

# Critiquing the Music Industry Through the Lens of Philosophy

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What follows is an account of how the music industry, as a product of modern conditions, perverts music. These conditions are understood primarily in the terms of Guy Debord's "spectacle" and Martin Heidegger's concept of "machination," and the account is supported by philosophical and musicological evidence and observation.

To meaningfully discuss the perversion of music by the music industry, it is necessary to provide some notion of what the unperverted form of music could be. This is a troublesome task because though we observe musicality in ourselves, it is easy to explain away the authenticity of why we sing, dance, or fashion instruments. We must posit the possibility of an authentic relationship to music to contrast the state of our tainted access to it under modern conditions. To explicate the authentic relationship, let us make reference to Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*: "In song and in dance man expresses himself as a member of a higher community; he has forgotten how to walk and speak and is on the way to flying into the air, dancing... He is no longer an artist, he has become a work of art." (Nietzsche, pp. 37) Herein Nietzsche describes the original relationship to music, unmitigated and ecstatic; man's appreciation for it does not require explanation. His attention is not directed *at* music. It is not a matter of attention at all. He has become an exponent of the art. Henceforth, the task at hand shall be to explicate how modern conditions prevent authentic relationships to music from being realized.

Guy Debord opens *The Society of the Spectacle* with the following description:

The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation

of *spectacles*. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation. (Debord, 12)

Debord asserts that the modern conditions of production have bred a capitalism that extends beyond its limitations *as commerce*, effectively reconfiguring reality as it is constructed and experienced. The term *spectacle* is employed by Debord to reference our societal preference for appearances. But Debord's work suggests that while the notion of "preference" is appropriate and accurate, it falls short as a designation of what is at stake. The "spectacle" is at once a preference, an obsession, a name for a process, a perspective, and, ultimately, the only perspective. Debord's spectacle is a machine built by society that *is* society. The spectacle operates in many concentric levels, be they perspectival, economic, communal, personal, or global. As such, every system within the spectacle is a microcosm of the larger system.

It becomes possible to interpret Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* as a critique of the music industry by reassigning the Marxist terminology/imagery to that context. Debord's work illustrates that the traditional critiques of capitalism need not be limited to economics and politics. We can use this diagnosis to develop an explanation and critique of the music industry, both as a spectacle and as it functions within the society of the spectacle.

'Political economy treats the *proletarian* as a mere *worker*' who must receive only the minimum necessary to guarantee his labor-power, and never considers him 'in his leisure, in his humanity...' [They] find that every day, once work is over, they are treated like grown-ups, with a great show of solicitude and politeness, in their new role as consumers. (Debord, 30)

In keeping with the tradition of critical theory, Debord criticizes the exploitation of workers in the capitalist system of production. The first sentence comments on the dehumanization of the worker in the eyes of the controllers of production. Debord expands this commentary to illustrate that the freedom granted by the factory whistle that releases the worker from his servitude is an illusion within a condescending rhetoric. In the surface sense, the worker is free to enjoy his leisure time. But at a deeper level, he is still engaged with his employer by welfare capitalism, the process of looking after the interests of the worker with the understanding that doing so is also in the interests of the employer. The employer provides the worker with leisure time to keep up productivity. As long as the worker sees his leisure time as a victory, his morale will stay high.

In his leisure time, the worker is a consumer. On a small scale, when the worker purchases a good from his employer that he produced, he contributes to his own exploitation by/within the system of production. But the scale of this example is not as small as it seems because of the interconnectedness of systems of production within the larger system of capitalism. The corporation that produces a brand of automobile in many ways is also in the business of producing drivers. This corporation employs people who become conditioned to be interested in owning such a car, and the advertising used by this corporation creates further interest in the market. Brand loyalty is also misleading. Public interest in Brand A will have a positive impact on Brand B, because “buyers of Brand A” is only a subset of “car buyers.” Thus, any public interest in cars can be good for both corporations. Broader still, all producers are in the business of generating consumers. By paying wages, the employer dictates to the worker that consuming will be his leisure. Now conditioned to consume, he enters the

marketplace where, convinced of his free will, he willfully sustains the system that brought him there.

