RESEARCH ONLINE

University of Wollongong
Research Online

Faculty of Arts - Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts

2010

Free music and trash culture: The reconfiguration of musical value online

Andrew M. Whelan
University of Wollongong, awhelan@uow.edu.au

Publication Details

Whelan, A. M. (2010). Free music and trash culture: The reconfiguration of musical value online. In K. Zemke & S. D.. Brunt (Eds.), 2009 IASPM Australia-New Zealand Conference: What's it worth?: 'value' and popular music (pp. 67-71). Dunedin, New Zealand: IASPM-ANZ.

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

RESEARCH ONLINE

Free Music and Trash Culture: The Reconfiguration of Musical Value Online

Andrew Whelan, University of Wollongong

The unprecedented quantity of music now freely available online appears to have peculiarly contradictory consequences for the 'value' of music. Music appears to lose value insofar as it is potentially infinitely reproducible at little cost: claims have been made that music thereby loses economic value; and perhaps affective value also. In the first case, music is not worth what it once was because copyright owners are no longer being paid for it. In losing income (the argument goes), less money will be invested in future music production: music therefore becomes less 'good' (culturally and aesthetically valuable). In the second case, it is suggested that online superabundance renders music worth less in that personal engagements with it are transient, frivolous, and ad hoc: nobody has time to listen to all that music, and the surfeit implies that musical value thereby depreciates. At one time consumers would studiously listen to entire albums, because they had paid for them. Now they simply delete downloaded releases that do not immediately appeal to them (if they can get around to listening to them).

The flipside of these arguments concerns the potentially democratising consequences of online distribution: consumers are no longer beholden to monopoly content providers and can customise their soundscape. In the framework provided by Attali (1985), this might be a step forward. However, 'free' distribution online has some consequences usually overlooked by these polarised perspectives. Online environments also facilitate the production of music. MySpace and Facebook pages, netlabels, peer-to-peer and torrenting, 'cracked' software, and vast quantities of material to sample have facilitated the emergence of 'deliberately', as opposed to 'accidentally' free music. And some of these niche musical subcultures (among them chiptune, nerdcore hip-hop, noise, speedcore) can be understood as critiquing, at the level of practice, both the economic values ascribed to music by the market, and the aesthetic values articulated in and through contemporary mass-market popular music.

This paper is concerned with one such genre, the body of electronic music referred to as 'breakcore'. In particular, it considers the turnover of commonly sampled material of the recent past, produced by successful 'mainstream' artists as they move along a trajectory towards cultural obsolescence or 'naffness'. This is not an account hailing 'prosumers' and 'produsers' and indicating how music is going to change in the brave new world of the internet. It is an attempt to describe some features of 'free music' online as that currently exists. I reference a number of examples to illustrate ideas of distinction, cultures of taste, and values of music, as these are articulated in sampling practices and distributive practices and the relations between these two.

The 'trash aesthetics' involved in breakcore have material features, evidenced specifically in relation to the emergence of breakcore as a genre initially distributed largely through peer-to-peer, where large amounts of this material are currently distributed freely by netlabel. Alongside the sampling practices that characterise breakcore, involving, as a matter of routine, wholesale copyright infringement, these distributive aspects of the breakcore scene gesture towards a much broader politics of popular music as pleasurable waste (Hamelman 2003). As Thompson points out, 'value (aesthetic value) and price (economic value) are related, yet, equally clearly, they are not one and the same. Nor is it justifiable to assume that this relationship is fixed' (1979, p. 83). The argument here considers how variations in this relationship are articulated and exploited by breakcore musicians to produce subtle interventions in the musical sign economy; in doing so, both leveraging and poking fun at different forms of cultural and subcultural capital.

Netlabel breakcore

It is difficult to determine the popularity of breakcore: given that the genre is largely distributed for 'free'. Were sales figures readily available they would likely be unreliable. Although breakcore is released on vinyl and CD (which, like all other genres, then finds wider distribution through peer-to-peer and blogs with direct download links), a majority of releases are now distributed by netlabels, of which there are a significant number.[1] Several of the more prolific netlabels post on the Internet Archive, a not-for-profit digital library which maintains extensive audio holdings. One of the features of archive.org web pages is that they state number of downloads: this gives some indication of how many people might be paying attention to a given release. For example, the Internet Archive page for *VIP Rework*, the 100th release on RusZUD, a Russian netlabel, indicates that it has been downloaded 11,688 times to date. For a comparatively niche genre, this seems a respectable listenership, and no doubt a wider one than that available when this sort of material was distributed in limited vinyl runs.

