

A Reading Note on “Die Form der Schallplatte”

(“The form of the phonograph record,” 「レコードのフォルム」)

by Theodor W. Adorno

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0. Introduction

「夜の中を歩みとおすときに助けになるものは橋でもなく翼でもなくて、友の足音だ」

W. ベンヤミン

This text is a compilation from conversations that followed reading various (English, French, and Japanese) translations of Theodor Adorno’s essay “Die Form der Schallplatte.” It should be underlined that none of us are specialists of Adorno, nor are we philosophers of music or even historians of the twentieth century. This project was an experiment and the choice to read Adorno was made to foster exchange between our different disciplines and cultures through an unfamiliar text available in our respective native or second languages. Indeed, we come from three different points of view: Tokitsu is a specialist of media studies and pedagogy, Murray and Osako are musicologists, specialists of French and Belgian music. Tokitsu and Osako are Japanese, Murray is American. And while English is our only common language, conversations often passed into Japanese or French. For all three of us therefore, Adorno’s essay posed certain number of problems—written as it was in German in the particular historical context of 1934, then transmitted through the lens of translation. Although we chose the text for its subject matter—media history, potential common ground between our respective fields—its origin in a foreign and historically distant culture placed us at a similar distance from the essay’s argument and invited us to collaborate to find meaning in our conversations regarding its content.

1. Summary

Key sentences

For it is not in the play of the gramophone as a surrogate for music but rather in the phonograph record as a thing that its potential significance—and also its aesthetic



significance—resides. As an artistic product of decline, it is the first means of musical presentation that can be possessed as a thing. (Adorno 2002 : 278)

There is no doubt that, as music is removed by the phonograph record from the realm of live production and from the imperative of artistic activity and becomes petrified, it absorbs into itself, in this process of petrification, the very life that would otherwise vanish. The dead art rescues the ephemeral and perishing art as the only one alive. Therein may lie the phonograph record's most profound justification, which cannot be impugned by an aesthetic objection to its reification. For this justification reestablishes by the very means of reification an age-old, submerged and yet warranted relationship: that between music and writing. (Adorno 2002 : 279) .

This essay deals with Adorno's ideas about the record's effect on music. Adorno begins by describing the record in terms of its "thingness" (*Dinglichkeit*) (Adorno 2002 : 278) as a commodity that "reifies" (Adorno 2002 : 279) formerly immaterial and human musical acts into a portable, mass-produced (and reproducible) product. The record takes a previously spiritual artistic act, ephemeral, because it unfolds in a particular time and place, within the context of particular human relations, and makes it available at any time, in any place, and in any number of conditions. This transgression renders the music "inhuman." (Adorno 2002 : 280) Once removed by the phonograph record from the realm of live production, music becomes petrified, it absorbs into itself. This is the process that Adorno describes as the reification (*Verdinglichung*) of music.

From the very first paragraph Adorno describes the record's groove as a form of writing; later he compares the groove's power for capturing music to that of music notation (writing), remarking that the record seems to have been even more successful than notation in capturing music at a time (the 1930s) when musical writing was tending toward ever-increasing complexity in an attempt to wholly capture music and dictate the terms of its performance. Although the record renders music "inhuman" it also brings it "mysteriously closer to the character of writing and language." (Adorno 2002 : 280) Adorno discusses music in terms of language while implicitly advocating for its preservation as a particular sort of art. To him, the fact that music can be read like a language by the record's technology is the meaning of the records' form.

2. Discussion

Dialogue 1

**Tokitsu:**

Adorno writes :

Anyone who has ever recognized the steadily growing compulsion that, at least during the last fifty years, both musical notation and the configuration of the musical score have imposed on compositions—the pejorative expression “paper music” betrays this drastically)—will not be surprised if one day a reversal of the following sort occurs: music, previously conveyed by writing, suddenly itself turns into writing. This occurs at the price of its immediacy, yet with the hope that, once fixed in this way, it will someday become readable as the “last remaining universal language since the construction of the tower,” a language whose determined yet encrypted expressions are contained in each of its “phrases.” (Adorno 2002 : 279)

What is the “immediacy” of art? I found that Adorno opposes music’s immediacy with its notation in scores.

