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Outsourcing Taste; Are Algorithms Doing all the Work?

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It is a truism that is nevertheless true that creativity does not come into existence in a vacuum. Creative endeavour, whether individual or collective, requires a material and social context within which it can practice. This context includes, but is not limited to, the existence of an audience that might be expected to understand the work produced, the means by which the work can reach that audience and at least the possibility – within capitalism – that the single creative practitioner or collective enterprise can profit from such work.

Popular music, by which, for the purpose of this essay, I take to refer to – for the most part – music produced from within the post- Rock and Roll, Anglo-American cultural space, has always had a specific and necessary entanglement with the technology by which it is disseminated and consumed. An alternative definition to the one offered above might simply state that popular music is recorded music: not music that *is* recorded, but music that is made *as* recordings. In other words, the primary object is not the song, or the score, but the record. Over the more than 60 year history of this form of popular music, the physical – and later 'virtual' – form that recordings have taken has changed many times: I imagine it would be possible to listen to the same Elvis Presley recording 0f 'Blue Suede Shoes' as a 78 rpm disc, a 45 rpm single, on a 33 ⅓ LP compilation, on cassette tape, on 8-track tape, on a CD, as a digital download and as streamed content from a platform such as Spotify – and, of course, on the radio. It is even possible that the same listener might have purchased or consumed the same or similar content in all these formats.

Each of these formats bring with them specific affordances: the car radio, the high- end stereo system, the smartphone, all permit differing modes of attention and demand specific social contexts. The argument I wish to pursue here is that the technological and social context in which popular

music, and the associated industry, reached its commercial –and some would argue, artistic – apotheosis in the roughly two and a half decades between the mid-sixties and the late nineties of the 20th century was supported by a notion of taste that had its roots in 'high' modernism, albeit misconstrued, and that as listening habits and industry structures have been transformed since the start of this century, so have the ways in which taste is understood and mobilised by the industry. The first section will look at how notions of taste and judgement, rooted in Kantian aesthetics, were smuggled into the commercial music industry, even as the inheritors of that tradition – the Frankfurt school – railed against it. The second section will examine how the technological changes and consequent shifts in listening practices wrought by the move to digital means of production and dissemination have disrupted this 'ideology of rock' and the final section will posit some possible outcomes.

1

The notion of taste as judgement, as an act that affirms and confirms a common humanity and that is independent of 'interest' in the sense of something that we might profit by, or that might have emotional associations, is fundamental to the construction of the European, and later the American bourgeoisies, and their understanding of themselves.

The view of culture, which, in much of Europe certainly, involved music as the pinnacle of disinterested artistic endeavour, as something separated from the cultic and from aristocratic privilege, was the necessary alibi for a rising class, one that did not inherit a sense of itself as the measure of all things. By insisting on the universality and necessity of the judgment of taste, it was

able to lay claim to a common humanity, to mechanism of judgement that rested not on revelation or on tradition, but, as with the 'facts' of science, on a deduction, albeit a complex and reflexive one.

Music was central to this, although Kant, from whom this notion of taste stems, was indifferent to its charms, considering a 'minor art' and one that interrupted the discourse of gentlemen at dinner (*Anthropology* 7:281)[1]. Music, particularly in the German tradition that shadowed the idealism that provided its philosophical clothing, most nearly approximated the ideal of the vanishing aesthetic object, the thing that was not a thing that underwrote the harmony of the faculties that, in turn, affirmed the *sensus communis,* the common sense that grounded our humanity and our social being (*Critique of Judgement* 5:240).

Art, and the taste for it, affirmed a notion of value that was supposed to be opaque to the market, even as the artist – and in particular the composer and/ or musician – became entirely the creature of that market, as patronage from church and court withdrew. This value absolved the class that most benefitted from its construction from the charge of vulgarity, and effectively replaced – or at least supplemented – religion as the site of detachment from the struggles of a fallen world.

Popular culture, of course, lay outside this articulation of taste completely, just as it was considered beneath the considerations of copyright. (see Attali, 1985, p. 54).

Since the end of the second world war we have seen the displacement of the old hierarchies of taste with either an eclecticism that permits the subject to strategize her engagement with culture according to occasion or a simple, and wholesale, replacement of 'high' culture by popular culture. (see Huyssen, 1986, Kellner, 1989, Harvey, 1989 etc.) This replacement has, of course, been extensively theorised within the literature of cultural studies but, as much of this work has emerged from disciplinary discourses that tend to bracket the idea of value, in favour of description, there

[1] References to Kant given according to *Akademie* pagination, as is conventional.

remains, I think, much work to be done to say how the idea of value functions within this new terrain.

