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## Exhausted Commodities: The Material Culture of Music

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*Abstract:* The twentieth century ended with the widespread conversion of cultural artefacts into digital information. Less attention has been granted to the ways in which cultural artefacts accumulate in the form of "things"-tangible books, recordings, and other objects whose economic value has often withered. This article examines the question of cultural waste and looks at those commercial and social institutions (such as the flea market and garage sale) which have evolved in order to keep old cultural commodities circulating. The recycling of old musical styles within contemporary practice is examined as one means of retrieving and revalorizing cultural waste.

*Résumé:* La transposition massive d'artefacts culturels sous forme digitale a marqué la fin du 20e siècle. En revanche, on a porté moins d'attention à l'accumulation de ces artefacts sous forme de «choses»-livres, enregistrements et autres objets matériels dont la valeur marchande a fortement diminué dans bien des cas. Cet article examine la question de détrit culturels, et jette un regard sur les institutions commerciales et sociales (telles que le marché aux puces et la vente de garage) qui ont évolué afin de garder les vieux biens culturels en circulation. En outre, l'article examine le recyclage d'anciens styles musicaux dans la pratique contemporaine, à titre d'exemple de récupération et de remise en valeur de détrit culturels.

There might be an irony in the fact that cultural research into consumption has become more and more "mental" at the same time as our Western lives are cluttered up with things to an extent never witnessed before in history. (Lofgren, 1997, p. 102)

"Obsolescence," the anthropologist Michael Taussig once wrote, "is where the future meets the past in the dying body of the commodity" (1993, p. 232). This article presumes that obsolete objects do not simply disappear, giving way to a future which will unfold without them, but persist and circulate throughout the commercial markets of contemporary life. It is concerned, in large measure, with those processes through which musical recordings become cultural waste, as their meanings and value are exhausted. This involves an attention to time, to the life cycles of cultural commodities and the ways in which they age. It invites us, as well, to focus on questions of space, on the accumulation of exhausted commodities alongside each other, in the retail sites and other institutions which have evolved to contain them.

Amidst so much talk about the imminent disappearance of cultural artefacts-of books, records, and videotapes-within systems of electronic distribution, it is worth noting the ways in which these artefacts continue to accumulate within the institutions of urban commerce. At both extremes, the last decade has seen an expansion of sites in which physical artefacts are gathered in ever-increasing numbers. On the one hand, forms of retail activity devoted to new commodities have assumed gargantuan scale, through the development of the superstore and the so-called destination entertainment centre. In the mid-1990s, global music retail chains leapt over each other in a race to build the world's biggest record store; the retail sector of the book industry has undergone similar processes. At the same time, however, and to less comment, we have witnessed an ongoing expansion of those commercial institutions and events which make up the informal or secondary economy. Charity shops-or commercial enterprises which resemble charity shops, like the Value Village chain-are expanding throughout Canada and the United States, amidst a significant resurgence of the pawnshop (Geisterfer, 1999; Mainville, 1999; Tyson, 1996). In the United Kingdom, so many charity shops have opened in recent years that there is now a shortage of second-hand items, forcing charities to import such items from other European countries (McCann, 1997). Yard or garage sales, once seen as respectable middle-class rituals held once or twice a year, are now weekly affairs for people living below the poverty line, who scavenge throughout the week and offer new assortments of goods each time. They have become so common that Montreal's city government recently argued that the respectable frequency for yard sales was two per year; to hold more than that indicated operation of a business (Derfel, 1997). In all these institutions of the informal economy, the objects which predominate are those, like clothes, books, and records, most subject to the cycles of cultural fashion.

At both these commercial extremes, there are enough similarities, from one country to another, to suggest that two very different kinds of globalization are at work. Retail superstores resemble each other for reasons that are easy to grasp, tied as they are to interlocking, internationalized circuits of production and distribution. It is the similarities at the level of the thrift store or charity shop which intrigue me-the ways in which different national cultures cast off the same sorts of cultural waste. The charity shops of a half dozen developed countries will all testify to a hazy international consensus over the feeling that certain kinds of music are now worthless: in Sydney, Brighton, Pittsburgh, and Vancouver one can find the same party albums by James Last and the same records by failed New Wave bands of the early 1980s. At the same time, the differences, from one national culture to another, show the indigenous assimilation of globally popular styles within a myriad of local production circumstances: the bossa nova records made in the mid-1960s by Australian high school bands, the Mexican recordings covering the theme songs of American television programs, or the albums by Czech female singers of the 1960s featuring translated versions of songs by Petula Clark and Nancy Sinatra.

