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The Rebirth of Aura: Communal Recording in the Digital Age

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Abstract

With Edison's creation of the gramophone, the search for the authentic reproduction of art began. For Benjamin (1935), the mechanical reproduction of art was considered either lifeless or life-consuming. Today, however, a new technological twist allows for listener-consumers to become listener-producers of art rather than remaining a passive audience. This co-authorship recreates the communal aesthetic of art, realizing Benjamin's first stipulation of "aura" - that the work must be unique in time and place (1935). To examine this, literature was reviewed to provide evidence of the manipulation of art toward renewed authenticity and authorship by consumers. An examination of Fort Minor's Creative Commons project and the Nine Inch Nails Remix project was executed to determine if authenticity through co-authorship is possible in a New Media Society.

Introduction

Music is the back drop of our lives, and the sustenance of our popular culture. It provides a soundtrack to our daily routines, a back beat as we walk, type, run, think and socialize. It is a fundamental and arguably essential part of the human experience.

But music, like many art forms, has a unique cognitive affect as well. Memory itself is affected by music, for example; a song can generate aural memories that link past experiences with a melody or musical phrase (Kenney, 1999). Popular songs can become so ubiquitous and ingrained in our aural landscape, that associations are forged that can be triggered simply by hearing a familiar melody. The association becomes fixed and can instantly reoccur upon hearing the song any point in a person's life (Kenney, 1999).

Cultural critic Walter Benjamin recognized the power of music, and its immense influence on popular culture. As an art form, Benjamin was the first to recognize that music, combined with technology, could change the way we think about ourselves, and in the process redefine the values of human and political culture. The key to this understanding was Benjamin's idea of "aura" or "authenticity". For Benjamin, aura was a distinct set of aesthetics principles bestowed on a work of art unique to a particular time and place. These principals forged an underlying relationship between the work of art and the audience. A relationship Benjamin predicted would be altered by the mechanical reproduction of sound.

The age of mechanical reproduction created a musical experience that was decidedly one way. Recordings produced by professional musicians were permanently etched on wax records and then sold to the consumer. These recordings became cultural singularities, an impregnable rendering of song played continually, and rarely altered. But the growth of digital technology has altered this pattern of use. In an age where music is becoming less of a

physical commodity and more of an ethereal digital transaction, new methods of distribution are emerging (Recording Industry Association of America, 2008b).

Impractical as they may be, records represent the authenticity of the moment in time and place as created by the artist (Janis, n.d). Though records provided a secure means for the sounds of yesterday to survive time, preserving moments for future generations. What records do not allow for, however, is the truest tradition of live music - the spontaneous interaction between artist and audience. Digital technology has generated a means of distribution that allows the artist to continue the spontaneous creation of art with his audience.

Some methods of distribution also include access to the work itself, so that listener-consumers can change the process to become listener-producers. Musical groups like Radiohead, Fort Minor and Nine Inch Nails all have granted access to their multi-track files of certain songs in order to give their fans the opportunity to take their art and make it their own. Radiohead currently has a contest allowing fans to purchase the multi-tracks to their single *Nude* so that fans can generate a unique version of the song which can then be submitted to the band (Radiohead, 2008). Fort Minor also had a remix contest, but gave away the multi-tracks through the Creative Commons website (Shinoda, 2007). Nine Inch Nails, however, released their recent four album instrumental collection for free online, provided a Creative Commons license for distribution, and also developed a website for fans to develop their own versions of songs from the multi-tracks provided by frontman, Trent Reznor (n.d.). Unlike Radiohead and Fort Minor, the Remix.NIN site is not part of a contest, nor does it require any form of payment. All the developed works on the site are completely listener-producer driven and rated.

Each musical group varies in their degrees of open-sourced content, and each turn a passive listener-consumer into a producer of material. In essence, the consumer reproduces a piece of art into a unique experience by becoming the producer. More than just sense memory, they become part of the process of making art. This isn't mechanical reproduction; this is creating authenticity through co-authorship of art.

