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The vinyl: The analogue medium in the age of digital reproduction

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Abstract

Recent discussions of music listening practices have given priority to the digitalisation of sound and the role of digital music players in changing the form, medium and possibly even the content of listening. While such an emphasis is warranted given the rapid uptake of digital music consumption, it is also the case that vinyl records are currently the fastest growing area of music sales. Moreover, within particular music listening circles, the vinyl record is approached as an auratic object. In this paper, we explore the vinyl's persistence on the market and its rekindled cultural prominence. Using the frameworks of cultural sociology, combined with insights from material culture studies and cultural approaches to consumption within business studies and sociology, we explore the reasons why vinyl records have once again become highly valued objects of cultural consumption. Resisting explanations which focus solely on matters of nostalgia or fetish, we look to the concepts of iconicity, ritual, aura and the sensibility of coolness to explain the paradoxical resurgence of vinyl at the time of the digital revolution.

Keywords

Vinyl record, music, aura, icon, material culture, materiality, consumption, commodity

Introduction

This article addresses the enduring cultural appeal of the analogue record at the time of the digital revolution in music consumption and production. Our interest in this phenomenon stems from the observation that not only did the vinyl record manage to survive and persist through the first sweeping wave of digitalisation

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symbolised by the compact disc, but that nowadays it is also experiencing a renaissance of sorts. Interestingly, the current commercial comeback of the vinyl record occurs precisely when computer-based technologies have profoundly transformed the music industry and rendered our economic and cultural systems irreversibly digital. How could an old and apparently obsolete medium possibly withstand the tide of technological revolution that effectively transforms the music file from cumbersome physical object to weightless electronic information? The story of this unlikely survival is complex and the complexity resides not only in the specificity of the vinyl and its rich history but also in the relational construction of such meanings as old, obsolete, object, information and musical experience.

As a basic phonographic idea first patented by Emil Berliner, the analogue disc became 125 years old in 2012 (von Leszczynski, 2012). This was also the year in which vinyl sales reached their highest level since 1993, when the Nielsen Company started tracking the consumption of the by then marginalised medium. With more than 15 million units sold in the five years between 2008 and 2012, the vinyl record has unexpectedly reclaimed a small, but significant, part of the market territory it occupied from the late 1940s until the mid 1980s. That we may indeed describe this as a significant change is suggested by the fact that this sales number was bigger than the total of sales in the entire period from 1993 to 2007. Moreover, the actual increase may well be bigger, because the majority of vinyl albums were purchased at independent record stores that often do not report to SoundScan (Fernando, 2012). In addition to the increased quantity, the vinyl record has also reasserted its special quality as a cultural object. It is not just the surging commercial numbers which speak volumes about the iconic power of the medium, but also the plethora of appreciative symbolic narratives. In sum, the vinyl record has survived as an analogue *product* and seems to have been reinvented as a signifier whose value as a *thing* grows, both within and also outside the music industry proper. Yet this power and its paradoxical effects cannot be taken for granted or reduced to any single objective condition. Instead, the phenomenon demands a synchronic inquiry into the cultural construction of the medium as well as a diachronic understanding of the social meanings that have made possible the considerable 'resurgence' in vinyl consumption, at least in Europe and the US (Fehlmann, 2012; Fernando, 2012).

To begin with, the wide use in the media of such terms as resurgence and comeback suggests that the medium's re-articulated market presence is a multidimensional and relatively robust cultural situation rather than a fleeting craze, or a passing effect of fetishistic nostalgia briefly fuelled by the ultimate triumph of the digital. It has been demonstrated that 'music digitalization and the dematerialization of musical goods do not mean less materiality and do not imply a less relevant social role for material objects within consumption processes' (Maguadda, 2011: 16). This recognition is also shared among the cutting edge electronic musicians and producers themselves, like the artist Björk, who emphasise that although the physical process of going to a record shop may be obsolete for many listeners, the 'hunger for physical experiences' is not (Björk, 2001: 46). Similarly, elite DJs tend to acknowledge the 'attraction' to vinyl and its 'mesmerising' quality even as

nowadays most of them embrace the digital technology in their daily business and personal consumption (Brewster and Broughton, 2010: 433–434). Engineers predict that the vinyl record has come back to stay as the only analogue medium (von Leszczynski, 2012), and sociologists conclude that ‘new objects and devices and old ones are not mutually exclusive’ (Maguadda, 2012: 31).

If these statements may strike the reader as quite commonsensical, it is less clear how the coexistence of different formats on the market works and what makes the vinyl live on in the cut-throat domain of the technology-driven entertainment industry. While all the cited observers recognise the importance of the reconfiguration in the definition of the material as well as the shifts in the relation between the digital and the analogue, they have not offered a systematic account of what is the cultural logic of these semantic changes. We also realise that there are numerous pragmatic aspects of music consumption with which these semantic changes are associated. Our study aims to make up for this lacuna in knowledge. We use the analytical resources of cultural sociology, including the concepts of iconicity, narrative and materiality, and the frameworks of material culture studies and interpretive consumer studies, to unravel and categorise the meanings behind the vinyl’s enduring and still growing appeal.

The vinyl as the medium and the message

A brief survey of the modern history of the vinyl format allows us to lay out the basic features of its material career. Vinyl emerged in its standard form of the 33 rpm double-sided, long-playing (‘LP’) record via Columbia Records in 1948 (Patmore, 2009). It rose to prominence in the subsequent decade, dominated the trade in the 1960s and 1970s, and declined in the 1980s, apparently superseded forever by what was then advertised as a superior sound carrier – the digital compact disc. The downfall was quite dramatic and seemed irrevocable. The LP’s share in the US market of pre-recorded music dropped roughly from 40% to 1% in the 10 years following the commercial introduction of the CD in 1983. Consigned to oblivion by the corporate agents of technological progress, the analogue record became an endangered species of the late modern mass media (Coleman, 2003; Millard, 2005; Patmore, 2009). Yet it has survived the lean years of the 1990s, mainly because of its importance for the DJs and the aficionados of such genres as hip hop, techno and house where vinyl retained its symbolic relevance. As a matter of fact, it was precisely that decade that witnessed the unprecedented shift in cultural status of the DJ from a pariah of the music industry to a venerated iconic figure (see Brewster and Broughton, 2010; Marclay and Tone, 2004: 344). Still, it was only toward the end of the next decade that the medium could be claimed to have re-entered the mainstream. As mp3 files had saturated the by then wholly computerised market and the iPod had become the playing device, the vinyl record surprisingly became the fastest growing music format in 2010.

