

# Music as Commodity and Material Culture

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In one among many recent polemics which have urged a return to the economic within cultural analysis, Susan Buck-Morss has suggested that we re-examine the “objectness” of commodities (Buck-Morss 1995). In what ways, we might ask, do cultural commodities exist in the world and occupy space? In what ways does the physical form of cultural commodities shape their circulation, or the nature and extent of their influence? What forms of libidinal or ideological investment are brought to bear on the cultural commodity as object? How, if at all, is the physical decay of cultural commodities related to shifts in their cultural or monetary value? These are questions which seem increasingly pertinent in a world marked by the sedimentation, circulation and collection of artifacts. They are also, it must be noted, questions which bring with them the specters of a misplaced concreteness or a vulgar materialism.

We are accustomed, in thinking about objects such as books or musical recordings, to see them as the lifeless, physical residues of processes which themselves, and for entirely understandable reasons, hold greater interest. Music, in particular, due to its invisibility, and to the manner in which it unfolds in time, has been easy prey to the claim that it is an immaterial phenomenon. Adam Smith sees music as “perishable,” a form of endeavor “which does not fix or realize itself in any perma-

ment subject” (quoted in Chanan 1994, 144). For others, such as Jacques Attali, music is meaningful only inasmuch as it is “fixed” within concrete, social contexts: “Outside of a ritual context or a spectacle, the music object has no value in itself” (Attali 1985, 106). As Antoine Hennion argues convincingly, the perceived non-solidity of music helps to explain the preoccupation of music scholars with those forms of mediation which are seen to prop it up:

Rendered clever and verbose by the solidity of the object which it seeks to unveil, critical discourse finds the tables turned when confronted with music, which offers no object to be unmasked and which, far from concealing its interpreters and its instruments behind the object which they make visible, is only too happy to show them off. They are the only visible guarantees of its existence. The object of musical creation is so elusive, in fact, that music has had to call on scholars to come to its rescue, to establish its reality beyond the overwhelming presence of intermediaries, of instruments, scores, media, languages, institutions, performers, professors. In fact, it is only these that one sees, and the problem, in getting to the music behind them, is not to reveal these mediations, as art history does with more and more skill in the case of paintings, but to get rid of them (Hennion 1993, 13; my translation).

One response to such dematerializing moves, of course, is to urge a return to the study of the musical text itself, marshaling an array of methods which will reassert its formal, communicative or affective “solidity.” This is not my project, and it is one for which I am not qualified. From the perspective of communications or cultural studies, however, it may be noted that claims as to the immateriality of the musical object find interesting echoes in assertions about those commodity forms in which modern-age popular music is typically embodied. The “fragility” of the cultural commodity has been a persistent theme within cultural economics and sociology, and claims about the disappearance of music itself into thin air are often mirrored in descriptions of the musical

commodity similarly disappearing within unending processes of commodity turnover.

### *Cultural Use Value*

For a quarter-century or more, the sociology of cultural industries has grappled with the question of how cultural commodities might be distinct from other classes of commodity. This question is always seen as having more than simply theoretical interest. As the work of Hirsch, Peterson, and Burger suggests, isolating the unique qualities of the cultural commodity might help to explain the observably distinct organizational structures and processes through which cultural commodities are produced and released into the world (Peterson and Burger 1971, 98; see also Hirsch 1972). Career paths, organizational structures, and processes of planning and testing new commodities within the cultural industries differ noticeably from those in industries producing other mass-produced goods, the argument runs, because the market conditions which the former confront are normally much more "turbulent" (Peterson and Burger 1971, 98). In Miège's words, the cultural commodity, upon its release, will almost always encounter a level of "demand uncertainty" higher than that for other classes of commodity (Miège 1989, 29-30). In this sense, the cultural commodity is a fragile entity, one whose success within a marketplace can never be determined or predicted in advance with anything approaching the levels of certainty common in other industries.