The culture industry critique, originating from first generation Critical Theory, most particularly from the work of Adorno and Horkheimer (1979 and also Adorno, 1991), remains unavoidable as a theoretical resource. They understood that the transformation of the products of culture into mass produced artefacts brought culture under the logic of the commodity, and the discourse of alienation and reification, rooted in Marx, via Lukacs (1975). The logic that informed artistic and cultural practices could no longer be plausibly upheld as protected by the membrane of disinterest and notions of value outside the market. This had the effect, as Adorno noted, of created a tear, a diremption, between the popular and the shrinking and threatened arena in which the autonomous artwork might operate: they became two halves of a torn unity, to which however 'they did not add up' (Adorno in Adorno et al 1977, p. 126) – because, in the trauma that separated them, each was deformed. The popular lost its connection to the nourishing stream of innovation and adventure provided by autonomous art and that art lost its access to the demotic, and to a language able to communicate more generally. Art became incomprehensible in order to avoid co-option by the market and popular culture submitted to the logic of the commodity that denuded it of all access to spirit. This diremption meant that each was defined against the other: to be a person of 'high' culture meant to be the enemy of the popular, and to be a devotee of the popular required the construction of an aesthetic, however makeshift, that countered the scorn of highbrow.

There was a time – perhaps – when popular music was innocent of the claims of taste, and of the aesthetic. However, and perhaps beginning in the 1920s when Jazz began to be written about seriously, first in Europe and later in its homeland, an argument that could be taken into the territory of the highbrow was needed. With Western pop music, by which I mean, for the moment the music created, for the most part in the US and in Europe that was rooted in the eruption of rock and roll in the mid -1950s, the field was untroubled by this anxiety until the sixties: by which time,

when music rooted in these forms began to understand itself in ways that were not completely indexed to the market, what Simon Frith (1983) has called 'an ideology of rock' was developed, one that, while attempting to counter the condescension of the highbrow, managed, perhaps less than consciously, to import – as Alison Stone (2016) has perceptively detailed – the categories by which this condescension was upheld into its own discourse. The oppositions between pop and rock, indie and mainstream, 'commercial' and not, by which much of the conversation around popular music distinguishes the worthy from the unworthy repeats the same distinction in a minor key that conservative critics such as Roger Scruton deprecate popular music as whole. Often this is taken to refute Adorno – special pleading on behalf of some treasured cases rescued from the vulgar mass that, under certain circumstances, this music can, after all be art. Here, the identification of exceptions really does prove the rule.

This particular aesthetic ideology was one of the engines that helped drive the huge expansion of the popular music industry from the sixties until it fell off the cliff in the early years of this century. The shift from pop to rock heralded the move from the single to the album and the construction of a canon of rock music that was informed by an array of gatekeepers (or cultural intermediaries)– press, radio, promoters, and, of course, record company A&R – that constituted an ideological apparatus of taste, not, to be sure, one that was uniform, but one that occupied a field where all the actors had, for the most part, enough common ground and a language in which and by which judgements of value that fed into articulations of the market might be constructed.

Much of this language was permeated with notions of value and distinction centred around the idea of genre and, separately, but connectedly, that of authenticity. Genre had a dual function: it identified music and identified likely audiences. It was thus constructed in two, sometimes overlapping, sometimes conflicting ways. The first one was as a way record companies used to match audience and artist (see Negus 1999). The second was, often, a more organic process whereby a scene identified itself, often in explicit opposition to the first process, around a group of

artists and venues, built networks of communication and reinforcement and would – as in the paradigmatic, and perhaps overdetermined case of punk – negotiate its entry to the marketplace on (some of) its own terms. This differing modulations of genre meant that each genre had its own specific gravity: some, such as jazz, and in particular, its sub-genres, such as fusion, afro-jazz, jazz-funk etc. had specific musical markers, necessary and usually sufficient conditions, relatively free of additional scene-specific markers. You could play jazz-funk just about anywhere, and while there was a certain racial coding involved, your success at being a jazz-funk artist or ensemble was more or less dependent on musical skills and attributes. At the other extreme, a genre such as Northern Soul was retrospective, DJ and audience driven. No one ever set out to make a 'Northern Soul' record until the scene was well established: until then, and eclectic and unconnected selection of tunes, assembled by the taste of a few DJs in a few clubs in the north of England and driven by success on the dancefloor, determined what Northern Soul would be.