Because of this increase in sales – which contradicts the expected linear narrative of technological progress in regard to sound quality and listening formats – vinyl is

treated as something of a cultural curiosity in the mainstream media, which work to re/construct its mythology as they report its apparent resurgence. In the UK, data compiled by the BPI (a body representing the UK's recorded music industry) stated that sales of vinyl rose by nearly 50% (43.7%) over 2011, representing what it called a 'modest resurgence' (Jones, 2011). In the USA, the mainstream rock and pop magazine *Rolling Stone* recently ran with the headline 'Vinyl sales increase despite industry slump', reporting Nielsen SoundScan data which showed that 'though overall album sales dropped by 13 percent in 2010, sales of vinyl increased by 14 percent over the previous year, with around 2.8 million units sold'. The magazine continues, commenting that: 'this is a new record for vinyl sales since 1991, when the format had all but disappeared in the wake of the CD boom' (Perpetua, 2011). Further evidence of the current remarketing of vinyl comes from *The Wall Street Journal*, which in early 2012 proclaimed in a headline, 'It's alive! Vinyl makes a comeback', and reported that:

The digital revolution was supposed to do away with a lot of fusty old relics. First compact discs took their toll on the long-playing (and long-played) vinyl record; then iPods and digital downloads began doing the same to CDs. But long after the eulogies had been delivered, the vinyl LP has been revived. The LP still represents just a sliver of music sales. But last year, according to Nielsen SoundScan data, while CD sales fell by more than 5%, vinyl record sales grew more than 36% (Felten, 2012).

Although without any genuine prospects to fully recapture the mass music market, vinyl has secured its position of a medium that is there not only to stay, but also to influence once more the experience of sound and our thoughts on what constitutes 'physical' media. This shift in its popular status may be described as a sudden transformation from a critically endangered to dangerously critical medium, one that seems to prove the Nietzschean adage: what does not kill makes one stronger. But this perceived 'revival' of the analogue record may seem odd or unexpected only when looked at from a purely quantitative perspective based on assumptions of exclusively linear technological progress, and a certain understanding of efficiency and convenience. Once a broader qualitative optics is adopted then a different, more complex cultural landscape emerges. Such a vantage point enables us to discern the relative autonomy of iconic power and reveals that what the mainstream registers as a kind of surprising renaissance of the vinyl cannot be exhausted by the ready-made vocabulary of nostalgic sentimentalism, or such shibboleths as 'retro' or 'vintage'. Nor can it be adequately captured by discourses reducing it to mere fetishistic impulses contrived to divert jaded publics of the late modern markets. Instead, it points to a necessity of coming to terms with the multi-track character of the modern mediascape in which *material media* are contingently constructed and socially enacted as *cultural messages* (Belk and Tumbat, 2005; Bull, 2002, 2007; Scott and Woodward, 2011).

The perspective we adopt is sensitive to the fact that certain formats of expression, preservation and use of artistic works can be construed not merely as niche

products or valuable aesthetic goods but also as vehicles of non-artistic, moral values and instruments of identity-projection. But rather than emphasising their role of status-signalling *commodities* in disenchanting societies, we propose to focus on them as aura-laden *objects* connected to constellations of other non-human entities that facilitate a series of emotionally charged rituals and experiences on which various communities thrive. Here we follow Durkheim, who acknowledged that collective feelings that keep communities together 'become conscious of themselves only by settling upon external objects' (Durkheim, 1995: 421). Beyond its 'rediscovered' sonic specificity as a material container of 'warm', 'human' and 'real' sounds (Yochim and Biddinger, 2008), the story of vinyl is capable of disclosing the intricate nature of meaning attribution and its commercial and cultural consequences. The fact that the vinyl grows in stature amongst some listening communities and artists despite being the most expensive and least portable medium precisely at the time when the high quality electronic formats like FLAC or WAV became available, further accentuates the non-musical messages that the sound object contains and/or is believed to deliver. As noted by Brown, 'If the topic of things has attained a new urgency... this may have been a response to the digitization of our world' (Brown, 2001: 16).

The sales figures for the top selling vinyl LPs bear out the role of vinyl as a popular, 'authentic' way to experience the pop and rock canon. Sales data gathered by Nielsen SoundScan show that *Abbey Road* by The Beatles has been the top selling vinyl LP of the three years 2009–2011, with sales of over 100,000 units (Perpetua, 2012). Looking at the comparative pricing of the vinyl record reveals some noteworthy aspects of price and value elements of the vinyl story. Amazon UK sells the remastered version of the *Abbey Road* album on vinyl for around £35 for a new copy, while Amazon in the USA sells it for anything from US\$15 to US\$50, depending on the version of the album one buys. CD and MP3 versions of the album sell for around US\$13. What is noticeable, from a scan of comparative pricing, is that the vinyl edition of an album generally commands a price premium of 30–50% relative to other listening formats. To take another example using one of the top-selling vinyl releases in 2011, the album by Mumford and Sons *Sigh No More* sells for US\$15 on Amazon, with the CD version selling for around US\$9, and the MP3 version for US\$7. Likewise, a remastered vinyl version of *A Love Supreme* by John Coltrane sells for US\$17 on Amazon, compared to US\$9 and US\$9.50 respectively for the standard CD and MP3 formats. Interestingly enough, the same trend is true for the brand new productions as well as contemporary classics. For instance, the album *Tomboy* by Panda Bear was bought by one of the authors for US\$35, though the CD version could be purchased for around US\$20, and the MP3 version can be had for US\$17 on iTunes. Any iconic album of the 1990s is likely to be much more expensive on vinyl than CD. Moreover, some singles and remixes never officially appeared in a digital form and they are known as vinyl-only versions. The price discrepancies between formats are even wider when one compares the first original vinyl edition with the digital issues of any album released before the introduction of the digital carrier.

In order to understand what this economic dimension indicates, we look closer into the cultural construction of vinyl as object. This can be done by paying more attention to two aspects of vinyl's cultural biography: (1) the material nature and aesthetic affordance of the vinyl album format, i.e. 33 rpm LP, and (2) how other forms of vinyl record, in particular 45 rpm seven- and 12-inch singles lend themselves to particular cultural practices of specific taste communities and urban scenes that not only utilised and venerated the vinyl during its lean times in the 1990s as *the* medium, but also endowed it with the enduring meanings of coolness and archaeological cultural value.