At one level, these claims are internal to a sociology of cultural organizations, and controversy continues over the extent to which they accurately describe the structure and operations of cultural industries in recent years (for example, Storper and Christopherson 1987).

Almost invariably, however, such claims seek to link the fragility of the cultural commodity to the nature of the needs or desires which it fulfills. It is here that one is often led to consider the question of the nature of cultural use value. Is the marketing of cultural commodities uncertain because cultural "use value" is itself uncertain, making its translation into the terms of economic exchange difficult? Linked as it is to a realm of experience often conceived as abstract (or even transcendent), is aesthetic need less easily communicated to the producers of cultural goods than are other sorts of needs? Is the demand for aesthetic satisfaction expressive of an unconscious, fundamental psychic or ideological dissatisfaction, such that it will never find adequate expression in the modern world of capitalist exchange? Questions such as these typically return the study of cultural commodities to broader philosophical claims about the innateness of human needs or the possibility of genuine satisfaction within capitalist societies.

Within a well-known critique of mass culture, the cultural commodity is fragile because of the discrepancy between the pre-capitalist values it is meant to embody (those of individual freedom or a unified experience) and the standardized, fragmented capitalist forms in which it is produced and received. Here, delivery on the promise contained in the cultural commodity is, in the words of Horkheimer and Adorno, "endlessly prolonged"; the fraudulent commodity never produces a satisfaction which, from an economic perspective, might constitute its use value (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972, 139). More commonly, writers on the cultural commodity trace its fragility to the difficulty with which it may be fulfill pre-given needs, rather than any intrinsic incapacity to do so. As non-utilitarian objects, one set of arguments claims, cultural commodities are not among the requirements of

life, and the satisfactions they offer are, as a result, predictable only with considerable difficulty. Here, one finds a tendency to posit a hierarchy of needs, such that the demand for cultural experience is hazy and indecipherable because it is not rooted in biological necessity. Denisoff, writing of the musical recording, calls it “a discretionary item, a product a consumer buys with leisure funds,” distinguishing it from items more necessary to survival and therefore more easily specified (Denisoff 1986, 80).

Several French cultural economists handle this question with more ambivalence. Huet et al. speak of the “aleatory quality of artistic use value” and of cultural production as a sphere which “escapes the general laws of capitalist production” (such as the tendency towards salaried labor and large, bureaucratic organizations) but nevertheless requires the social construction of consumer demand (Huet et al. 1978, 137). For Miège, who is concerned to avoid what he calls “the idealist thesis of the arbitrariness of artistic taste” (1979, 32)—a thesis which would see cultural use value as outside the sphere of ideological determination—ideological labor is required to align new commodities with potential consumers, yet to be interpellated as such:

The cultural industry is not in the end a response to a pre-existing demand. Rather, basing itself on the dominant conceptions of culture, it must as a first stage, at the same time as it puts new products onto the market (or rather a whole interlocking package of new products), create a social demand, give it a consistency, in other words lead certain social groups selected as commercial targets to prepare themselves to respond to the producers’ offer (Miège 1979, 300).

### *Time and Exhaustion*

There are, nevertheless, accounts of the cultural commodity's fragility which do not hinge on the question of cultural use value. If cultural-historical time is experienced as the constant eclipsing of texts and meanings, this may have as much to do with the effect of consumption in diminishing a cultural commodity's exchange value as with the fragility or hazy nature of cultural use value. Paul Hirsch has pointed out that cultural industries do not normally engage in the pre-testing of prototypes of their commodities to the same extent as do other industries. This is in part a function of the economic logic of these industries: to produce a "testable" version of a film or sound recording is to invest most of the costs of a final, public release. It makes more sense simply to release finished products into the marketplace and gauge the reaction of a public, than to produce several prototypes of potential releases and test these so as to choose among them (Hirsch 1972, 652). The principal source of the cultural commodity's fragility, then, is an economic logic which encourages the over-production of titles and a sensibility which expects most of these to fail. From this logic flow conditions which nourish common perceptions of the cultural sphere as one of enormous waste or as susceptible to the irrational winds of random change.