Murray:

I am not alone in thinking of writing itself as a form of technology, and might compare the mass—printed novel to the record on a certain level. No longer a direct and embodied performance like an epic poem or improvised commedia dell’arte theatre, the printed text of the novel becomes a portable, mass-produced commodity that can be consumed in isolation, in small fragments, and in any time or place. The same might be said of printed music. Even handwriting captures the immediacy of fleeting, direct, improvised performance and allows for a certain permanence of a set poem, play or work of music. But it opens the door to forms of reproduction and commodification, first by scribes, and later in greater volume by the printing press.

Am I right to understand that what Adorno finds so disturbing about the record is that it translates the reproduction and commodification of writing into a format unreadable by the human eye, a format that forgoes human interpretation altogether? (The inevitable “reading” of the machine, here the record player, puts us in a position of increased passivity. We no longer interpret or imagine the formerly malleable text, we passively consume a the sound of a single, fixed interpretation.)

Osako:

Yes, this is what I thought. When we play music from a score, we analyze and interpret the the composer’s intentions. But where a composer marks “forte,” for example, we can



imagine many possibilities of sound. If we listen to a piece on the phonograph, there is nothing left to interpret. With performances, there is no possibility for imagining the sound otherwise because we hear the sound, immediately, as it is. To this immediacy of the passive listening experience the record adds the possibility of portability, of dictating the context of performance.

However, Adorno speaks of “the steadily growing compulsion that, at least during the last fifty years, both musical notation and the configuration of the musical score have imposed on compositions.” As he says, music notation has long been in use. But why would Adorno oppose notation or scores? Is it because we can carry scores and we can reproduce an execution based on scores?

Tokitsu :

Yes, I think it is because we can carry and reproduce scores as a “thing.”

But for Adorno, what is art music? And what is the “arty private home” (Adorno 2002 : 277)? I would suppose that art music is something unstable, like the execution of music in concert that disappears immediately.

Murray:

I think that Adorno’s vision of art music is that of traditional, Western classical music, and his preference is clearly for live performance, either as a performer himself or listener.

I don’t think he opposed scores... I think he’s just pointing out the irony of the record’s greater success in capturing every aspect of a performance in the way that even the most detailed score could never do, no?

Osako:

I still think that Adorno distrusts even scores—to a certain degree—because we can transport scores everywhere, and use them at any time. This means that the music on scores doesn’t disappear immediately as it does after a performance...

Murray:

I don’t think Adorno minds scores especially. He observes that they have become increasingly complex in the early twentieth century, but scores don’t replace the artistic act of interpretation the way that recordings can.



Dialogue 2

Murray:

Since Kei (Tokitsu) mentioned it, I also happened to wonder about the meaning of the "arty private home." I thought this might be Adorno taking a jab at conventional bourgeois good taste or conventional efforts to display that taste in the private home through the self-conscious consumption of artistic commodities. He makes reference to such homes saying that even they were powerless to "customize" the record's form. Still, I am not sure. This is a case where, even with a good translation in hand, I am at a loss to understand particular historical or cultural references without further background knowledge. In the same vein, I don't understand why Adorno writes that the "true character" of music is writing, just as I don't grasp his remarks on the "truth-content" of art and his references to "the theologian." (Adorno 2002 : 280) I would imagine that a better knowledge of the debates of Adorno's time and notably of the particular context of his writing (1930s Vienna, *the review 23*) would help.

I am also struck by the contrast between Adorno's pessimist tone and his rather lofty (dare I say elitist?) ideals for the development of artistic taste. I know he was a composer and student of Schoenberg. Clearly he idealizes Beethoven, given his reference to the Eroica symphony. But I wonder about how he saw his own world and to whom he imagined he was speaking in this essay, particularly given his implied hopes for changed class structure and artistic taste, as communicated through his remarks on oil painting and his comparison of record albums to other "artistic objects of decline." (Adorno 2002 : 278) I wonder how (if) he hoped to save art from this imagined "decline" while also rendering it accessible to those outside of a very small elite.

Tokitsu :

I'd like to continue in this direction.

First, I'm very interested in your interpretation that recording technology alters a spiritual artistic act previously dependent upon an ephemeral unfolding in time, and, writing itself is a form of technology. I also think that technology has tended to isolate human beings because its use is rarely fixed to a particular time, place, or social context. I think that this is a theme found in the work of Marshall McLuhan (*Understanding the Media*) and Walter Ong (*Orality and Literacy*). One might extend this thinking to regard primary school, with its instruction in reading and writing, as the device by which children learn to be isolated.