Long play as deep play

First, the idea of 'the album' itself is crucially connected to the history of the vinyl long-playing record. In its modern form, vinyl is classically based on the 33 rpm 'Long Playing Record' (LP) format. It is materially designed for *the idea* of the album as a listening experience, akin to reading a book divided into parts and chapters. The LP album was thought of as materialising a sonic narrative that reaches the public in the form of an artistic object. The idea of 'the album' preserves the integrity of an album such as The Beatles' *Abbey Road* as a complete set of interrelated songs which is best appreciated in the continuous long playing context structured by the dramatic pause introduced by the side division. It preserves the idea of unique suites on each side of all LPs, each with its own musical character, trajectory and narrative. Marillion's best-selling *Misplaced Childhood* album is just another example of that particular affordance of vinyl LP. In other words, the vinyl, which must be flipped at the end of each playing side, commands attention and sensitises listeners to both overall structure and details of a record. In this context it is also worth considering Miles Davis's album, *Kind of Blue*. Anyone familiar with the album can recall a poignant effect achieved by having the album's melancholy highlight track 'Blue in green' in the *middle* of the album, but also at the *end* of the first side. The artistic and commercial success of such albums suggests that this is a culturally valued way of crafting and receiving the musical performance which aspires to be more than mere entertainment. It invites one to ritualise and celebrate the act of listening. It can effectively compel one to focus on minutiae of composition and thus delve deeper into carefully delimited structures of LP. Indeed, the slogan used by Rhino Records in their 'RhinoVinyl' series of classic album reissues, is that vinyl affords listening to 'music the way it was meant to be heard. One side at a time'. Importantly, these aspects of the vinyl as an attention-riveting medium and awe-inspiring artistic message are explicitly appreciated by the youngest groups of contemporary consumers (Maguadda, 2011: 29), not just those who grew up with records as the medium.

In addition to this set of features, buying the vinyl record is literally and figuratively a package deal. The LP format's material packaging is relevant for understanding its reported aura. In the case of *Abbey Road*, for example, the cover image is extremely well known; in fact, it might be considered one of the iconic images in

popular culture, and is recreated and referenced by tourists and other media alike. The obvious attraction of vinyl in this context is the large size of the photo on the LP record cover, about 500% larger than a CD cover, let alone the small accompanying images included in such applications as iTunes. The scaled-up visual and material dimensions of the vinyl package also lend themselves to references to record covers as artworks in their own right. Many books on popular culture have been devoted to reproducing ‘the best album cover art’. A notable example are the celebrated vinyl record covers designed for Factory Records, reprinted in a book entitled *Factory Records: The Complete Graphic Album* (Robertson, 2007), to highlight the artistic legacy of Factory’s futuristic record covers. Similar books of classic record covers exist for important labels such as ECM, Blue Note and Prestige.

But the most recent vinyl renaissance seems to be going well beyond just the scale of the cover art as a way of giving sensual expression to the materiality of vinyl. Recent new and re-releases incorporate a range of other special material features which play up the attractions of buying vinyl, relative to CDs and digital downloads. First is the increasingly frequent use of the heavy vinyl pressing. Standard vinyl releases have been pressed on 140 gram vinyl. Heavier pressings – frequently 180 gram pressings, but sometimes 200 or even 220 grams – are more durable and resistant to warping and are sometimes advertised to buyers as ‘Audiophile vinyl’, though for the non-audiophile buyer the heavier editions have a pleasing heavyweight feel suggesting the importance of the musical content and increasing the longevity and collectability of one’s purchase. Other ways of promoting the distinctiveness of vinyl as a listening format include the use of coloured vinyl (though this idea has been around for a long time, it seems more popular in recent times as a way of promoting the collectability of vinyl). To use again Miles Davis’s iconic oeuvre as an example, the 50th Anniversary Edition of *Kind of Blue* released in 2009 contains a transparent blue 180 gram vinyl record, plus exquisitely printed pictures and a richly illustrated, hard cover book about the cultural significance and production of the album. Finally, while music buyers will pay 100% more for a new release vinyl album compared to a download, many new vinyl releases come packaged with a download voucher for the complete album, and sometimes more special features like a cover art poster (as in re-releases of the well-known photographic record covers for the band Roxy Music). Though a buyer might pay a little over twice the price for a vinyl record than a digital download, with the vinyl they not only get a download voucher, but also the pleasure of possessing a large, artistic cover art sleeve. The latter quality may play a particularly critical role for the consumers of remix EPs (Extended Play) that rarely if ever contain download vouchers but happen to come in beautifully crafted sleeves – think again about Roxy Music’s *Remix #01*, exquisitely packaged in a well-designed gatefold sleeve.

In short, the LP format appears to be a special, often carefully curated object. It can help distinguish a ‘true music lover’ (Fernando, 2012), partly because it conveys a sense of higher value and often provides rich information disclosing the

depth of preparation behind the recording. This is particularly though not exclusively true of classic jazz records. Today their current reissues stick to the old convention and reprint all the information plus original liner notes. Influential legendary producers and avid collectors such as Madlib, Ron Trent and DJ Shadow share overt appreciation for these aspects of the medium. Madlib lends his authority to it, admitting that:

... art is as important as the music, to be honest. I don't just download things. I want to know who played on a record, who produced it, where it was made... This stuff is important to me and always has been (Madlib, in Felmann, 2012: 76).

Trent points out the same aspect, saying:

I was immersed in a lot of music on the DJ front. These guys were always buying records... When I was coming up, we tried to study what it was all about instead of getting what we call the 'newscaster version'. If you're going to know something, know it. Try to be the best at it because you're carrying a legacy that's rich (Trent, 2007).

Shadow explicitly emphasises the haptic satisfaction that records provide: 'Aside from the fact the music was everything to me, it satisfied multiple dimensions. It was tactile in the way that comic books are tactile. And yet they spoke to you sonically as well' (Shadow, in Brewster and Broughton, 2010: 226).

Last but not least, for the consumers of contemporary releases the sense of acquiring the fullest format is greater than ever because 'practically all vinyl records today are small-batch boutique pressings. There are limited editions, collector editions, audiophile editions and more' (Furchgott, 2012). In other words, it is the fact that the vinyl is not anymore, and will never be the standard mainstream medium which facilitates the rekindling of its cultural message. Instead of completely displacing the analogue medium, the digital technologies helped recontextualise it (Sterne, 2012). Specifically, they created the general cultural situation in which the analogue record is not merely the prime carrier of continuous 'natural' sound but can be marketed as a customised aesthetic object. As artist Christian Marclay recalls:

... coming from Switzerland to the United States in the 1970s, I noticed that change in attitudes towards objects. I would see records on the streets, in the gutter. I would see thousands of records in thrift shops that nobody wanted, that nobody cared about (Marclay, in Cox and Warner, 2004: 345).