In an elaborate investigation of similar questions with respect to the cinema, John Ellis has observed that consumers of new films cannot try out new products to the same extent as is possible with other classes of commodity. The marketing of films is shaped by the fact that most films are made to be seen only once by an individual:

The moment at which the capital involved in cinema is turned over is therefore a special moment, quite dissimilar to the sale of a particular item to a consumer, be it a cabbage or a videotape. Cinematic capital is turned over, tickets are sold, on the expectation of pleasure. A particular individual is buying something that he or she has not seen; in fact, entertainment cinema hinges on the fact that the audience has not seen the particular film before (Ellis 1982, 26).

The obviousness of this description should not detract from its implications for an analysis of the cultural commodity's relationship to time and experience. Forms which depend on the unfolding over time of a fixed sequence of textual features, towards a resolution which is regarded as an essential element of their pleasure, pose unique problems to the industries producing them. Clearly, the fact that central features of what is being offered necessarily must remain unknown to potential spectators or buyers, in order that a title's market value be maintained, is an important factor in shaping the promotional strategies of certain cultural industries. Film trailers or advertisements for new novels will not normally embody the most important of the experiences or pleasures being offered—suspense, for example, or the pleasures of narrative resolution. While forms of publicity and promotion may comment upon or evoke these pleasures, they are normally not able to replicate them within their own restricted boundaries.

In this respect, book publishers or film companies may offer only in fragmentary or indirect ways the forms of sampling or inspection made available to consumers by other industries. What, then, of those industries producing musical recordings? It may be noted that the musical text itself may embody certain of the formal characteristics of narrative cultural forms. The experience of an individual song—the basic textual form within popular music—normally unfolds within a pre-determined se-

quence over time, as do the reading of a novel and the viewing of a feature film. Similarly, as music theory has argued, the structure of both musical and fictional narrative texts within Western cultures is one in which the introduction and resolution of particular formal tensions play a central role (for an overview of this issue, see Nat-tiez 1975). On one level, the appeals of music and of fictional narrative forms are grounded in certain experiential qualities offered by both.

A principal and obvious difference between musical and fictional narrative texts has to do with the role of revelation within the incentive to purchase. The cinematic or literary narrative normally moves towards a resolution in which the diminution of tension involves granting to the reader or viewer information which has to that point been withheld. In contrast, in the experience of popular music the resolution of tensions through the revelation of previously-withheld "information" at the conclusion is relatively minor. Formally, popular musical texts will usually alternate, throughout their unfolding, between passages of tension and resolution, such that their conclusion may merely recapitulate (albeit in an occasionally more elaborate way) passages heard previously. Arguably, the resolution of tension within musical structures functions principally to ensure a balance and an equilibrium which are not dependent for their aesthetic effect upon the absence of prior familiarity. On the contrary, as radio programmers and those involved in marketing popular music know only too well, prior exposure to the musical text is a significant factor in the urge or decision to purchase it.

The link between familiarity with a musical text and the desire to repeat the experience of listening to it has shaped the commodity status of popular music in its recorded forms. In certain respects, the musical re-

ording as a commodity may be said to resemble certain non-narrative cultural “texts”—such as decorative objects or easel paintings—in that the decision to purchase these is likely to follow a prior, full experience of the commodity in question. (This is not typically the case with films, despite the changes which the videocassette has introduced into their markets.) From the perspective of the consumer, the musical commodity offers the possibility of repeating, at will, a prior experience already judged desirable. From the perspective of those producing and marketing musical commodities, these are unlike films or books in that they circulate through channels (such as radio programming) which allow them to be pre-tested.