The Swedish folklorist Orvar Lofgren recently suggested that scholars of national cultures direct their attention to what he called "the nationalization of trivialities" (1997, p. 106). Differences between nations, he suggests, have less and less to do with the distinctiveness of indigenous craft or industry traditions, and more to do with variations of packaging and availability among globally distributed commodities. These differences, Lofgren writes, help to shape the "cultural thickenings of . . . belonging." They invite an attention to

"the ways in which national differences become embedded in the materialities of everyday life, found . . . in the national trajectories of commodities" (p. 106). These trajectories are those which take musical texts into the broadcasting systems and retail structures of Canada, and shape their alignment with different markets and populations. The national trajectories of commodities will also include the pathways which commodities follow as they leave the formal markets for new goods and enter later phases of their life cycles. In these later phases, they are likely to accumulate in those sites which have evolved to house commodities whose value has withered or is subject to intermittent renewal.

## MUSICAL RECORDINGS AS CULTURAL WASTE

In part because of its perceived immateriality, popular music has been studied in ways which emphasize change over time, which are fixated on the succession and seriality of musical texts and styles. We should remember, however, that recordings, like other cultural artefacts, do not simply succeed each other in time; they also accumulate in space. In doing so, they leave behind, in the evocative words of Mary Douglas & Baron Isherwood, "a sediment that builds up the structure of culture like a coral island" (quoted in Metcalf, 1991, p. 206). The sense of used commodities as life forms of a sort is common in writing on the subject: Benjamin spoke of leftover commodities "growing on walls like scar tissue, ancient, wild flora which, blocked off from the sap of consumer traffic, intertwine with each other in the most irregular fashion" (quoted in Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 66). Some of this sedimentation is to be found in the record collections which many of us create as a way of spatially organizing the cultural commodities we have drawn into our own domestic spaces. Sedimentation is visible, as well, in the used record stores, thrift shops, and other institutions in which records accumulate.

In his book, *Rubbish Theory*, Michael Thompson noted that the central problem in the analysis of objects was the disjunction between economic decay and physical decay. Long after objects have ceased to hold any significant economic value, they continue to exist as physical artefacts. Twelve-inch vinyl dance singles, whose commercial life cycle may be little more than a couple of weeks, do not disappear from the world once that two weeks has elapsed. "In an idea world," Thompson (1979) writes, "an object would reach zero value and zero expected life-span at the same instant, and then disappear into dust. But, in reality, it usually does not do this; it just continues to exist in a timeless and valueless limbo where, at some later date it has the chance of being discovered" (pp. 9-10). Later, McKenzie Wark (1991) would describe similar disjunctions in his analysis of fashion. Fashion, he noted, is marked by a discrepancy between the different speeds of semiotic and physical decay. The coherent or rich meaningfulness of an object will typically have withered or dispersed long before the object itself. Nevertheless, the object persists, awaiting either its own physical decay, far off in the future, or those moments in which its meaningfulness and desirability will be renewed.

Here, an analysis of cultural artefacts almost of necessity becomes an ecological analysis, in the broadest sense of the term. The accumulation of artefacts for which there is no longer any observable social desire invites us to deal with the question of how we deal with cultural waste. Where do old vinyl records go when no one wants them? The records left unsold at the end of a yard sale are almost never thrown away because we assume that someone, somewhere will want them and because we have a vaguely moral objection to simply destroying them. No one may want certain kinds of mid-1980s dance singles, or French-language Maoist books of the early 1970s, but there is still a resistance to throwing them out with other kinds of trash. And so we donate them to church rummage sales or charity shops where they continue to sit, usually unsold, until they are moved along to somewhere else. A whole informal economy has taken shape around this passage, an economy shaped by the trajectories through which certain kinds of cultural commodities move as they seek to find a final resting place.