The popular attitude is shifting again now. The current releases are seldom mass scale and often numbered by hand. The old records that once avoided physical destruction but may now be threatened by cultural oblivion are in a position to be rediscovered as valuable works of art. Indeed, in addition to markets for new vinyl, or new vinyl re-releases of classic or important albums, vinyl remains important in

second hand markets. Absolutely in contrast to the digital format where music files can be endlessly *cloned*, each vinyl rests on its relative rarity as a *pressing* and its material capacity to have history, and to be ‘possessed’, owned, touched, and cared for. In a sense, its being a ‘copy’ does not deprive it of a sense of uniqueness. As a matter of fact, the whole meaning of ‘copy’ changes once different media get juxtaposed in the market, each capable of being technically reproduced but with a dissimilar set of other material properties.

Finally, at the market’s top end, vinyl makes the promise of being an investment, or a collectable object. In collectors’ markets, first pressings of important albums can cost many thousands, original vinyl releases from popular artists from the past few decades can cost hundreds, and special cuttings, like DMM¹ technology, offer unique sonic qualities for slightly higher prices. Some albums appeared only in limited series or have never been reprinted; a circumstance which increases their value as something ‘hard to get’, an increasingly valuable quality in the context of the digitalised market saturated with ubiquitous and perfectly transferable *files*. The *New Musical Express* music magazine recently listed the top 20 vinyl releases, with an original pressing of The Quarrymen (featuring members of The Beatles, before they became The Beatles) estimated to be valued at £100,000, while The Sex Pistols’ ‘God save the Queen’ single is estimated at £8000. Independent contemporary artists often release their music in limited run vinyl format and systematically resist reprinting even when sales prospects seem good, in order to give their records special value. The LPs of such electronic acts as Kruder and Dorfmeister or Boards of Canada are illustrative cases in point. For example, in the decade since the original release of the latter’s *Geogaddi* album via the independent British label Warp, there has been no reissue and today one has to pay for it anything between €100 and €400. The same is true of the former’s remixing classic, four-vinyl set *The K&D Sessions* from 1998, published by Berlin-based ‘Studio!K7’.

In short, much of the remarketing or reselling of vinyl depends on matters of context and quality. Part of the excitement, and enchantment in the vinyl market is in the chase for collectibles, colloquially known as ‘crate digging’. The digger never knows what they might find and at what prices it might be offered. This is a type of serendipitous urban archaeology, akin to shopping for second hand clothes or old furniture. The cultural value added resides precisely in rarity and serendipity factors, both hardly available in the experience of the internet surfers. Of course, today the second hand markets for vinyl are supported by internet markets and increasingly by mobile phone applications such as ‘Vinyl District’ and ‘iCrates’. This merging of the two spheres illustrates the point of the internet creating not simply a virtual but augmented reality. At the same time, however, contemporary independent labels, such as Clone Records from Rotterdam, release store-only-series of their vinyls. It is also the case that shops usually sell unique vinyls at lower prices than online markets based on such all-containing websites as *Discogs*. For example, one of the authors has recently bought two original and well preserved copies of *The K&D Sessions* in London and Vienna, each below €100. Miles Davis’s rare European concert performance LP *Double Image* was priced at €90

online (as of May 2012 only one copy in nearly perfect condition was available), whereas an excellent copy of it could be purchased for €40 at the same time in one of the biggest second hand vinyl stores in Frankfurt. Last but not least, store-based buying enables one to carefully inspect a vinyl's condition in person and play it.

Because searching for tunes online and downloading of whole albums is effortless and thus potentially unlimited, it became a standard, mundane purchasing practice. With internet-based consumption, quantity tends to override the quality of the acquired material. By contrast, vinyl encourages consumption based on the modern vision *less is more*. As a physical product it can also sustain record stores that function as meeting points for various taste communities in which ideas and information are exchanged, and professional and personal connections forged. Record stores serve, in turn, as cultural vehicles for genre classification. Especially the independent venues with electronic music tend to rely on label- and style-related ordering even if the owners and communities they supply are aware that today's music landscape dissolves strict borders and thus becomes 'post-categorical' (Dax, 2012: 3). Together with hip hop culture, it was precisely this broadly conceived electronic dance social milieu that established both the record store and the club as key cultural venues in the urban landscape of the 1990s, despite the reign of CD and subsequent emergence of cheap portable digital players. DJs were the gatekeepers of these two taste communities that not only greatly contributed to vinyl's cultural and commercial lasting when the mainstream music industry gave up on the format, but also endowed it with the meanings of avant-garde artistry and alternative coolness. In other words, nostalgic collectionneering and sophisticated audiophile use of 33 rpm LPs alone could not generate a cultural myth at a scale observable today. Therefore, one has to pay attention to the meanings of the vinyl formats utilised by these communities: seven- and 12-inch 45 rpm singles. This leads us to the second dimension of vinyl's cultural biography.

Revolutions of the single, sampling and electronic music scenes

Vinyl's material properties meant two things crucial for the club scene: (1) DJs could manipulate the medium manually; they could literally see the tracks, their structure reflected in the physical micro-architecture of the groove; it was also relatively easy to master the basic procedures of sound manipulation, the feature that makes the analogue technology straightforward and fully 'transparent' and is often mentioned as such, especially compared with the cutting-edge digital devices (Brewster and Broughton, 2010: 433; Marclay and Tone, 2004: 346). (2) The high fidelity of the analogue medium and the fact that all the music recorded before the 1980s was available in this format rendered it a cultural archive of musical samples for all style-conscious and ambitious producers. Both dimensions enabled vinyl-collecting DJs to move beyond the confines of simple consumption and becoming *prosumers*, proactive or producing consumers.

Of course, this attractive potential of the medium was envisaged much earlier, first by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy in his early 1920s texts and then by John Cage's

experiments with phonographs in the 1930s. Hip hop and house DJs turned theory and experimentation into a regular entertainment practice and gradually elevated it to the level of art in its own right. The subsequent explosion of house and techno scenes meant that while ‘in the 1980s everybody wanted to be a guitar player, in the 1990s everybody wanted to be a DJ’ (Marclay and Tone, 2004: 346). These communities epitomised the hedonistic cool and often the anti-system alternative. For them the turntable became an instrument (Shapiro, 2002), and records were at the centre of the game that offered a way of resisting the system and asserting personal agency (Haynes, in Maguadda, 2011: 28). Although even the best DJs tend to be modest and cautious when asked about the artistic status of what they do, they and their audiences treated DJing – and continue to do so – as a ‘real creative expression’ (Brewster and Broughton, 2010: 436).