These differences in the role of prior exposure, however, do not alter the fact that the satisfaction derived from the experience of a cultural commodity will not typically lead to repeated consumption of that commodity (the repeat purchase of specific books and records or of admissions to films). A crucial difference between the cultural industries and other producers of discretionary goods stems from the fact that the repeat purchase of a unique cultural commodity (i.e., a particular “title”) by a single individual is an unlikely and economically unimportant occurrence. The maximum number of purchases by an individual of any given record or book, or of tickets to a specific film, will not normally exceed one. In contrast, the number of likely sales of such items as specific brands of candy bars is obviously subject to cumulative and potentially unlimited growth through repeat purchases. Here, the usefulness of a distinction between discretionary and non-discretionary forms of consumption collapses. Chocolate bars and admissions to films may both be seen as discretionary, but consumption of the former is usually characterized by stable market

shares for individual brand names. This is not the case for cultural industries marketing specific “titles” (in the form of film tickets, compact discs, or books).

While both the confectionery and cultural industries seek to establish predictable levels of consumption, long-term loyalty towards specific unique products is meaningless for the cultural industries and a principal cause of the unpredictability they face. (We may like the last Blur album, but this obviously doesn’t mean we will keep buying it.) Attempts to displace this loyalty onto constituent or peripheral aspects of particular cultural commodities (performers, for example) are central to the functioning of such industries. However, such attempts do not eliminate the necessity of repeated investment in the production and promotion of new titles, which will embody these aspects and displace those products for which demand is exhausted.

The producers of cultural commodities, unlike those manufacturing candy bars, confront a finite upper limit on sales, one equal to the number of potential purchasers. The market for individual cultural commodities is perpetually marked by the probability of saturation of a pool of potential consumers. Sales of an individual title may neither follow an irreversible upward movement nor stabilize at a permanent level; rather, any growth in the sales of a cultural commodity will bring it closer to the point at which its sales potential is likely to be exhausted. As a result of these conditions, the fate of a cultural commodity is more likely than that of other commodities to be imagined in temporal terms, as a life cycle. This lifecycle will unfold in a series of stages between the moment of its release and the point at which the probable upper limit on its sales has been reached. The market for confectionery items may be imagined in spatial terms, with the relative market share of each product

relative to others the principal index of its success. In the cultural industries, measuring success at any given moment requires calculations of the relationship between the current sales of an individual title and the projected changes in those sales. This produces evaluations of the degree of momentum and longevity which a product possesses at any given moment—evaluations in which the market share of a product relative to others remains relatively insignificant.

In economic terms, then, the fragility of cultural commodities stems not from the flimsiness of their use value but from a particular relationship to exhaustion and repeatability. A record or book bought once need not be bought again, however stable and solid the use value which it provides. The unpredictability of cultural markets is not an effect of the elusiveness of the cultural consumer's motivation, as anthropological theories of cultural need would have it, but rather of the fact that this motivation will not express itself in repeated consumption of commodities found to be satisfying. The logic of cultural industries requires that this motivation be constantly realigned with a series of commodities, however much the attempt is made to mark this series with the guarantees of continuity (performer names, generic traditions, etc.). Our sense of cultural commodities as living out their lives in rising and falling trajectories of popularity fuels our sense of the cultural field as one marked by transitory, short-lived moments of glory. This, in turn, nourishes our moral judgment of the cultural market as one marked by flimsy impermanence. We might note, however, that this is an inevitable result of a commodity form whose life is directed towards exhaustion and commercial decay.