These netlabels present a rather curious business model, insofar as there is nothing to actually buy; netlabel releases are not really comprehensible even as 'loss leaders'. Only occasionally is there an option to make a donation via PayPal, or evidence of Google Ads revenue or similar. While *some* netlabels advertise upcoming events featuring rostered artists, many do not, and the option of buying even a T-shirt to 'support the artist' is surprisingly uncommon. However, there are factors which mitigate against netlabels as pure altruism or gifting. One such factor is the broader media ecology in which they operate, where links to artists' MySpace pages, and to other, larger online 'scenic institutions' (Kahn-Harris 2004, p. 99) are routine. The broader online breakcore environment constitutes an attention economy as well as an online community of sorts. Breakcore netlabels are also legible in terms of a libertarian ideology not dissimilar from that which circulates around open source software, where ostensibly 'free' labour actually generates prestige, and thereby status. Also, given the ethics and aesthetics of sampling within the genre, it is unsurprising (in legal as well as perhaps political or ethical terms) that it should come to be distributed at no cost. Some netlabels display Creative Commons licenses, which is rather curious given their orientation to the copyright of others, but many do not appear to have any interest in expressing legal or legalistic status for their works.

Of course, we are all sufficiently well versed in economist or 'catallactic' logic (Polanyi 1971, p. 257) that another reason might be plausibly advanced for the existence of netlabels: they make available music that nobody would want to buy anyway. Usually, this is taken to mean music that is worthless, music that has no value, music that is formally 'bad' (aesthetically, technically etc.). In this account netlabels are rather like vanity publishing, and provide an outlet for material that in a properly meritocratic (read: Darwinian) market would never get an airing. The 'real world' is one where CDs sit on shelves and culture comes with price tags. This 'real world' is one where netlabel music would not exist, because it would not turn a profit (leaving aside things like cassette trading, or government-subsidised genres).

This is the slippery alignment of aesthetics and economics associated with monopoly distribution, and evident in such arguments against piracy as the following: 'asserting that music should be free is the same as saying it has no value – that music is worthless. It's not' (Music Industry Piracy Investigations 2010). The issue with this reasoning is not just that it is unkind and unwise to suggest that free music is worthless. Many things that are free have value, and are not worthless. Air, for instance, remains free (although one could question this), and obviously has an irreducible value. There is a school of thought where things are worth only what one pays for them, so that the more expensive they are, the better they are: ideas about 'free healthcare' and 'free education' are sometimes subjected to this logic. The problem here is not that music is not a 'natural resource' or a 'public good' or that 'information wants to be free'. It is that the concept of 'value' deployed is wilfully unspecified, allowing economic and aesthetic or cultural definitions to be collapsed into each other. These sorts of concerns are perhaps why William Brooks advocated for 'tasteless scholarship', unfettered by ideas of musicological or aesthetic quality (1982, p. 13). 'Value', 'quality', and corresponding notions are in a 'semantic predicament' (Abend 2008) which facilitates and camouflages political work.

Breakcore sampling

It is precisely this idea – that free things are worthless – that netlabel breakcore can be thought of as working through, particularly through the approaches to sampling in the genre and the attitudes towards 'mainstream' and canonical pop music expressed through these approaches. Examples are not difficult to come across, but for the current discussion the following are indicative illustrations: 'Trip', by Non Human on *War Nah Done*, both of Alex Tune's versions of 'Ass of Bass', on *VIP Rework* and *What is a Mashup?*, Zombie's 'Tush Nie MashaPasha' on *Grave Rave*, 'How about a Kiss? by Negrobeat on *Damn Skippy*, and Buttress O'Kneel's 'Paraplegic Android (part 1)' on *Mash-Up Your Ass*, all from 2009. Sometimes this sort of breakcore is referred to as 'mashcore', for obvious reasons.