As far as the first material aspect of the analogue technology is concerned, it gave rise to the now omnipresent aesthetics of scratching, backspinning, cutting, editing (Borschke, 2011) and mixing first developed by hip hop DJs such as Grandmaster Flash. In the wake of their growing recognition as true pioneers, mixing matured as a skill and in the 1990s *turntablism* emerged as genre with its own iconic figures such as DJ Q-Bert or DJ Shadow. Turntablism brought special attention to the vinyl medium, and in the hands of hip hop prosumers delivered a post-modern message that ‘it is not so much what you say that matters, but how you say it’ (Shapiro, 2002: 164). Of course, specific high quality devices connected to this practice, such as Technics SL-1200MK2 turntable and mixers, were needed and in time became iconic objects themselves. This constellation of products enabled whole generations of professional DJs and amateur enthusiasts to create dance sets by successively or simultaneously connecting many records to each other and citing them within each other. It allowed producers like DJ Spooky to say: ‘give me two turntables, and I’ll make you a universe’ (Miller, 2004: 127), a clear pun on John Cage’s words that uncannily anticipated the techno culture: ‘given four phonographs we can compose and perform a quartet for explosive motor, wind, heartbeat and landslide’ (Cage, in Shapiro, 2002: 164).

The entire cultural universe that indeed grew out of early hip hop and dance scenes is unthinkable without the 45 rpm vinyl single. The Jamaican culture of sound systems was an early precursor of this format, and the birth of the entire influential genre of dub music is traceable to ‘the existence of an instrumental side, called version, on the B-side of single recordings, which became both a tradition and a necessity for sound systems’ (Daynes, 2010: 33). All genres of contemporary electronic club music thrived on such singles with various remixes on both sides because they enabled the fulfilment of the key demand of dance – make the music last, keep the beat going uninterruptedly all night long. In short, ‘the reappropriation of the record as a mass consumer product in the framework of performance first of all meant the possibility of prolonging a piece on both sides of a 45 by making use of two different versions’ (During, 2003: 48). Thereafter, a distinct taste for longer pieces developed, such that would not be supported by commercial radio stations. Just as one side of the LP album allowed musicians to produce suite-based

concept albums, so did the single format contribute to freer, more expansive aesthetic forms that expressed not only specific musical preferences but ultimately a series of attitudes. In this context it is important to remember that 'disco, hip hop and reggae, house, techno and drum & bass, were all created by DJs, by the ones who were brave enough to try something weird and extreme and different' (Brewster and Broughton, 2010: 5). As these new aesthetic sensibilities became more popular, the whole club-based dance culture centered around vinyl-playing DJs morphed into a truly transnational network (Bull and Back, 2005: 13) which increased global visibility of the vinyl and reinscribed cities like Chicago, Detroit, New York, London, Manchester and Berlin within the map of underground music. This process was also aided by the DJs/collectors like John Peel and Gilles Peterson who championed a broad range of avant-garde and obscure dance tunes in their radio shows. In time it became possible to associate the vinyl with such cultural tropes as independence, cosmopolitanism and hipness that these urban scenes initially exemplified. It was under all those cultural conditions that the vinyl single ceased to be a mere mass commodity of the recording business and assumed quasi-totemic qualities, often embedded in legendary venues like famous club and record stores, and connected with effervescent rituals – official and illegal parties. Vinyl offered not only a 'warm' sophisticated sound, but also a world of looks, haptics and pragmatics that signified the hip, the authentic, the alternative. Just looking at the subtitles of the now classic compilation series *Hi:Fidelity Lounge* of famous Chicago-based house label Guidance Recordings offers a glimpse into these meanings: *Subterranean Soundtracks, Licensed to Chill, Cosmopolitan Grooves*.

The second aspect we distinguished above, i.e. analogue records being a special musical library, shows both how two different technologies can coexist and that to a certain extent they support each other. In particular, the extant stock of analogue records is a special cultural archive that became especially consequential for music development when new electronic devices, like samplers introduced in the 1980s, enabled deeper integration of the existing records to music production (Borschke, 2011; Gitelman, 2004). Because quite a few singles contain material that has never been released digitally, they constitute the treasure trove of modern musical tradition. Once the medium's message is retrieved, converted and played with, those vinyl records' value of privileged sound files becomes even more pronounced. The cutting-edge electronic producers like Amon Tobin, who in the mid 1990s began to systematically sample analogue sources, may have violated copyrights, but they had deep respect for the content and the medium. Their creative practice revolutionised the pop aesthetics and prevalent understandings of authorship in art. Crucially, they would always release their works on vinyl through small independent labels, often only as 45 rpm singles. As listeners, they seem to have been inspired by artists like John Cage who is reported to have said: 'What people ultimately have to learn is to use records not as music but as records' (Cage, cited in Fischer, 2005: 12). As producers, they helped re-establish the vinyl record not only as a legitimate but an authentic medium essential for the most advanced musical experimentation, and they did that at a time when hardly anyone

in the mainstream seemed to believe in it any more. Even a cursory examination of a few key records created within these scenes offers an understanding of how vinyl has become more than just another mass product or an obsolete format.

Consider first *Endtroducing* by DJ Shadow, released in 1996. It is regarded as a touchstone of sampled music. The entire double album is about weaving together various styles, beats and snippets of melodies derived from other records and turning them into a musical narrative that – in the words of DJ Shadow himself included in the liner notes of this album – ‘reflects a lifetime of vinyl culture’. The sleeve features a large scale picture of the artist browsing through the stacks of seven-inch records. Amon Tobin’s seminal debut album *Bricolage*, released a year after *Endtroducing*, provides a definition of the title term and quotes Claude Levi-Strauss on the back cover to express the idea of sampling. Here the seemingly obsolete vinyl sat at the very centre of the postmodern revolution in music.

Although such albums played the important role of cultural landmarks in the electronic music and hip hop scenes, it was the single that sustained these scenes and their specificity on a regular basis. A single’s B-side often contained ‘exclusive’ tracks, unavailable elsewhere. Some of them inspired whole genres of electronic music, for example drum’n’bass and breakbeat derived from the beat structure of *Amen, Brother* by the Winstons. The masters of these new styles, like LTJ Bukem, elevated them to the status of late modern classics. They used singles as a primary format and turned them into self-standing DJ-friendly releases that included what the jazzmen would call alternate takes: reworks, remixes and special tracks. Similarly, 12-inch EPs became the preferable concise format for the most important visionary electronic producers, for example Autechre. To emphasize the artistic worth of these short forms and underscore their sonic and temporal minimalism, some newer independent electronic labels like ‘Spectral’ or ‘Apple Pips’ package their regular output in imaginative sleeves. In this sense they confirm (and conform to) the vinyl record’s traditional reputation as auratic artwork, even as they redefine the meaning of music itself. Systematically collecting and analysing these vinyls avails one of access to the sonic and visual sensibilities of entire urban scenes that revolutionised late modern western culture.