### *Waste and the Commodity Lifecycle*

The commodity phase of an artifact's lifecycle is only part of the story. In his book *Rubbish Theory*, Michael Thompson notes that the central problem in the analysis of objects is the disjunction between economic decay and physical decay. Long after objects have ceased to hold any significant economic value, long after they have stopped being signifiers of social desire, they continue to exist as physical artifacts. 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 those two weeks have elapsed. "In an idea world," Thompson 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" (Thompson 1979, 9-10). Later, Mackenzie Wark (1991) would describe similar disjunctions in his analysis of fashion. Fashion, he notes, 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 artifacts almost of necessity becomes an ecological analysis, in the broadest sense of the term. The accumulation of artifacts for which there is no longer any observable social desire invites the question of how we deal with cultural waste. Where do old vinyl records go when no one wants them anymore? I have asked this question in five or six cities,

from Mexico City to the former East Berlin, and it is a question which has often confounded even devoted shoppers in those cities. People in Mexico City answered that there was little market for used records, or for second-hand goods generally, among the middle class, but this did not answer the question of where all the records had gone. 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 lifecycle 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: buildings from different eras exist alongside each other and signify different historical periods; forms of commerce 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, 92). This

process is one which geographers have called the spacing of time, and the sedimentation of cultural commodities throughout the city is a principal 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 lifecycles. The sparsely-stocked dance music specialty store, with twenty-five new 12" drum and bass 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 warehouse stores of used vinyl, of a scale I have not seen anywhere else. Over the last 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 they sit, static, their very bulk signaling a kind of monumentality. 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. It is, by all accounts, the most commonly stolen of items, part of an economy of proliferating secondhand stores and pawn shops which are themselves, in cities such as Vancouver, bound up with the economy of drug addiction and petty crime.

The mobility of the compact disc as commodity is somehow appropriate to an artifactual form whose global standardization and acceptance have been rapid. In the accumulation of undesired vinyl recordings, we may see lessons as to 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 Quebecois music which continues to resist these processes of reCanonization 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 unsold, these commodities belie 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 has called "ballast": they stand as a public record or display of cultural production (McCracken 1988, 131). The legacy of Quebecois 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. In the same way, the sense we may have 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 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.

The record stores I am talking about are, at one level, museums of failure, but by collecting failure in one place they endow it with a monumentality and historical solidity, and that is one of the paradoxes of material culture. Anglophone Quebeckers are educated about Francophone Quebecois music against their will, if you like, through the ways in which the residues of material production fill stores, thrift shops, and other sites which they are more likely to stumble across and examine than the French language variety shows available on their television sets. Another of the paradoxes of material culture is that, in an age supposedly marked by the dematerialization of the cultural artifact and its reduction to electronic information, our cities contain ever more gargantuan physical structures devoted to collecting and offering cultural artifacts: the book, video and record su-

perstores which have transformed the retail industries over the last decade.

Susan Stewart has spoken of “the constant self-periodization of popular culture” (Stewart 1994, 167)—that is, of those processes by which cultural commodities come, with time, to signify their historicity above all else. 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 artifacts become dated, one effect is that differences in prestige and ambition dissolve within the shared markers of a period sensibility. Aesthetic judgments about differential seriousness come to seem less pertinent than the anthropological noting of shifting collective perceptions and values. Early 1960s recordings of *musique concrète* and science-fiction movie soundtracks from the same period will, with time, come to serve equally well as signifiers of a period’s construction of musical novelty. At the same time, the reduction of hierarchy to equivalence works to naturalize the thousands of commercial decisions underlying the production of cultural commodities, making each seem subordinate to a natural history of musical perceptions and styles. Over time, everything will come to bear the marks of a period style, and thus will come to be seen as the expression of a deeply-rooted structure of taste and sensibility rather than a complex set of economic decisions and calculations. Susan Stewart writes that “the antiquarian is nostalgic for use value,” for objects which, “surviving their original contexts, are seen as traces of the way of life that once surrounded them” (1994, 144). The collector of easy listening records is similarly drawn to those records which, saturated with

the intersecting styles of a period, seem to carry with them the deep-structured sensibility of the moments in which they came to life.

### *Neophilia and the Collection*

Is it so wrong, wanting to be at home with your record collection? It's not like collecting records is like collecting stamps, or beer mats, or antique thimbles. There's a whole world in here, a nicer, dirtier, more violent, more peaceful, more colorful, sleazier, more dangerous, more loving world than the world I live in; there is history, and geography, and poetry, and countless other things I should have studied at school, including music (Hornby 1995, 83).