It is effectively assembled from samples in such a way as to *perform* or *enact* 'a long list of discarded cultural references that, having been forgotten or hurled into the dumpsite of memory, have become the equivalent of symbolic garbage' (Negrón-Muntaner 2009, p. 333). This argument hinges on a sense of the turnover of popular music as that is 'read' in breakcore, where samples are, through judicious cotext and context, eloquently made to name their own precise location on the way to cultural obsolescence. Breakcore (for example, Zombie's work) sometimes resembles Frankenstein's monster, in two ways: the 'mad doctor' can be discerned pulling the strings, and producers also 'speak' ventriloquially through the popular music of the recent and not-so-recent past. The effect of their 'speech' is to highlight the relative cultural value of the samples used, where their contemporaneity is proportional to their 'coolness'.

What the breakcore producers mentioned do is sample and refigure music that has recently become uncool, or has achieved a certain *tackiness* along the way. For example, Ace of Base's 'All that she Wants' has entered the special class of popular music now heard in supermarkets. Alex Tune's decision to release both a 'cover' and a 'mashup' is arguably *because of* rather than despite this status. Such interventions are sometimes described as *détournement*: the 'use of appropriated materials in ways that alter their original meaning' (Collins 2005, p. 169). Such an account requires greater nuance, in that the 'original meaning' is not fixed: it is changing even as the appropriation occurs; it is contextually negotiated. Breakcore producers thus play on and participate in a sort of reverse economy of prestige, playfully repurposing and resignifying cultural waste. This 'altering' can also be thought of as heteroglossic or double-voiced ironic distancing: a reclamation and critique of what originally made the source text appealing, alongside a simultaneous disavowal of the practice of breakcore production. The latter becomes 'merely humorous' where producers consistently exscript their own labour by sticking to well-worn modes of significatory exploration.

Cultural capital depreciation

It is worth querying whether some 'absolute' means exists for saying that some piece of popular music is or is not now a cliché, or is or is not now officially 'naff'. We might disagree, for instance, about whether or not Michael Jackson's 'Beat It' is *really* cheesy or not. This is a useful example because Jackson's music is being reassessed since his death. It could be argued that this process of *reassessment* is constantly repeated in various types of popular music. Songs change from being 'cool' and desirable to being 'overplayed' cultural waste. The *exact same sounds* may then be recycled and go through the entire process all over again, albeit through smaller or more specialised audience circuits. As Frow puts it:

> value is an effect of the circulation of objects *between* regimes of value, a circulation which may be, but is not necessarily, driven either by wastefulness, the transformation of valuable matter into waste, or by the reverse process … whereby a zero degree of worth generates new and unexpected structures of value which then modify the rules of the game of distinction. This circulation is always excessive to the singular market supposed by any reduction of use value to intrinsic properties (2003, p. 35).

We might agree about 'Beat It', but differ about Black Lace's 'Agadoo'. Much of the delight in listening to plunderphonic breakcore comes from the skilled deployment of a sample, the skilled

wresting of a sample back from cheesiness. This involves complex literacies on the part of both producer and listener, and this interplay or dialogic relation is in part a negotiation of the value of a given sample enacted in the act of producing and thereby projecting an imagined listener, and then again in the actual act of listening, on the part of the consumer.

The danger in attempting to 'read' samples in this way is of course that of inadvertently indicating only one's own position in the field of taste. How can one determine whether something is being sampled because it is cheesy, or whether the assessment that it is cheesy is a subjective *faux pas* on the part of the listener? Attempting to articulate a reading of a culture is always also a neat way of allowing culture to read *you*: 'culture classifies and, in doing so, classifies the classifier' (Savage and Bennett 2005, p. 4).

Conclusion

It cannot be taken as entirely contingent that this is a mode of musical production and distribution which is entirely organised around and through networked computers. There is in some sense a *homology* of sorts between the plunderphonic, trash aesthetics of the genre, and the mode of distribution, via netlabel. Whether wilfully or not, free distribution of music produced from appropriated samples reproduces and inflects a longstanding model of cultural value, where economic and semiotic or symbolic worth are conflated. Netlabel breakcore is neatly legible in the terms articulated originally by Hebdige (1979), where the subculture magically resolves contradictions by appropriation and bricolage, subversively iterating and undermining a basic tenet of capitalist ideology: that commodities are only ever worth exactly what they cost, and if something is provided for nothing, it must be worth nothing. Netlabel breakcore riffs on this ideological motif by being effectively free, in monetary terms, to those with the resources to access it, and yet simultaneously being largely concerned at an aesthetic level with waste, with significatory play with popular culture, cultural memory, and the ephemerality and accelerated turnover time of popular music.