Today, the first pressings of many singles released in the 1990s through labels like Good Looking Records, Metalheadz, Prescription, Warp, or Ninja Tune have reached iconic status and some happen to be more expensive than many rock and pop LPs. To be able to dig in the vaults of legendary labels such as Blue Note or Verve and compile or remix some of their highlights became a ‘great honour’ for new producers, and when they did, like Jazzanova and Thievery Corporation for the two iconic labels respectively, they explicitly defined their work as paying homage to classic artists and original vinyl singles. Symptomatically, Thievery Corporation’s first LP released in 1996 features a blurred closeup photo of a tone arm on a vinyl and is entitled *Sounds from the Thievery hi-fi*. Over the years it has become a classic statement of electronic chill out music, never reprinted, worth at least €50 when in mint condition in the country of its original release – Germany.

Last but not least, all vinyl-based genres that emerged in the 1980s and refined their voices in the 1990s played, and continue to play, an important role as the cultural and political *other* to digitalisation and corporate mass production. While vinyl is nowadays the most expensive format to purchase, it is interpreted as the most critical and politically resistant format. It is associated with the superlative, and often anti-systemic cultural qualities without absorbing the negative connotations typically attached to some of them. It is exclusive but not elitist, sophisticated but not snobbish, traditional but not conservative, alternative but not pretentious. It is being favourably compared to the mainstream digital format which now gradually begins to be seen as being tied to big business and mega brands, which some consumers see as restrictive, or even exploitative and unbearably mainstream.

This social aspect is not to be understated, and combined with all aforementioned material factors it makes the now comparably cumbersome 12-inch format an iconically potent medium, indeed the key signifier of an entire culture and its attitudes. In an interview with the internet music site 'Pitchfork', co-owner of the emblematic German 'Kompakt' label Michael Mayer reflected on the vinyl culture that Kompakt cultivated:

There are lots of DJs who still want to play vinyl, even if they buy the vinyl and digitalize it and play .wav files. I don't think it's going to die completely. It's such a beautiful culture that's running for such a long time, I don't think it's going to stop (Mayer, in Plagenhoef, 2009).

Discussion

Performativity of the vinyl

One of the fundamental outcomes of the innovations in the last few decades within consumer studies, material culture studies and sociological studies of consumption has been a radical revisioning of theories of the commodity. In its conceptualisation of modernity, sociology in particular has always reserved a special place for the commodity, as either a material container of economically-driven processes of alienation, exploitation and disenchantment, or a status-based, aesthetic symbol of exclusivity and cultural superiority (Miller, 1987; Slater, 1997). While the postmodern and cultural turn in social theory succeeded in emphasising matters of lifestyle, pleasure, symbolic challenge and desire as elemental to commodity engagements (Featherstone, 1991), it was culturally and anthropologically inspired work within recent material culture studies and interpretive consumer studies which has made the greatest advances in rethinking the commodity (Belk et al., 1989; Douglas and Isherwood, 1979; Holt, 2004; Miller, 1987; Woodward, 2007, 2012). As the classical statements in economic anthropology have reminded us, the economic activities of exchange and consumption actually constitute social bonds and the circulation of cultural ideals (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979; Malinowski, 1961; Mauss, 1967;

Sahlins, 1974). What is valued, exchanged and used are not just 'commodities', but material containers of social meanings. From a cultural point of view, what we call 'the economy' is fundamentally a networked system of symbolic exchange, a system organised for the construction and exchange of totems (Benzecry, 2008), rather than merely a field of social action defined by models of instrumental rationality and commercial contract.

This cultural model of markets and commodities requires a rather more fluid and processual theory of the commodity. Reiterating some basic principles of classical works in cultural anthropology, one of the important insights of recent conceptualisations of material culture studies has been the idea that commodity objects have 'social lives' (Appadurai, 1986) or 'biographies' (Kopytoff, 1986). According to these conceptions, objects have social trajectories whereby their meanings for different groups of consumers change over time and space. Objects have an inherently mobile, mutable quality and are constructed both by their materiality and by stories, myths and their production and reception in particular contexts (Harre, 2002; Pels et al., 2002). Moreover, as things of value, commodities must be persistently reconstructed via exchange, use and purchase (Lash and Lury, 2007). Such a constellation of meaning-making processes is discernible in relation to the vinyl record, historically and in the context of contemporary settings, and indeed explaining this context is the general task we set ourselves in this paper.

The iconicity of vinyl

If we agree that there is more to objects than commodity status, we thereby acknowledge that their value is culturally constructed and variable relative to specific social carriers. Objects such as music records matter not only in an immediate utilitarian way, so to speak by themselves, but also because they are capable of generating the cultural frame of use and appreciation which then always mediates their presence and feeds back to the experience of actual object-related practices.

There are certain categories of objects that epitomise this phenomenon more than others. Their features transfix whole social audiences and are in turn endowed by them with worth that exhibits a surplus of meaning, not unlike the one Paul Ricoeur talks about in his theory of text (Ricoeur, 1971). As layers of meanings accrue to such objects over time, a semiotic spiral is launched. As a result, in addition to all its *ostensible functions* the object assumes the role of *iconic signifier*; it ceases to be a mere noun and becomes an agent of adverbial and adjectival assessments. It stands for the entire class of experiential qualities and – in special cases – for lifestyle-defining practices. This means that when it comes to investigating the social trajectories of the objects that acquire such special significance we encounter neither instances of artistic epiphany nor commodity fetishism but face instead complex effects of collective enchantment whose meanings transcend the boundaries of purely aesthetic or narrowly utilitarian engagement with reality. We have tried to show that the vinyl record is such an object.