What, then, might we say of the record collection and of the practice of record collecting? Reading through the scattered literature on collections, I am struck by the conflicting characterizations of collecting to be found there. From one perspective, collecting functions to bring rational order into the chaotic world of commodities, plucking them from the randomness of capitalist production and organizing them in comprehensible, rational ways. In this sense, to collect records or books is to cure the cultural commodity of its fragility, turning even the most fleeting and ephemeral of titles into a stable and meaningful point on a cultural map. For Kopytoff, entry into the collection is one moment (often the "terminal" one) in the biography of commodities, the moment at which its velocity of circulation is stopped and its anchoring in a precise historical moment accomplished (Kopytoff 1986, 80). (In this, the historical links between collecting and scholarship, between the rescuing of objects from the world and their placement within intelligible series, are evident.) Similarly, for Pearce, to collect is "to lift objects away from the web of social relationships, to deny process, and to freeze time" (Pearce

1994, 201). This sense of collecting as rescuing is echoed in images (common within fictional representations of loneliness) of the collection itself as a refuge for its owner. Psychological accounts of collecting stress the link between the closure of the completed collection and the reduction of tension for the person whose creation it is (for example, see Danet and Katriel 1994).

Such characterizations of collecting presume a particular relationship between the temporal and the spatial. If the temporal dimensions of cultural commodities—the endless seriality of their release and disappearance—render such commodities transitory or fragile, they also work against their intelligibility, making the past the site of an origin often lost to memory or knowledge. Susan Stewart has argued that “the collection replaces origin with classification, thereby making temporality a spatial and material phenomenon” (1994, 151). The records of the Velvet Underground may now co-exist comfortably within the space of our record collections, ordered more by our sense of them as a complete body of work than by the sequence in which they came out. In this sense, collecting enacts the transformation of historical sequence into spatial equivalence.

There are, however, compelling accounts of collecting which invert this relationship. In these accounts, collecting represents a capitulation to desperate, irrational desire, and the objects which constitute the collection are best understood as a succession of fetishes. Here the collection is not the mark of an order but of an unending unease, and the revealing moment is not that in which the newly-acquired object takes its place within an intelligible series but, rather, the immediately subsequent moment in which desperate desire is born again. Furthermore, the act of collecting works to reorganize the spatial repertory of existing commodities into a temporal

sequence of acquisitions completed or anticipated. The desires at work may be explained within a wide range of psychological or psychoanalytic perspectives, but the impulse they fuel may be given the general name of *neophilia*, the love of the new.

In his book *Consuming Bodies*, Pasi Falk describes a transformation of the link between aesthetic taste and the eating of food (Falk 1994). Prior to the 18th century, he argues, European aesthetics of eating were organized around rituals of excess. To eat transgressively in this earlier period was to engage in a practice of indulgence conceived in quantitative terms. Indulgence centered on great feasts and orgies of eating which favored a limited corpus of foods. Over time, this gave way to a conception of eating which centered on the serial experience of the new and the exotic—the consumption, night after night or week after week, of hitherto untried cuisines. The gourmet, by the 19th century (and most certainly by the 20th) is the person who pursues an endless sequence of increasingly differentiated, refined sensual experiences. These experiences, Falk notes, would take as their content the wide range of national and ethnic styles which colonial expansion had helped to make available.

Here, Falk suggests, we may see the mechanisms of neophilia at work. The exotic cuisines which Falk's bourgeois subject now seeks out are, of course, not new at all, except to the individual seeking them, but that is the point. Neophilia transforms the spatially dispersed variety of a colonial world into a series of possible experiences extending forward in time—the time of each individual's biography. It is essential that these pleasures be multiple and unending; for any one to actually fulfill desire in an absolute and terminal sense would suggest a loss of curiosity. For Falk, neophilia is the mechanism underlying all consumption and, in particular, that of the

collector. It is one way of describing the insatiability of the collector's urge, a theme of much writing on collecting. The idea of the collected object as psychoanalytic partial object, never satisfying the desire which leads one to it, is a recurrent one.