This image is still too narrow, because it describes a food chain on top of which sit the controllers of production. It remains to be shown that while the spectacle is the capitalist system, the capitalist system is still a tool of the spectacle.

No one is outside of the spectacle. The spectacle dictates how we relate to it, producing its own necessity so that we must continually feed it. Part of this is the phenomenon of commodity fetishism, wherein money is no longer a placeholder for other commodities, but instead is *the* commodity. It is representative of security and power in the present and in the future (i.e. insurance against a “rainy day”). On the other side, there exist minority groups who reject the love of money. These are the few who do not work within the system, but they are nonetheless still subject to it, because without the spectacle they would be left with nothing to fight against. The spectacle is still their sustenance, but they feed from it in an unconventional way.

The music industry is a spectacle within a spectacle. The worker with his wage in hand, searching for leisure, is in a position to consume, and he may turn his attention to music. If he buys a CD, he has fed that record label, which will transform that profit into advertising that turns other consumers into *music consumers*, which feeds itself and other players in the industry, who in turn generate more consumers who feed the larger system of production. But it is not just the money that sustains the system. If the worker illegally downloads a piece of music, the total audience of that music goes up by one. Whether the worker paid for his share as an audience member or not, being an audience member makes him more likely to contribute to the music industry in the future, because like the consumer who is made more likely to be a “car buyer” through subjection to advertising,

this audience member is now subject to/in the world of the music, and a likely “music buyer,” be he a buyer of recordings, tickets, or merchandise. Statistically speaking, any growth of the audience is likely to be a growth in revenue.

The spectacle is the privileging of image over substance. This begins with money. Substantively, the value of money is very low, but imagistically, its value is boundless. When we look at money, we see the things we can buy and the enjoyment we can get from them. A father sees a home to shelter his family; a sick man sees another year of life. But a capitalist sees more money, because he understands that money equals happiness, more money equals more happiness. Prosperity is a stand-in for widespread happiness.

Here’s the loop: The worker labors to acquire money, which he will turn into leisure. Suppose he purchases a form of musical entertainment. The producer of that entertainment receives the worker’s money as his income, which he will turn into his own leisure. Frequently enough, he will purchase music. Everyone feeds into the same system.

Debord describes the spectacle as the “celebration of a choice *already made*.” (Debord, 13). This describes the assessment that the worker is already a consumer. But how is his choice in leisure “already made?” It is so because the system is already in motion. It is already determined that the consumer will buy from what is available. What is available is determined by what is viable. Things that aren’t viable are not produced (for long), so already, the consumer is forced to choose only from “viable” options. When consumers buy what they buy is both viable and popular. This is the choice already made.

Choices already made define the music industry. The greatest example is radio and its televised cousin, music video. In these forms

of access, instead of being directly supported by the audience, the station draws its income from advertising revenue. In order to secure the support of advertisers, the station is obligated to offer music that attracts the largest audience share. Accordingly, stations will opt for the choice already made, playing what is popular, which is popular because it is being played.

This system perverts the process of music creation, because in order to be produced and marketed, new music must demonstrate its viability beforehand, which is accomplished by showing that it falls into a preexisting category of viability.

There is a parallel between the detractors of capitalism and the detractors of the music industry as capitalistic. Manuel Castells uses the term “resistance identity,” or “the exclusion of the excluders by the excluded,” which suits both (Castells, pp. 9). Where capitalism excludes some members of society, the excluded use this rejection as a communal rallying point. Similarly, those who reject commercial music communally embrace something else. All music is commodified according to its image as a genre, which begins as an outcropping of resistance identity, e.g. dressing unconventionally in opposition to the convention, only to have that unconventional mode of dress commodified into a commercially viable style. “Indie” music as a genre is evidence that *not being in a genre* is now a genre in the same way that “Christian” music captures an audience primarily by being *non-secular*. Indie is not genre in the traditional sense, but functions like one in a very real way. The music itself is preceded by the image of its reputation. As such, it already has a built-in audience of listeners who are attracted to what few people are listening to, primarily motivated by the desire to be different. But to know what is *different*, the listener must have spent time as audience to *the same*, just as, given that all music is derivative of its predecessors,

musicians must have served as audience to *the same* to develop a theory/ identity of resistance. Conscious attempts at innovation are essentially futile; the history of musical derivation dictates that *the different* fundamentally *is the same*.