At the same time, the life cycle of cultural commodities may be considered in spatial and geographical terms as well. The paths and velocities through which cultural commodities move help to define the rhythms and the directionality of urban life. One of the themes of cultural geography is the co-presence of different temporalities within the city: the buildings from different eras which exist alongside each other and signify different historical periods; the forms of commerce which represent different moments in the development of modes of production. Walter Benjamin spoke of the tension between the monumental new buildings of industrial capitalism and the "small, discarded objects, the outdated buildings and fashions" which persisted (quoted in Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 92.) This process is one which geographers have called the "spacing of time" (Parkes & Thrift, 1975, p. 658) and the sedimentation of cultural commodities throughout the city is one part of this process. Musical recordings are distributed, in the space of the city, in ways which depend in part on the velocity of their turnover, on the rapidity with which they live out their life cycles. The sparsely stocked dance music specialty store, with 25 new 12-inch British dance singles displayed on a wall exemplifies, almost paradoxically, one such velocity. The low-tech, artisanal appearance of these stores disguises the efficiency with which they are intimately bound up with high-velocity, trans-Atlantic feedback loops and circuits of distribution. At the same time, both the artisanal and the highly connected dimensions of these stores are essential to the ways in which they convey credibility and hipness. Conversely, the chain superstore, with its high-tech, computerized connections to inventory databases and resupply warehouses, is, nevertheless, full of slow-moving reissues whose value is produced within more leisurely processes of canonization and rediscovery.

In another instance of this polarization, we may note the different velocities of old vinyl albums and used compact discs in the current moment. In Montreal there were, until recently, several large retail stores, of a scale I have seen nowhere else, offering old vinyl records for sale. Over the past five years, many of these have closed, their stocks ending up in the few stores which remain; more generally, one can see the consolidation of used record stocks as they move from radio station libraries and small independent stores towards a very few retail outlets. There the records tend to remain, static, their very bulk conveying their undesirability in almost monumental terms. The compact disc, on the other hand, is one of the most efficiently mobile of commodity forms, moving through primary and secondary markets in ways which link it to a whole set of legal and illicit economic activities. Newspapers, over the last half decade, have written extensively about the heroin trade in Vancouver, a city which is now considered to be the heroin addiction capital of North America. Part of the economy of addiction, it is suggested, are the proliferating second-hand stores and pawnshops in Vancouver, commercial

institutions through which funds for drug purchases might be quickly raised. Compact discs are considered one of the key commodities within this commerce insofar as they are easily stolen, easily converted into cash, and easily resold. The compact disc circulates quickly and relatively easily from retail stores to apartments, and from there to pawnshops or second-hand stores and back into individual collections.

The mobility of the compact disc as commodity is somehow appropriate to an artefactual form whose global standardization and acceptance have been rapid. In the accumulation of undesired vinyl recordings, on the other hand, we may find lessons about the ways in which peripheral cultures informally sediment and house their cultural memories. Over a decade, I have watched as successive layers of the vinyl records for sale in Montreal stores have been stripped away in response to ongoing processes of canonization or revalorization: first, the 1960s Anglo-American rock, then the 1950s vocal music, the newly revalued 1970s disco singles, the soundtracks, the instrumental exotica albums, and so on. What remains, still unsifted, is the legacy of two decades of Québécois music which continues to resist these processes of reanonization and rediscovery: the fake Tijuana Brass albums produced in Montreal, the French-language Hawaiian records, the disco symphonies celebrating the 1976 Olympics.

In the ways in which they accumulate, and in the fact that they sit there, unsold, these commodities contradict the definition of the commodity as a signifier of social desire. They accumulate precisely because of their undesirability, but this undesirability, paradoxically, contributes to their meaningfulness. These records have come to function as what Grant McCracken (1988) has called "ballast": they stand as a public record or display of cultural production (p. 30). The legacy of Québécois easy-listening albums, whose cultural value has decayed long before the physical objects themselves, is nevertheless signified through the sheer bulk of these records as they continue to fill the spaces of record stores, thrift shops, and garage sales. While they remain valueless, their bulk nevertheless functions almost monumentally, in a way that English-Canadian popular music never has. (Indeed, the weaknesses of English-Canadian popular culture come across in the absence of stockpiles of old, failed commodities as much as in the scarcity of new, blockbuster successes.) In the same way, recent revivalists' sense of the richness of 1960s easy-listening culture is rooted in part in the fact that, for 20 years or so, these records remained undesired and unsold and were therefore seen, thousands and thousands of times, by those moving past them in the search for real treasures. Now that they are newly fetishized and sought after, they have also lost their bulky presence as cultural waste—a bulky presence which contributed to the sense that this was a corpus of considerable coherence and importance. Their current status as fetish is thus nourished by their absence from easily accessible sites of display.