A broad conceptual framework that enables one to understand the vinyl in this special cultural capacity has emerged recently out of the so-called iconic turn (Boehm, 1994, 2001). It found a sociological expression in the theory of iconicity sketched by Jeffrey C Alexander in several articles (2008a, 2008b, 2010). According to Alexander, the objects endowed with the symbolic power adumbrated above are *cultural icons*. The 'iconic' does not denote the strictly semiotic qualifier Charles Peirce talks about, nor the one commonly employed in everyday discourses with reference to the epitome of something. Rather, Alexander points to the more general and more profound social role of cultural icons as symbolic condensations (Freud) and totemic representations (Durkheim) associated with the processes of identity formation and non-verbal channels of meaning-production. Being iconic is a social affordance. Alexander emphasises, however, that neither Freud nor Durkheim ever offered a systematic account of how icons work in this capacity within modern societies. It is Walter Benjamin's concept of aura that brings us closer to understanding how the so-conceived icons work.

However, Benjamin himself added a series of rather restrictive conceptual qualifications to the generic notion of aura he promoted. According to him aura denotes 'the associations which tend to cluster around the object of a perception' (Benjamin, 1968: 186). He deepened this understanding when he wrote: 'To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return' (Benjamin, 1968: 188). This metaphor of the reciprocated gaze that transfixes subjects and is capable of constituting social audiences is at the core of the contemporary notion of iconicity developed and applied by such art historians as Hans Belting (2005, 2012) or Horst Bredekamp (2010). Yet, for Benjamin only *unique* objects could count as auratic. An object's aura was 'derived from its uniqueness' (Benjamin, 2008: 24) and the status of uniqueness was defined by the presence of all the qualities of an object that are 'transmissible in it from its origin on' (Benjamin, 2008: 22). In this scheme, no 'copies' mattered. As a result, Benjamin would deny the existence of auratic potential in photographs or phonographic records. Benjamin believed that the uniqueness – and thus aura of an object – is strictly dependent on the unity of creative intentionality, specific time and particular place recognisable in the object. Applied by Benjamin mainly to art, this conception presumably 'extends far beyond its realm' (Benjamin, 2008: 22). But he does not prove this contention sociologically. We argue that it would be hard to prove it for two reasons: (1) his conception of *uniqueness* is too rigid, (2) the implied understanding of 'copy' is not nuanced enough to account for the variegated forms we observe today.

Of course, it is a benefit of late modern hindsight to understand this double point. 'With electronic music, the artwork moves from the era of "technical reproducibility" to the era of the digital hyper-reproducibility – to an extent that even Benjamin himself might not have dared to imagine' (Van Assche, 2003: 10). On the other hand, Benjamin could have realised it, had he limited his ideological commitments and with it suspended his intellectual disbelief. We argue that he missed it because he employed the notion of aura chiefly to disavow what he viewed as

modern disenchantment whose symptoms included the *loss of aura* as absolute uniqueness. Here his intention was mainly normative, not analytic. Empirically, the story of vinyl we narrated illustrates the limitations of his approach, and underscores the capacity of objects to be ‘compressed performances’ that reveal the ‘uncontemporaneous’ nature of cultural history advocated by another German cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer (Pinney, 2005: 266–268). Yet – by the same token – it suggests unexpected usefulness for the generic notion of aura Benjamin helped bring to scholarly attention. The trick is to use the concept in an analytic, not normative manner, and to make it more flexible. One can achieve it in two theoretical steps. First, replacing *uniqueness* with other categories such as *relative rarity* dislodges the concept of aura from its restrictive denotative structure. Second, understanding aura as relational and multidimensional, not just an intrinsic quality, helps grasp the iconic status of ‘mechanically reproduced’ objects that Benjamin deemed improbable.

This research agenda is supported by parallel studies in marketing and other social sciences that utilise the notion of cultural iconicity (e.g. Bartmanski, 2011, 2012; Holt, 2004, 2006; Jencks, 2005; Kravets and Öрге, 2010; Sklair, 2010; Woodward and Ellison, 2012). Taken together these perspectives allow us not only to understand vinyl as a revived commodity but also to explain its ascendancy to the status of auratic cultural icon which sums up an important aspect of late modernity – the search for authenticity and meaning through the heavily mediated, digitalised and commodified world.

Hearing music heritage and authenticity on vinyl

One of the powerful capacities of the vinyl record is its ability to point to important referents in pop music history and heritage, while retaining a credible sense of being part of the cultural underground, cool and cutting-edge. In part, this facet relates the vinyl record to desires for particular modes of music listening (Bull, 2002; Hennion, 2001) which privilege the warmth and feel that vinyl is perceived to offer. In this sense, we must locate vinyl as a material signifier of a special type of listening practice that finds in the vinyl format qualities such as intimacy, warmth, authenticity and charisma (Yochim and Biddinger, 2008). The rituals of preparing for vinyl listening, the physical characteristics of the record, and the act of playing the vinyl itself, make one more conscious of the medium’s presence and the specific aesthetics of sound reproduction, not only in terms of audible properties of music but also visual impressions of the medium and the equipment that ‘reads’ it.

Thus, the analogue format offers an experience that stands in direct contrast to listening practices in other formats. Precisely because it is not the only, or main, format anymore, its characteristics become both more legible and more unique. It is also connected to a series of practices which help to consecrate vinyl as affording and encouraging sacred listening experiences: caring for the vinyl in order to protect and preserve its analogue qualities, cleaning the disc, monitoring the turntable

and ensuring its mechanical integrity, or paying attention to care of the record cover. These routinal practices of preparation and care mean that vinyl listening actually requires more work and care than other formats, though this is not interpreted so simply as 'work', but as practices of care, craft (Campbell, 2005) and tendering that links to embodied, emotional connections to listening practices. Moreover, as Yochim and Biddinger (2008: 190) suggest, these types of care practices invest vinyl with human qualities. Undoubtedly, the fact that the analogue medium wears out in the process of using it creates a rather clear metonymic reference to the fundamental experience of human life.

Because of its figuring as the sonically perfected, technologically hegemonic format for music listening up to the period of the late 1980s, the vinyl record has an advantage of being perceived as the 'classic', 'real' or 'authentic' format for certain, if not most types of music listening experiences (Yochim and Biddinger, 2008). For example, listeners who value high fidelity sound reproduction and/or authentic engagements with music heritage may consider that the 'best' way to hear an early album of The Rolling Stones or Miles Davis is via the format for which it was prepared and on which it was originally released – the vinyl LP. These artists and their oeuvre are coded as essential parts of the modern music canon. Importantly, serious listeners commit to the vinyl format as the preferred way of hearing and understanding – rather than merely listening to – these heritage acts. Sound and style, not just melody, are at stake.