Sociologist Simon Frith's *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* presents a history of rock music that touches on the relationship between art and commodity as experienced by artists, often experienced as a challenge to their integrity.

Pop meant groups put together... to satisfy a fad." "In pop, even when the musicians were themselves responsible for how they pleased their public, they had to take account of that public's demand, and the youth market was as constraining as any other. Rock, by contrast, was a means of self-expression; it could not be subordinated to any market... rock was explicitly anti-commercial... for the first time, rock musicians began to experience a contradiction between their own artistic impulses and the consumer demand for commodities. (Frith, 73)

Another conception of difference between art and commodity is of *yours* and *mine*. Arts are expressive. The art of music is in its expressive quality, created for the sake of the artist. It is a small step to the transformation of art into commodity. As soon as one encounters art and appreciates it in terms of *mine*, it is commodified, appreciated as an object in terms of value-for-me. We use music to construct our identities. We buy it in many forms, or pay to see it performed. We also invest in it by willingly joining its audience. We use it as fuel for dancing, exercising, driving, and shopping. When we allow music to be a distraction or a focus, we are using it, so long as we are making it ours. This is where the spectacle latches on to music and begins to transform it. Commodified music is a human resource intercepted by the enterprising and repackaged as commodity.

This interception originates in the notion of music as being for an audience. Therein is the transition from the personal to the public, from art to commodity, from music-as-it-occurs to music-for-an-audience. In his book *Moving to Higher Ground: How Jazz Can Change Your Life*, trumpeter Wynton Marsalis discusses time and dance extensively to develop his ideas about what constitutes good music. On the subject of time, he writes,

Because jazz musicians improvise under the pressure of time, what's inside comes out pure. It's like being pressed to answer a question before you have a chance to get your lie straight. The first thought is usually the truth." (Marsalis, 8)

There are always three kinds of time at play when you're on the bandstand: actual time (the dry, relentless passing of seconds and minutes), your time (how the passage of actual time feels to you), and swing time (how you adjust your time to make actual time become *our* time). (Marsalis, 16-17)

In the first quote, Marsalis emphasizes the artfulness of the personal. If the "truth" he describes is a manifestation of the authentic self, then when we desire that truth through a man's music, we desire the man himself. But in the second quote, Marsalis introduces the concept of "our time," and suddenly the personal authenticity of "your time" is compromised by the imposition of others' time.

Marsalis sets apart idealized "actual time" from the more realistic, subjective "your time." He expresses that "your time" is essentially the personal, unique way that actual time is felt by the individual, but fails to account for how it is possible for several individuals to lock into a single "our time" if an individual cannot experience "actual time" without it being translated into "your time."

As an illustration of how "your time" fails to merge as "our time," consider a live music recording that features and audience clapping along in participation with the music (I have

selected 5:12 of “Strange Kind of Woman,” from Deep Purple’s *Made In Japan*). Each “clap” made by the audience is perceived as a distinct percussive beat, but careful listening shows that each beat has a swell, peak, and decay created by many hands clapping at different times, with most clapping at or around the peak moment and fewer clapping too soon or too late. Evidently, each audience member interprets the beat of the music in a different way, and each is audibly out of sync with the others. Comparing this to the musicians on stage, though they tend to interpret the beat more concertedly, it could not be said that they truly find “our time.”