What these differently weighted distinctions meant though was that 'your' scene or genre felt not simply like a market segment, but brought with it all kinds of consequences regarding ones particular social position, and the articulation of this location. 'Your' genre was the ideal to which all others aspired, but fell short: it expressed its time and identity was intimately bound up with this: 'our' music intrinsically and unavoidably tied to other commitments – social, political, and representational.

Arguments about some notion of aesthetically demarcated 'truth', often parsed as 'authenticity' or in similar terms, has been central to both the distinctions between genres within popular music and as ways of understanding and evaluating works within particular genres. Certain specific qualities become constitutively evaluative – rootsy-ness in certain kinds of country music, flow in rap, heaviness in metal etc. The more a tune embodies the defining quality of the genre, the better it will be – and not all of these qualities will translate across genre.

Nevertheless, in the heyday of the recording business as the purveyor of physical product, in a media landscape that was constituted hierarchically and where influence was negotiated at arms' length between producers of cultural product and the evaluative critical apparatus that played a key role in disseminating and articulating the qualities of such works, there was a sense that all popular music was part of a singular field, and that popularity, sales, and critical approval – and eventually canonicity and sustainable careers – were up for grabs under the same conditions for all. Even at genre level, taste was a matter of public negotiation – you heard music on the radio, you read about it in a magazine, and while this was one- way traffic, it was something you knew other were listening to, and reading. The act of commitment as what would now be called an advocate- consumer to a particular record involved a public act – buying that record. For most of us, our purchases were matter for debate and *dissensus* within our social group – in much of the world, and for the audience that consumed pop and rock, buying a record was a relatively substantial investment, both of money, and of aesthetic 'risk' capital. Music, then, not simply as an active practice, but, as fandom, was social.

2

The changes wrought on the recording industry by successive transformations in the means of production and distribution since the CD era have been well rehearsed in the literature, and there is a growing literature that examines the ways in which consumers now engage with music, and how transformations in the ways in which music is channelled has effected changes in the ways in which its users value it.

In the rest of this paper, I wish to look at how taste, and the ways in which listeners understand what they are doing in the act of judging, and the consequences and entailments of those acts, has changed as a consequence of the shift from music understood as something instantiated as a physical -and scarce – commodity, to something understood as 'ubiquitous' and effectively free, or at least, without a unit price. The shift to streaming has radically undermined the traditional sites of

gatekeeping, of endorsement, critique and recommendation – where once we heard – or heard/ read about – a piece of music, and went through successive stages of growing engagement leading to the eventual purchase of a relatively high value object, this process will now occur in seconds – and likely as not, guided by an algorithm.

As noted above, the changes in the patterns of distribution and consumption of recorded music have been extensively covered in the literature. Does this represent a shift comparable to the shift to mechanical reproduction of music at the turn of the 20th century, and is a continuation of these technologies by other means?

> 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 sound in the form of player piano rolls or audio recordings in many other formats, analog or digital.(Taylor, 2016, p.21)

Or, is it that, as Fleischer insists, the shift to a subscription service, whereby the consumer pays a monthly tariff for unlimited access to a vast database of tracks, rather than paying for individual tracks, or pre-selected bundles – albums – represents more than simply a practical change

> The decommodification of individual recordings (at the consumer's side), now coincides with the recommodification of music as an experience. (Fleischer 2017, p. 158)

How do consumers understand what they are doing as they stream? Before looking at this more closely, however, I wish to examine a slightly different aspect of this change, one that, I think, has been overlooked. This is the way in which the temporal order of the pop process has shifted in quite complex ways and in different directions over the past two decades.

The first aspect is that pop careers have become longer, and the time between events, and phases of those careers longer also. The shifts in David Bowie's sound, personae and audience between 1972 and 1979 would be unimaginable now for a comparable pop star – three years between albums has become the norm, songs stay on the charts – themselves a metric that has altered beyond the scale of comparison – for comparative aeons.