Of course, these listeners can be divided between those collectors, audiophiles, DJs and enthusiasts who search out the various editions of the vinyl recording – from the first or rare pressing and never played, to faded and scratched second hand editions, to the fresh and glossy, heavy vinyl reissues and remix versions. What remains constant is a kind of aesthetic experience afforded by the medium and the performative logic of the LP's two sides. To grasp the meanings of these qualities first made available by the vinyl LP, consider the following statement about one of the most iconic modern albums ever produced, Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue*:

[it] would not have been possible if the LP did not exist. It was jazz conceived for the record album, not only because of the playing times of the tunes but also because how the album creates an overall mood (Early, 2008: 33).

The vinyl record paved the way for the emergence of what came to be called the concept album, and its playing mode fitted both the more expansive strategies of the creators and the focused attention span of the public.

This association of vinyl with canonical musical performances is expressed in the current patterns of vinyl production, especially in the reissue of classic albums in rock, indie and jazz genres. Catalogues such as Universal Records' 'Back to Black' series reissue important and popular albums in the rock and pop canon on high quality vinyl pressings, and the Blue Note jazz label reissues canonical albums by artists such as John Coltrane and Miles Davis on heavy 180 gram vinyl formats.

The record label '4 Men With Beards', self-described as 'one of the pre-eminent vinyl reissue labels in the world', is another example. A simple analysis of their online catalogue shows a variety of key vinyl reissues by artists who are either important in the canon of alternative rock, such as The Velvet Underground, Iggy Pop, Wire and Bauhaus, or essential soul and jazz artists like Nina Simone, Aretha Franklin, Miles Davis and Herbie Hancock. This is a finely curated catalogue of reissues. The case of 4 Men with Beards is significant because, for the most part, its releases are not focused on the most celebrated albums by these artists, such as Davis' *Kind of Blue*, Gainsbourg's *Histoire de Melodie Nelson*, or any of Dylan's celebrated first clutch of LP records. While major labels and the public retain an interest in these iconic, relatively high-selling vinyl reissues, 4 Men With Beards offers the rare and lesser known releases from these artists, for example the latest reissue of Miles Davis's 1970s concert performances *Pangaea* and *Dark Magus*. In this sense, they encourage the use of vinyl as a way to engage with the complete and hard to find canon of 'important' music by key artists of earlier, often culturally formative modern eras.

A further distinct affordance of vinyl in this regard is that it gives larger scale, tactile material expression to aspects of the record's production, playing and artwork. Unlike digital downloads (which sometimes have a virtual book accompaniment) the vinyl album encourages an emphasis on the heritage aspects of listening by making its production and playing directly visible and 'to hand' to be read and felt. This makes vinyl as a whole a kind of palpable, durable work of art, i.e. an important companion for ritualised aesthetic practices. While digital listening favours lightness, mobility and ease of transfer, and the CD is popularly held to erase the music's 'warmth' and also to disrupt the notion of the two-sided LP, vinyl is the slow food equivalent of music listening practices. Precisely because vinyl does not lend itself to portability but invites special attention, it can function as a more demanding, 'organic' and thus sophisticated and reflective medium. Indeed, there are current urban venues that combine vinyl record store with rustic delicatessen, like the Vienna-based shop called Tongues. Vinyl's tangible material features make it durable in an intuitive sense but they are also prone to acquire traces of use in time which endows them with aura unavailable for digital copies. Together with analogue sound qualities vinyl may also mean a more immersive experience, whereby one can feel closer to the music or at least approach the conditions of reception that the producers of music themselves enjoy when they create their work.

Conclusion

The vinyl record is a powerful cultural object because of its semiotic mutability; its ability to materialise a flexible range of meanings for its various audiences, with each pointing to a basic culture structure which is anchored by notions of heritage, authenticity and coolness. Vinyl is identified by different listening communities to draw upon and signify different – to some degree unique and in some cases

contradictory – cultural connotations. In general, we have argued that vinyl has this capacity because it concretises and points to various meaningful, powerful historical and cultural representations and narratives, and because it offers particular materially afforded qualities of engagement. Our interpretive analysis of vinyl as an auratic commodity has rested on thick description of cultural texts and narratives as well as some of its material properties, though it should be clear that a comprehensive and much larger study of vinyl would need to encompass questions such as the material entanglements with turntables; matters of purchase, storage, care and collection; record stores and vinyl scenes; second hand markets and processes of de-commodification and re-commodification; and matters related to the pressing and production of vinyl.

We have shown that in the first instance, vinyl is an object which crystallises and refers to the heritage of the pop and rock musical canon. The fact that important albums in this canon were originally recorded for and listened to on vinyl gives the analogue format an authenticity and cachet for listeners cultivating and/or discovering the heritage of rock and pop. But, paradoxically, when vinyl was all but killed off by the compact disc during the 1990s, its relevance to vital, cutting-edge musical and youth cultures was maintained by its centrality to dance, electronic and hip hop listening cultures, where it was an enduringly relevant format for the performative and collective listening practices these cultures are based upon. Moreover, playing vinyl encourages various ritualistic engagements: localised immobile and immersive listening, careful selection and visually arresting ‘spinning’ performed by DJs. This engagement with ritual renders vinyl a carrier of deeper aesthetic and political meanings, an antidote to the hegemony of digital listening cultures’ reliance on multinational conglomerates which provide the homogenous platform and means for music listening.

Vinyl as a commodity materialises paradoxical cultural values. Ironically, its fragility and proneness to damage is reinterpreted as a strength endowed with human qualities, compared to digital formats which are endlessly reproducible and deletable at a keyboard stroke. As a material container of sounds, vinyl constantly cycles through stages of commoditisation, de-commodification and re-commodification via second hand markets, which are now more than ever enabled through online means. Vinyl exists relationally with scenes and spaces, energised by particular myths of cities, labels, clubs and record stores. We demonstrate that the vinyl record encapsulates a cluster of interconnected sentiments that help define its contemporary aesthetic consciousness. In this capacity it stabilises a series of currently important binary codings, specifically the reference of the real vis-à-vis the virtual, sentimental vs. strategic, ritual vs. convenient, exceptional vs. regular, etc. It helps embody and thus concretise the notoriously elusive collective representations such as coolness, hipness and alternative. Though its commercial resurgence is small in absolute terms, the vinyl record is one of the key modern cultural commodities on which these loose and elusive cultural properties are fixed and stabilised. In short, the vinyl record is a perfect example of how a mechanically reproducible product can become an iconic signifier full of references. It shows that

aura of authenticity is not reducible to any one notion of originality or uniqueness but is instead constituted relationally in contingent social performances.

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Note

1. Direct Metal Mastering, is an analogue audio disc mastering technique, jointly developed by two German companies, Telefunken-Decca (TelDec) and Georg Neumann GmbH, towards the end of the 20th century.

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