Literature Review

Whether defined as destroyer of human individuality or the restoration of art, the reproduction of music has led a troubled existence. The following literature will explain the birth of the mechanical reproduction of music and what it means for today's society.

Early Mechanical Reproduction of Music

Before digital distribution and the loss of authenticity came the mechanical reproduction of art by Thomas Edison.

In 1877, Thomas Edison developed the first gramophone (Thompson, 1995). Originally intended to be an improvement on the telegraph as a means of increasing the speed of communication, Edison stumbled upon a way to record sound to be played back later. His device, the progenitor of the Victor phonograph, was developed to preserve moments in time through the recordings of voices. The loss in quality played back on Edison's first devices provided the impetus to create future models that preserved the fidelity of the original work. As the models became more refined, Edison's public relations department devised public tone tests, so that audiences around the country could hear a recording played against the real voice of the musician singing. The desire to accomplish an authentic recording that preserved the aura of the original work birthed phonographs that made the recorded singing indistinguishable from the live singer who would sing along with the recording and stop unexpectedly.

Though Edison's phonograph was eventually overtaken in the market by Eldridge Johnson's Victor model, fidelity remained a key component of any future musical playback device. Even as radio broadcasting developed and the Victor fought for its share of the

market, the fidelity of the music remained key to the authentic aural experience. The mechanical reproduction of music without fidelity could not maintain an aura of the moment with the glitches and gaffs of impure recordings.

Walter Benjamin

From the original gramophone came the phonograph, radio, and film. Each of these mechanical devices record and broadcast moments in time to other places and moments.

Walter Benjamin, a German Jew, understood the politics of art and the necessity of the authentic moment. In 1935, Benjamin wrote *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, an essay discussing the loss of the aura aesthetic through the mass reproduction of art.

Benjamin believed that art was never to be underestimated, for art was the superstructure that the concepts of creativity and genius were founded on (1935). If art is the basis for creation, then art is also the foundation of both politics and revolution. The structure of politics and revolution find their ground in traditions of the people, but, Benjamin believed, that mechanical reproduction decayed tradition to a fallacy. The ideal reproduction lacked a “presence in time and space”, a presence which generated the aura aesthetic of the unique experience. So by reproducing pieces of art, the tradition of art decays along with the aura aesthetic of the original piece. Benjamin also believed that the individuality and concreteness of a work rotted with each new work. In essence, if the art is designed through tradition, and the authentic aura aesthetic developed through the proximity to the original, then the mass mechanical reproduction of a work could destroy the foundation of a people.

Benjamin's arguments centered on the impact of mechanical reproduction on the traditional form of art. Barely surviving the reach of the Nazis, Benjamin had little faith in the body politic, so the removal of authentic experiences through art seemed a real threat from technology. The destruction of a people by destroying the traditions they founded themselves on was a tactic of the Nazis in exterminating Benjamin's fellow Jews. The technology of later Twentieth Century, and the gifts it brought with it, would mostly likely have swayed Benjamin's fears.

Twenty-First Century Digital Media

Digital Media In Review

The mass reproduction of music saw its birth with the record player, but the largest distribution network of information technology came with the internet. Originally devised by scholars as a means for archiving and disseminating information quickly and easily throughout the world, the internet, in the late 1990s, became a hot bed for music distribution and a social interaction. A new community with new traditions formed.

Drotner (2008) studied the way in which young adults interact with new media technology. Unsure of how digital media and education play into each other, Drotner explored the leisure activities of young adults with digital media. A desire to simultaneously develop new products, communicate with friends, and be entertained all at once were key reasons for digital media interaction. Intuitively, the educational exercises the young adults participated in required each to use a combination of music, text and imagery in any form they felt appropriate. Young adults proved through their work that through different combinations of media, they all develop a form of literacy that develops their creativity.