Few would argue that ensemble music devastates the art form, but finding “common ground” between players is certainly a strain on the authenticity of any individual, simply because the translation of his experience of time (and other elements) is a move away from the locus of the individual towards something impersonal. Extrapolated, the greater number of people who can identify with that time, the more compromised it becomes. Added to the performing ensemble come dancers that must be provided with danceable music, creating boundaries on the music where one’s time can be right or wrong, which privileges a common pulse over anything else, like sacrificing a heartbeat for a metronome or measuring distance in meters instead of strides.

Elements of Heidegger’s philosophy resemble Debord’s spectacle. Heidegger’s treatment of machination in *Contributions to Philosophy: Of the Event* describes the situation where man loses the reality of the world in the invasion of machination, the universal perspective that entails among its consequences superficiality and objectivity. Accordingly, man has undergone an imposition of the lens of cause and effect that changes everything. Valuation is based on creation, heritage, and use value. The symptoms of machination are *calculation* --

that things conform to prediction -- *speed* -- privileging what comes next -- *the massive* -- favoring accessibility over rarity -- and *the gigantic* -- allowing superficiality to stand for essence. (Heidegger, 121-123, 135-138) These symptoms describe the state of music aptly: the predictability of popular trends, the short attention span of the public, the homogenization of recorded sound, and the dazzle of the big show. Heidegger describes a similar lens in *The Question Concerning Technology*, wherein he details the phenomenon of how our evolving relationship with technology, from a neutral coexistence with the world to a rampant technologizing of its elements in anticipation of their use as means to an end.

These observations support a critical theory of the contemporary way by which music is recorded. Mark Poster describes the multi-track way of recording rock-style music in the introduction to *The Mode of Information*, stating that because there is no original performance, the completed recording and its copies are simulacra, a bizarre product of information technology. But the simulacra Poster describes are also indicative of a perverse reshaping of the intentions of the musician.

A musical performance is a momentary occurrence with a time and place. One can bear witness to a musician signing his name upon fleeting aural space. The musician focuses on the now, speaking his truth under the pressure of time. The intervention of the music industry’s mode of production removes that pressure, the imperative not to lie. Under pressure, the musician unleashes a rendition of the essential song in his head, translated by the unique personality of his technique. As such a happening, the performance is motivated by the essence of the music, which is impossible to realize in representation.

In contrast, the influence of recording technology, which represents the infinite possibility of creation, perverts the aim of the

musician. The musician comes to view his craft through the lens of the available technology, which promises him that he can achieve that essence in a way that live performance cannot. This persuasion occurs in that the musician now hears the essential song in his head in terms of what can be produced in the studio. When a studio recording has been completed, what was intended has been realized, but it is not that the essence has been brought forth. Instead, the musician's expectations have been lowered to expect or desire nothing beyond the inherent limitations of translation. To hold the record in my hands and claim "Here is the song; I have it" is a feeble, underdeveloped goal. But machination already provides this goal, because valuing man by what he produces makes it imperative that music be measurably valuable, and accomplished rather than merely gestured at. The recording completes its lifecycle by proving marketable, changing the audience's relation to music entirely:

[A]n audience generally familiar with the artist's recordings attends to hear their live replication. What irony: people originally intended to use the record to preserve the performance, and today the performance is

only successful as a simulacrum of the record. (Attali, 85)

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[I]n the din of the cultural noise, one has to gloss up an idea, package it in a sound bite or flashy formula, in order for it to get a hearing at all. (This is true even if one is attacking the sound-bite culture itself.) (Berman, 53)

In this passage from *The Twilight of American Culture*, Morris Berman illustrates spectacular and machinational operations at work. For anything to gain recognition, it must be packaged, buoyed by something other than its own merit. In music, the show-and-celebration model is the only viable one because it demands attention, serving a paradigm where new flash and hype is the only suitable replacement for the preceding parade of the superficial (could there be any greater example of the "celebration of the choice already made" than the tagline for the Grammy Awards, "We're All Fans"?). Berman's parenthetical comment casts doubt on the possibility of escape from this state. Whether we call it the spectacle or machination, it is apparent that it is inherited and apt at maintaining its own necessity. Even to recognize and resist it is to be trapped.

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