>20</sup> McIntyre (2014).  
<sup>21</sup> Taylor (2016), p. 21.  
<sup>22</sup> Fleischer (2017), p. 156.  
<sup>23</sup> Nylund Hagen (2016), p. 26.  
<sup>24</sup> Kant (1987), p. 57 (5: 213-14).

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