Second, I'd like to consider Adorno's elitism. As you say, there is a contrast between his



pessimism and his ideals for the development of artistic taste. I think his family situation was important in his thought formation. For example, his father had lived in England for a long time and his father was a wealthy wine merchant. On the other hand, his mother was an opera singer. He was blessed not only at home but also at school, skipping a grade in his Gymnasium. And, he studied philosophy at the University of Frankfurt where he earned a PhD with a thesis on Husserl.

Adorno was also part Jewish, his father being of Jewish origin, whereas his mother was from Corsica and held French citizenship. Like her, Adorno was a devout Catholic. Being of Jewish origin and Catholic during the Nazi period, he was not allowed to join the Jewish population resisting the Nazis. Despite being wealthy, his unusual cultural and social status was alienating. His elitism and resistance to power would have been borne out of overlapping domestic and historical conditions.

Murray:

I'm interested to hear you mention McLuhan and Ong's names in connection with Adorno's arguments. Could you say a bit more on this?

Tokitsu:

There is a significant gap between these two visions of technology, that of the Toronto school (McLuhan and Ong) and that of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, etc.). The former is more optimistic regarding technology, the latter, pessimistic.

Murray:

I suppose this is a historic difference that might be due to the fact that McLuhan's ideas were in reaction to later technologies and were formed several decades after Adorno's?

Tokitsu:

Of course. However, I recall in particular Ong's claims that human recognition and action changed as the media's center shifted from orality to literacy and back to orality. In media studies this might be described as a form of media determinism. And it seems somewhat simplistic (dualist) when considered from a more historical point of view.

The concept of media determinism is used in media studies. In particular, it calls the discourse of McLuhan and Ong.

Murray:



From the 15th century Western music was printed and, to a degree, increasingly mass-distributed. Still, many popular musical practices in the West have remained oral. A duality continues to persist (and of course, our larger frame of thinking is still dictated by forms of literary culture, even though our technological forms musical writing are not always readable without machines. Taruskin's recent history of Western music is largely organized in terms of what he sees as a rise and fall of literate music. Does Ong use this dualism and see the possibility of at least partially staying in the sphere of literacy?

Tokitsu:

Why was he able to simplify that there was a change from orality to literacy so far? Rather than literacy, he is fascinated by the world of orality. To be honest, I do not understand it well enough. But his thought is perhaps shaped by a Christian point of view. He was himself a Roman Catholic Priest. (By the way, McLuhan also converted to Catholicism.) When we are considering their thought, especially, we are considering the relationship between their thought and religion, we are faced with the very complex problem of the interrelation between religion, tradition (culture) and local thought processes.

Dialogue 3**Tokitsu :**

Chikako (Osako) and I have lately been discussing why we should read Adorno. And we can think as follows. The reason for reading Adorno is partly because he was a philosopher who struggled with rationalism and the threat its moral slippage in the context of rising Fascism in the 1930s. I might dare to put it as follows: Adorno saw humanity in the art of music. And, I was very concerned that rationalization was progressing also in the music which can be said to be typical of humanity.

For example, concentrated listening to music takes a lot of time. And to become a musician, it is necessary to spend a great deal more time and effort in training. Just to attend a live performance, it is necessary to organize going to the concert venue and sharing one's time. Even when inviting you to my home to listen to a performance, you will need more time, effort, and financial resources than to listen to a recording. The form of the record omits much of this. I think this is what Adorno found the most dangerous.

For educators like me, the context of resistance to such rationality inevitably recalls the argument of evidence-based education in recent pedagogy. Music and art are not in the scope of this evidence. This is similar to not being able to quantify humanity. But music and art cultivate humanity. These are gradually being reduced in the curriculum of school



education now.

Osako:

I think that some believe it is natural or normal to cut music classes because they think music is dispensable, apart perhaps to musicians and musicologists. They might say, if medical science vanishes from the world, we would be in grave danger, but if music disappears, perhaps nothing would change; I of course think that without music we ourselves would be mere machines, products. Music brings us part of the spirituality that makes us human. Perhaps did Adorno feared this, that music, (and people) would become a disposable “thing” like technology.

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