Taussig (1993) has written evocatively of the ways in which "the Third World and its objects are in a global perspective generally seen as permanently 'recently outdated,' a reservoir of First World hand-me-downs and sleepy-eyed memories of its earlier consumer items" (p. 232). The aging of cultural commodities will make them all, eventually, appear outdated, but it is easy to imagine, when looking at the discarded cultural artefacts of Quebec, that they were always so. Montreal is not the Third World, of course, but the cultural commodities left behind by several decades of local production are full of lessons about the place of Quebec within an international economy of credibility and legitimacy. One class of these commodities is the 12-inch vinyl dance singles, produced during a period (from the mid-1970s through the early 1980s) when Montreal was one of the world's major production centres for dance music recordings. The visual styles of these records have aged, and aged badly, and it is largely for this reason that they now seem so undesirable. The mistakes of language and the tacky exuberance of titles and illustrations have, with time, made these records seem like products of the backward margins of dance music culture rather than of its centre.

The sites in which unwanted cultural commodities (old records, books, etc.) accumulate are, at one level, museums of failure, but by collecting failure in one place they endow it with a monumentality and historical solidity. This is one of the paradoxes of material culture, of the ways in which musical commodities accumulate within the interstices of national cultures and national economies. Anglophone Quebecers are educated about Francophone Québécois music against their will, if you like, through the ways in which the residues of material production fill these warehouses, thrift stores, and other sites which Anglo-Quebeckers are more likely to stumble across and examine than the French-language variety shows available on their television sets.

Susan Stewart (1984) has spoken of "the constant self-periodization of popular culture," that is, of those processes by which cultural commodities come, with time, to signify the moment of their creation and emergence above all else (p. 167). This is, of course, one of the ways in which cultural commodities age, their distinctiveness dissolving within the variety of ways in which they come to resemble their contemporaries. This self-periodization has two effects with which a political reading of aging commodities must grapple. On the one hand, as cultural artefacts become dated, one effect of this dating is that differences in prestige and ambition dissolve within the shared markers of a period sensibility. Aesthetic judgments about different degrees of seriousness or achievement will come to seem less pertinent than the anthropological noting of shifting collective perceptions and values. Mid-1960s recordings by Quebec keyboardists of French music-hall classics and fake Hawaiian melodies will both, with time, come to stand equally well as examples of that period's musical background. At the same time, this self-periodization works to naturalize the thousands of commercial decisions underlying the production of cultural commodities. Each, with time, seems the product of an almost natural history of changing styles and technologies. Over time, everything will come to bear the marks of a period style, to be heard as the expression of a deeply rooted structure of taste and sensibility rather than a complex set of economic decisions and calculations. The hundreds of different Québécois instrumental records from the 1950s and 1960s have lost their individuality, conveying, through the very weight of their undifferentiated presence, the sense of a relentlessly assimilative cultural sensibility.

Typically, the history of postwar popular music in countries outside the U.S.-U.K. axis is imagined as a set of national struggles to break free of blatantly imitative forms and to find national, musical voices. In dozens of different countries, this is a story which takes us from cover bands of the early to mid-1960s (who covered Anglo-American hits in local languages) to those practices of the 1970s in which rock was articulated to indigenous national traditions (such as Mexican rock or the Québécois *chanson*). What is often overlooked in this