Connected to this, the past has become much longer, available in much greater depth and more present. There was a time when back catalogue didn't stay on the shelves for very long, and 5 years ago was pre-history. Anyone who remembers trying to buy Velvet Underground records in the early 1970s will concur. Now, people born this century are familiar with music recorded 30 years before they were born, and, because they generally consume it on the same platforms as music recorded yesterday, some – I would argue – of its historical specificity, the sense of its connection to its time is lost. Nor, however, does the vinyl fetish do anything to resolve this – a newly pressed copy of *Forever Changes* is still a 21st century artefact. The past recedes the more we try to approach it. This flattening, the recuperation of history that also denies its historicity, while allowing access to a wealth of previously available – and sometimes historical recordings that were never available – also stifles innovation in what we might call an infinite context. We know too much for innocent experimentation.

Conversely, the time taken to hear about a band, hear them and either decide to investigate further or dismiss them can all happen within minutes. Once, you might, if you were the sort of music fan who wished to keep up, or even be ahead of the curve, you might see a mention of a band in an article in the music press, after which months might elapse before you heard them. Radio in your country might not be interested, if you lived outside any of the major music business centres records might take a long time to reach you etc. The effect was of a slow priming of one's interest, and, given the level of investment buying an LP entailed, the commitment was – compared to clicking on a YouTube or Soundcloud link – quite substantial.

One effect of all this is that, while we all live in the now, we no longer share a public now. Once, knowing what was Number One was at least as culturally central as knowing at least something about sport – now it is perfectly possible to be hugely invested in popular music and have no idea what is in the charts. It was always, of course, possible to pretend that one didn't care – but you knew. Equally, as noted above with regard to genre, whereas once it was possible to be devoted to

metal, or punk, or whatever, and pretend to avoid all other genres, in order to stay current with your chosen genre, you would forced into at least semi-public realms occupied by other musics. You would, by a process of osmosis, absorb something about the many others of your field, and, since arguing the superiority of one genre and its associated subculture was a large part of participation therein, you needed to pay attention to what was going one elsewhere, if only to hone your weapons. The other possible effect of this was that you would, occasionally – and this was the gift of radio and record shops – hear something outside your normal zone of appreciation that would captivate, and relativize any fixed sense of yourself as a fan, and as a connoisseur. The charts could do this too – quite often, and this was perhaps more true of Britain than the US, utterly strange music would emerge into public view via specialist shops and audiences.

This aspect of popular culture, the sense of it as a counter- public sphere, where music functions as a placeholder for a view of the world that encompassed politics, fashion, other art forms and patterns of socialisation, is, I think, much more muted now. There is less to argue about.

Genre has moved from being something that functioned as a signifier for a world view, a form of life at least to some extent, to being simply a tag, a trace, a sliver of code. More to the point, one's individual taste becomes understood, by the market, as truly individual, a fingerprint, rather than a 'type'.

So if music means less, what does this mean for the recording industry?

Genre has moved from being a complex and weighted system of distinctions to being more simply a map of a terrain: one of the problems being that the terrain is unimaginably vast. One particular trope of the discourse of choice that permeates much of the language of the market in cultural commodities these days is that of scale – Spotify/ Netflix/ Amazon like to tell you how much is in there, suggest infinite resources. This is both comforting – you'll always be able to find what you want, and obscurely troubling – how will you know what you want, and what might you be missing out on?

The old maps, if we thought of it at all topographically, at least had familiar hills and a horizon: the new ones find us adrift in deep space, without an up or a down, or a direction home. Which is where the algorithms come in.

In order to try and understand how listeners navigate this new territory, it might be useful to look at the languages people use in order to describe their listening habits. Nylund Hagen (2017), following Markham (2003,) and White and LeCornu (2011), has suggested that the metaphors that allow us to understand what we do may be divided into the following categories: we either see the internet, or parts of it, as a *tool*, as a *place*, or as *way of being*. One distinction that Nylund Hagen noted was that older consumers, those for whom streaming has taken the place, partially or completely, of the ways of listening they grew up with it, tend to cleave to the 'tool' repertoire of metaphorical descriptions. Streaming is something that allows them access to a convenient copy of the 'real' thing – their record collection, whether still existing, or the collection they once had. For such consumers, the experience is something like fast food: it fulfils an immediate need, but is not to be compared to a proper meal, and is, in the end, unsatisfying, for, even if they no longer sit down and play a CD or LP very often anymore, that mode remains imaginatively primary. For such listeners, songs are still organised according to their original order as albums: such listeners remain aware of the chronology of an artist's career, and genre switching can have the same slightly transgressive feel that wandering into another section of the record shop would have had. Playlists, if used at all, are not imaginatively possessed – while, for a certain generation, they might recall the mix-tape, the lovingly compiled cassette of personal favourites assemble for a friend or lover – for this cohort, that level of affective engagement with something that is, after all, just a list on a screen, remains impossible.