Endnote

1. For example: Amenorea, Bad Sekta, Bitcrusher, Black Hoe, Breakcore.NL Music, Chase Records, Cock Rock Disco, Coffee Injection, Cunt Gang, Day of the Droids, Digital Vomit, Dirty Room 77, Dramacore, D-Trash, God Rekidz, Ideation, Illphabetik, KMPLX, Lost Science, Love Love Records, Musik Parano Mentale, Night Terror Recordings, NoiseworX, Northamericanhardcore, Pavilion36, RusZUD, Sickmode, Sociopath Recordings, Structural Damage Records, Subeclectic Records, United Elements of Hate, Wicked Area, Wildness Records, and Wrong Lab, among others.

Bibliography

Abend, G. 2008. 'The meaning of "theory"', *Sociological Theory,* 26/3, pp. 173–99

Attali, J. 1985. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (London)

Brooks, W. 1982. 'On being tasteless', *Popular Music,* 2, pp. 9–18

Collins, K. 2005. 'Dead channel surfing: the commonalities between cyberpunk literature and industrial music', *Popular Music,* 24/5, pp. 165–78

Frow, J. 2003. 'Invidious distinction: waste, difference, and classy stuff', in *Culture and Waste: The Creation and Destruction of Value*, ed. G. Hawkins and S. Muecke (Oxford) pp. 25–38

Hamelman, S. 2003. 'But is it garbage? The theme of trash in rock and roll criticism', *Popular Music and Society,* 26/2, pp. 203–23

Hebdige, D. 1979. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London)

Kahn-Harris, K. 2004. 'The "failure" of youth culture: reflexivity, music and politics in the black metal scene', *European Journal of Cultural Studies,* 7/1, pp. 95–111

Music Industry Piracy Investigations 2010. *Why should I care?* [online], available: http://www.mipi.com.au/Why-should-I-care.html [accessed May 2010]

Negrón-Muntaner, F. 2009. 'Poetry of filth: the (post) reggaeton lyrics of Calle 13', in *Reggaeton*, ed. R.Z. Rivera, W. Marshall, and D. Pacini Hernandez (Durham) pp. 327–40 '

Polanyi, K. 1971. 'The economy as instituted process', in *Trade and Market in the Early Empires*, ed. K. Polanyi, C.M. Arensberg and H.W. Pearson (Chicago) pp. 243–70

Savage, M. and T. Bennett. 2005. 'Editors' introduction: cultural capital and social inequality', *British Journal of Sociology*, 56/1, pp. 1–12

Thompson, M. 1979. *Rubbish Theory: the Creation and Destruction of Value* (Oxford)

Discography

Alex Tune, 'Ass Of Bass (EightBeatTune Remix), *VIP Rework*. RusZUD, rz100. 2009 [online], available: http://www.archive.org/details/rz100 [accessed 24 September 2010]

Alex Tune, 'Ass of Bass', *What is a Mashup?*. Sociopath Recordings, SRmp3 150. 2009 [online], available: http://sociopath-recordings-releases.blogspot.com/2009/09/srmp3-150-alex-tune-what-is-mashup.html [accessed 24 September 2010]

Buttress O'Kneel, 'Paraplegic Android (part 1)', *Mash-Up Your Ass*. Night Terror Records, NTR018. 2009 [online], available: http://www.nightterrorrecordings.com/ [accessed 24 September 2010]

Negrobeat, 'How about a Kiss?', *Damn Skippy*. KMPLX, KMPLX006. 2009 [online], available: http://www.myspace.com/komplexmusik [accessed 24 September 2010]

Non Human, 'Trip', *War Nah Done*. Ideation Records, IDEA012. 2009 [online], available: http://www.ideation-records.com/releases/war-nah-done/ [accessed 24 September 2010]

Zombie, 'Tysh Nie MashaPasha', *Grave Rave*. Blotklaat Rave Turbo Limited, BRL04. 2009 [online], available: http://blotklaatrave.blogspot.com/2009/12/grave-rave.html [accessed 24 September 2010]