narrative is the uprooting of local musical cultures which this struggle for respectability and distinctiveness entailed. In Quebec, for example, the early and mid-1960s saw the production of hundreds of records covering Anglo-American hits; dozens of studio albums in which U.S. film hits were covered, with cha-cha or Tijuana rhythms, by local studio orchestras; and innumerable recordings in which local singers sang versions of Burt Bacharach or Simon and Garfunkel compositions. Abject as these practices came to seem, they were rooted in local and national practices of collaboration, venues of live performance, and, much of the time, the commercial activities of independently owned record companies. By the time these practices had withered, giving way to the music of rock groups engaged in reclaiming national traditions and musical languages, the most successful performers were on the Canadian subsidiaries of multinational labels (or, at least, distributed by such labels). Paradoxically, music taken to possess enhanced local credibility and integrity was now much more firmly integrated within multinational corporate structures. The music of a few years earlier, easily dismissed as shamelessly imitative, nevertheless had been produced in contexts in which rich networks of local practices and institutions served to mediate the assimilation of musics from elsewhere.

Taussig (1993) has written that "history requires a medium for its reckoning, a temporal landscape of substance and things in which the meaning of events no less than the passage of time is recorded" (p. 232). This landscape is there in the rich residue of Québécois musical production, wherein the ongoing march of time and succession of popular musical styles may be read across the covers of innumerable discarded records. In January of 1999, writing in *The New York Observer*, music critic D. Strauss strained to describe the new sorts of taste patterns observable in hip circles in the West. He spoke of people turning away, in large numbers, from the tradition and canon of Anglo-American rock, seeking inspiration in what he called "the necessarily misunderstood imagined pasts of others: French pop, German hippies, Brazilian tropicalia, Japanese imitations of all of the above" (p. 42). Interest in all of these things has, indeed, rippled through Anglo-American musical culture over the last half-decade, shaping the mannerist exercises of so-called "post-rock" forms, the more large-scale strategic moves of performers like Beck, the endlessly interesting new syntheses found in French or Japanese club music.

I do not wish to exaggerate the scope of these shifts of attention, but neither do I wish to pass over the lessons of which they seem to me to be full. Globalism in the music industries is shaped by evolving industrial structures, but it finds expression, as well, in the sense made of the endless proliferation of artefacts. On the one hand, one sees a centripetal tendency to perpetuate a centre, to endlessly revalorize an Anglo-American canon. The boxed sets, bootlegged live albums, and innumerable variations of classic albums deepen and solidify the presence of that canon, and perpetuate the sense of it as monumental. National cultures outside the Anglo-American axis will have variable success in promoting their own music as heritage commodities; in Canada, a whole generation of companies, born in the early 1970s, now seek ways to market the April Wine or Rush albums on whose success these companies were built.

On the other hand, global musical relations are shaped by centrifugal tendencies which have sent interest outward, resulting in the unexpected global circulation of national styles and artefacts. This centrifugal movement is nourished by the scavenger-like record collecting of dance club disc jockeys, lounge music revivalists, curator-compilers like David Byrne, and by the activities of marginal reissue labels. These tendencies are dragging back, into the realms of hip credibility, musical currents long dismissed as false imitations or examples of debased exploitation. Italian jazz-funk, Asian girl-group garage psychedelia, or funky crime-movie soundtracks from India have all moved, in recent years, into the radar range of Western DJ-remixers or lounge revivalists. The U.S. music journalist James Sullivan (1999) described these new patterns of influence and rediscovery in evocative fashion:

Many of the best records of 1998 featured bizarre cross-fertilizations of styles. The petite Japanese women of Buffalo Daughter sang bossa novas; the dinky German band Stereo Total sang in French, Italian and Japanese (and covered KC and the Sunshine Band); the L.A.-based ensemble Ozomatli mixed hip-hop with mambo and Tex-Mex party music. (p. D1)

These hybrid forms are nourished partly by the thrill with which they imagine themselves to be scandalously counter-canonical, but they represent, as well, a relationship to other musics which inverts the patterns of respect typical within world music culture. Recent revivals of interest in unabashedly imitative Québécois pop music of the 1960s are driven in part by the sense that these adaptations, on the margins of a global industry, offer more interesting cross-fertilizations of influence than the original, canonical versions with which we have been familiar for so long. In the necessarily misunderstood and imagined pasts of others, we find those blatantly exploitative and commercial projects which, nonetheless, take us deep into the distinctive fabrics of national musical cultures. In the repositories of cultural waste which fill the institutions of second-hand commerce, we find the immobile physical artefacts on which these histories are inscribed.

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