The metaphor of place applied to streaming, as Nylund Hagen describes, is almost always a personal, private place – albeit one that can be shared, in a curated and carefully managed way by making playlist available to others. To some extent this reflects the way in which listeners interact with the wider internet, and more particularly social media. Occasionally accounts are shared with siblings,

friends, or partners, becoming a shared space that, in some way mimics a ‘real’ place in which music is heard.

For many listeners, and particularly those for whom streaming represents their primary mode, both in the sense of being the first mode of listening they adopted for themselves and in being the mode in which they more or less exclusively engage, music, generally listened to on headphones via a phone, becomes so intimately bound up with all aspects of life as to almost recede into a kind of taken-for- granted-ness, or, in phenomenological speak, ready-to-handedness. It is described in terms of affect, of feelings: music interacts with the lifeworld to heighten or transform the affective tenor of the everyday. Music consumption becomes close to frictionless, and choice, mediated by habit augmented by algorithmic prosthesis, ensures that little that would disrupt this continuum is able to intrude.

As will be seen, this is radically different from the kind of singular, if contested, social space that was constituted by the ‘ideology of rock’ as described above. If no one can hear what you are listening to, then no one can call your taste into question: and if you’re not even sure what it is you are listening to in the first place, then you cannot even doubt your own judgement.

The notion of various internet companies as ‘platforms’ suggests neutrality: the provider is there to allow the consumer and the provider to meet in a safely negotiated space. This supposed neutrality is belied by certain consequences of streaming, and more particularly, of Spotify. Firstly, and most obviously, the platform does not simply supplement other methods of distribution and engagement: it aims to, and largely does, replace them. The effect of this on the income of musicians has been perhaps the most remarked and deprecated effect of Spotification. The platform radically restructures the market.

A second effect, not entirely exclusive to streaming, but certainly one that it has greatly enabled, is the shift from listening on speakers, in a static location, to listening on headphones, and to files that contain significantly less sonic information than a CD or a record. Not unnaturally, musicians and

producers tailor the content and form of their recordings to these: shorter intros to avoid the skip reflex, sparser, and often slower songs to avoid aural exhaustion. Liz Pelly, in a recent article in *The Baffler*, identifies a genre that 'has practically become synonymous with the [Spotify] platform' a kind of 'muted, midtempo, melancholy pop', usually female fronted, that perfectly fits the mood and affect-oriented type of listening the service affords: or 'Spotify-core'.

She continues:

> 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 caters to an economy [….] where the most precious commodity is polarized human attention …. And where success is determined, almost in advance, by data. (Pelly 2018)

3

It is, of course, not the first time that technological innovation has caused a shift in the sound of music – recording methods and limitations have always dictated not only how music gets made, but how it sounds, its form, and mode of address to the listener. Adorno, as often prescient, noted that the gramophone would have the effect of making all music chamber music (Adorno and Levin 1990). On a similar note, Compton Mackenzie, writing in *Gramophone* on the introduction of the LP bemoaned the laziness and inattention that would ensue once the serious listener did not have to leap up periodically to change the record, as with 78s, with their playing time in the region of three minutes. (Hamm, 1995, p.25).

It would be tempting to enlist the evidence above into a jeremiad about a lost moment of cultural heft, when popular music 'meant something' and to mourn the drift of pop into the shallows. This is not my intention: there are many positive features to the shift away from the 'ideology of rock'. More women than ever are involved in the production of popular music and the casual misogyny, in both content and business practices, that gave to lie to its progressive credentials is fast

disappearing. More popular music from outside Europe and the North America and in languages other than English is reaching a global audience: Korean pop, Afrobeats (mostly from Nigeria) and various Latin forms, most notably reggaeton, have all made large inroads into a previously homogenous Anglo-American sphere. The purpose of this essay has been to argue that the notions of taste that grounded that ideology and thus the business that boomed on the back of the perceived cultural value of certain kinds of popular music have been undermined by changes in practices of distribution and consumption. Further, I would argue that this tells us something interesting about the ways in which technological shifts in production and distribution can affect the meanings ascribed to cultural products –and, indeed, the nature and intentions of those products.

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