Differences in these accounts of collecting spring in part from different conceptions of the world of objects and, I might suggest, of capitalist commodity production itself. If what marks the world of objects is a dull, lifeless physicality, then the collector's fetishistic attribution of marvelous qualities to these objects functions to fill them with meaning. If, on the other hand, the world of objects is imagined as an endless stream of alluring commodities produced by an irrational, seductive capitalism, then the autodidact's careful building of a representative collection stands very much as an operation of de-eroticization and pacification, the transformation of momentary sensation into stable knowledge.

This two-way passage between the temporal and the spatial may be seen at work in some of the better-known formations of record collecting. One of these has taken shape around the wide range of Western musical forms from the 1960s and early 1970s which straddle, or fall outside, the boundaries of rock: spy-movie or spaghetti-western soundtracks, Bacharach-style pop, Latin-tinged mood music, organ-based jazz dance, and so on. While visions of rock during this period understand its history as a succession of monumental steps forward, the collecting of the non-rock forms described above requires a much more spatialized vision in which historical sequences are blurred and novelty is found in the seemingly infinite variety of hybrid and interconnected forms. Those who attempt to delineate the limits of "Space Age Bachelor Pad Music" grapple less with the problem of chronological sequence than with the dilemma of where

one draws classificatory boundaries when defining a sensibility whose distinctive feature is its unflagging capacity to embrace styles and forms (see, for example, Powers 1996). As any trip to a contemporary record store will show, an endless series of compilations labors to carve up this terrain up in a variety of ways. One result of this carving is the sense that all examples of this music exist simultaneously.

Like the fan subcultures which surround mid-1960s garage psychedelia, this collecting formation is engaged in an ongoing enterprise of vernacular scholarship, working to bring a highly chaotic period in musical history under control, into manageable knowledge.<sup>1</sup> What this description misses, however, are the libidinal dynamics which fuel the collector's urge, particularly when that urge is directed at minor or degraded musical forms. If the never-ending search for new examples of 1960s easy listening music or psychedelia is partly about exhaustive documentation and the pacification of historical chaos, it is also about perpetuating the sense that a certain corpus is bottomless, that it will forever offer up new discoveries and modes of historical understanding. In this respect, the collector's urge is driven less by the desire for completion than by the need for reassurance that a given period will escape the logic of reissue programs or discographical documentation.

Here we may witness at least two interrelated impulses at work. One of these is the drive to find commodities which, by originating on the margins of cultural industries, nourish the sense that such industries are complex, chaotic structures constantly capable of surprise and invention. In this respect, the collecting of

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Craig Morrison for convincing me of the usefulness of the term "vernacular scholarship."

mass-produced items is almost always a means of rehabilitating a market economy. In the complex gradations of centrality and obscurity which accumulate around cultural commodities, one finds a satisfying rebuke to images of a calculating, rational capitalism. (George Michael fans, for instance, can spend their money and energies tracking down promotional CD singles or foreign pressings.) Similarly, through processes of obsolescence, by which cultural commodities come to be viewed as dated, kitchified or “classical,” we are able to convince ourselves that the economic logics of the cultural industries are subordinate to an almost natural history of changing perceptions and terms of judgment.

Michael Taussig 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” (Taussig 1993, 232). The stream of musical recordings, living out their lifecycles within the marketplace or seeking resting places of variable permanence in thrift stores or record collections, is one such medium. Here, time is marked by the ways in which such commodities convey precise, fleeting moments in cultural history. Time is conveyed, as well, in the semiotic density which sedimented accumulations of such commodities put on display in the institutions which have evolved to contain them.

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