Similarly, Carlisle's (2007) study examined the behavior of five young Australians in regard to online music information. Assuming that knowledge is based upon conversation and interaction, the five subjects revealed three types of repertoires that defined the user interaction of digital media: Romantic, Consumer Culture, and Multi-Cultural. These repertoires represented the views of distributing and downloading music from file sharing sites or other resources on the internet. The Romantic repertoire placed a higher level of status on music and the artist that developed it. Music is not just downloaded or purchased, but viewed as an investment. The Consumer Culture repertoire assumes that the music is "either a commercial enterprise of authentic artistry," but the listening audience is passive to the experience. Commercialism is the foundation of this repertoire, so listeners believe that the only interest in creating and marketing music is capitalism. In this case, the artist has to prove itself as authentic prior to purchase or downloading. The Multi-Cultural repertoire imposes value on every song, assuming authenticity through individual taste. The preference for music is not about marketing, but about conscious choice. Carlisle found that, as contradictory as they may be, an individual could possess the entire repertoire, though actively using only one at a time depending on the situation. The choice of what music to listen to and how to interpret the value and authenticity is the first step toward developing personal identity.

Determining identity in a digital era is a difficult task, so Ebare (2004) examined the subculture identity that young adults found in the sharing of information through digital technology. Despite lawsuits from the Recording Industry Association of America (R.I.A.A.) which attack file-sharing networks to prevent piracy and copyright infringement by individuals, programs such as Gnutella, Kazaa and Napster continue to thrive. Utilizing these

programs, music is transferred in a blink from one individual to another, replicating over and over. Trading music on such a massive scale, most of which being popular music, reduces the meaning of the work, but also enables the music to reach a wider audience. This audience then ingests the music and forms it to the identity they form for themselves. The identities developed through music categorizes an individual by sub-category which is determined based on the notion of authentic or in-authentic music. In this case, authenticity of the music is declared by the mass decision of fans, artists, and critics in regard to what genre a song belongs too. Identity, Ebare determined, grows increasingly complicated through new digital technology as the gap of listener-consumer becomes listener-producer thanks to new licensing and more open communication with artists. In fact, the connection between the authenticity of music and the identity of an individual are tied by the relationship of the artist to the listener.

Identity is most often found in the traditions of heritage, and music is a strong part of the traditions of every group in the world. As technology bridges the gap between artist and listener, music has the potential to maintain or regain authenticity through communal creation of work.

Communal Digital Media

The politics of music have been changed through digital media technology. From physical formations of records through wax or vinyl or the ethereal download, each form had governing rules. Now through Creative Commons licenses, some artists are giving open access of their work to the public.

A side project for Linkin Park's Mike Shinoda (2007), Fort Minor released its debut album *The Rising Tied* in 2005. In 2007, Fort Minor took part in a contest on the Creative

Commons website giving access to the multi-tracks of the song *Remember The Name*. By the end, hundreds of fans had taken part and submitted their own versions of the Fort Minor top 40 hit. The winner of the contest still has their version available for download on the contest page.

A longtime technologist, Nine Inch Nails frontman Trent Reznor (2008), upon breaking free from his record contract with Interscope, developed Remix.NIN to give his fans unprecedented access to the multi-tracks to many of his original works. Reznor has given access to songs from his acclaimed album *The Downward Spiral* to his recent four album instrumental work *Ghosts I-IV*. With no less than one thousand users logged in at all times, Reznor's Remix.NIN provides fans the opportunity to engage Reznor in a way unheard of in the recording industry today.

The literature has shown that Benjamin's theory of the aura aesthetic in a digital age of mass production remains in question. Based upon the literature I gathered, I developed the following research question:

Research Question: Is Authenticity possible in a New Media Society?

Method

Utilizing Benjamin's (1935) theory that the mechanical reproduction of art removes the aura aesthetic, thus the authenticity of the work, I examined the participation and results of the Remix projects as posted by Fort Minor and Nine Inch Nails. These artists were chosen due to their willingness to allow average consumers access to their multi-tracks that define their work, whether in a contest setting or not. Neither of these bands identify with the standard pop music style.

As defined by the theories of Benjamin (1935), none of these artists can produce authentic work through the spread of mass technology, or mechanical reproduction, nor can they generate a product that will not be defined as popular music. Each artist's project was examined for execution, licensing rights, and community involvement.

Discussion

Music is critical in the traditions of culture, so the reproduction of music is essential to the musical identity of society. Benjamin feared that mass production of art would change the reaction and decay that aura aesthetic (Benjamin, 1935), but through digital technology techniques, artists can create new life for their work through their listeners.

Benjamin's (1935) argument assumes that the artist, the originator of the work, cannot create a work that will withstand the scrutiny of mass publication and distribution. However, the transition of the individual from listener-consumer to listener-producer enables the work to have new life with each creation. Certainly the work is not the same vision as the artist's, but this is not the expectation. In fact, there are no expectations to create a specific work, only for the community to share in the creation and distribution of variant works. In the case of Nine Inch Nails and the Remix.NIN project, it is a communal area for fans to develop versions of songs, upload and share them with the world. So if Benjamin (1935) bases the aura of the authentic on the perception of distance from the work itself to the artist (Benjamin, 1935, 4), then by placing his work in the hands of his audience, Reznor (2008) is instilling the audience with his own eyes to be used by their will.

If traditions are the basis for the aura aesthetic, and the dissemination of music to fans for manipulation breaks tradition, Benjamin would say that the aura has decayed (Benjamin, 1935). However, the impact here may be less on the aura of the music, and more on the music industry itself. For if traditions are the customs of a group and the music is given to a group to make their own, then surely the tradition is not being destroyed, but adapted to fit a digital age of reproduction.

The shift from listener-consumer to listener-producer has far reaching affects in a digital age. Listeners have grown comfortable consuming the music the radio plays and the televisions instructs them to buy. Despite the upshift in digital consumption, physical formats are still preferable when enjoying music across all demographics (R.I.A.A., 2008a).

Technological change is a slow concept to adapt in traditions. Individuals crave interaction, so though digital communication can assist file-sharing at an exceptional degree (Ebare, 2004), the digital world does not appear to be the place they are going to find the connection they need. However, the digital shift has started and since 2004, the R.I.A.A. has noted a near 200% increase each year in digital single downloads since starting to track them (2008b).

Interestingly, the reports from the R.I.A.A. do not explain the originators of the digital downloads. Their data is collected from numerous organizations like Soundscan, Nielsen and Billboard, but what about the unaccounted for digital downloads from bittorrent sites and other file-share locations. Our culture is moving from a physical realm into a digital one and the actual download numbers may be too high for us to comprehend.

Benjamin (1935) said that “the greater the decrease in social significance of an art form, the sharper the distinction between criticism and enjoyment by the public”. The public is moving toward a digital domain where the aura of music is generated not by the musician alone, but by his audience as well. The communal work does not destroy the aura of the work, but infuse it.

Conclusion

Benjamin (1935) believed that the mass reproduction of music would break down art and the individual leading to a passive society full of listener-consumers posing as music lovers, digesting whatever record labels developed next. Where the Edison and the Victor sought to conform society to one style of listening, today's society finds its musical identity from not just listening to music, but also by taking part in its production. Through Creative Commons licensing or open permission from the artist, the listener-consumer becomes the listener-producer developing a renewed authenticity and authorship over a work that has been processed for the masses. Each work becomes individual and unique, preserving the aura of the work and divining the communal experience. By opening themselves up to the listener-consumers, musicians can find an audience without the distraction or sheepish acceptance which Benjamin (1935) feared. In our New Media society, the mass production of art is slowly becoming the first step toward authenticity and communal ownership for consumers around the world.

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