

LOGICS OF VALUE FOR DIGITAL MUSIC

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Abstract

This paper will present and discuss a philosophic taxonomy for examining the values used in the subject-object relationship of digital music exchange. Use value is what practical use the music has for the participant and is most often different for composers and audience. The symbolic value of a work involves its potential for representation of some quality beyond its structure or use-value. Sign-value (status) is what social identity audiences associate with a work, composer or genre. This is often a factor in determining who attends live performances or downloads audio files. Finally, exchange value or object as commodity is perhaps the most important for the majority of digital music consumed today. The requirement for reproduction, either through recorded hard media, in a concert setting, or over the internet poses interesting possibilities and challenges for the creator and audience of this music.

To understand music in all its current aspects, it is no longer adequate to analyze the intrinsic musical values in isolation from institutional context. The current environment for music creation, production, and experience is one in which the traditional roles of composition as a private act of seeing, and listening as a public act of examination, are no longer clearly differentiated given the multiple paths currently available for exchange of digital music. The exchange possible in this music construct is a factor of the values assigned to the musical object by the creator, to the subject by the interpretant-listener, and the implicit value of a method of representation that relies heavily upon simulation and in which the commodity form of value dominates social exchange.

The premise developed in this paper is a philosophic taxonomy of analytic and aesthetic inquiry into digitally conceived and produced music and its increasing reliance on mass reproduction and consumer driven models of valuation. Folding itself within a framework of a highly processed world of technology and media-based communications systems, music has been shaped by the commercialization and objectification of these fields. The logics of consumption and use value have replaced the symbolic and isolated experiential values as primary modes of evaluating musical significance. In the past the primary body of music aesthetics research has centered on both the development of models for understanding the intrinsic value of a temporally organized work and the experience in which musical worth is ascertained. Accordingly from this historic perspective, the fundamental appeal of a musical work is as a structure of sounds that contains its own logic of value. The value of music is derived from knowledge of the formal structure and syntax inherent in the sounds that compose the music. It can be appreciated only by those capable of experiencing it with prior understanding of the poetics and symbolic context.

In a society dominated by production, music has now adopted the functions and attributes of produced objects that one exchanges in a technologically constructed framework. Objects that previously possessed or were awarded a symbolic value have adopted exchange, use and sign values that are presupposed in a consumer driven society. The death of the symbol is a prerequisite for its emergence as a commodity sign. Only by dissolving itself from a symbolic exchange can the object become a true sign of commodity, available to anyone for a price, short-lived, and ultimately disposable.

As French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard explains, "In order to become the object of consumption, the object must become a sign, that is, in some way, external to a relation which it now only signifies...."(Baudrillard 1988: 22) Thus it follows, that in consumption

... objects are (not) mechanically substituted for an absent relation, to fill a void, no: they describe the void, in a development which is actually a way of not experiencing it, while always referring to the possibility of experience.

(Baudrillard 1988: 25)

Unlike the symbolic object that possesses a unique quality and is able to endure a substantial length of time maintaining its associative meaning, the sign and exchange objects will quickly lose their meaning, becoming properly consumed, so that another can be put in its place. As a universal structure of contemporary society, this systemization of the consumption of sign objects becomes the replacement of previous symbol forms. As Baudrillard summarizes it in *Le Système des objets*, consumption becomes "a collective and active behavior. It is a complete set of values." (Baudrillard 1988: 25)

To fully realize this relationship of subject-object in digitally reproduced and consumed music, reason dictates that multiple systems of value are necessary for grasping a full meaning of music. The following four logics of value are arguably distinct in their illuminations of the nature of digitally exchanged music: 1) use value, 2) exchange value, 3) sign value, and 4) symbolic value. Within this framework, symbolic value designates traditional notions of artistic value and intrinsic-experiential value. It is understood that

digital musical objects do not exist in isolation from these four logics. The digitally encoded language is in itself an iconic representation of the musical syntax, consequently it is related to the ties between code and reproduction.

Obviously, the use value of any music can be ascertained from the perspective of creators, interpretation, listeners, and scholars. The use-value of an object would be its utility related in Marx's term to the satisfaction of certain needs. For the composer, this could be a factor for career development or increasing fame and authority. For the interpretant, the utility aspects are evaluated within the framework of all useful information acquired through a technological pathway, including personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical and social forms of information. In the era of simulation, not the production, but the reproduction of objects becomes crucial. At the same time usage becomes transformed. Accessibility is the primary goal, replacing the live performance. A work becomes accessible to a multitude of people, and becomes infinitely repeatable outside the performance setting for an extremely large number of interpretants. It gains availability. It loses its symbolic volume. It becomes far more difficult to ascertain relevant, associated musical values. It is divorced from any level of ambivalence and ambiguity. This is environment in which digital music finds itself currently, functioning primarily as a mass reproducible object.

Objects that are produced, encoded and exchanged by technological means are consequently subjected to and legitimated by the conditions of this methodology.

Technology, crucial for understanding general knowledge in our society, follows the principle of optimal performance: maximum output for minimum input. Jean-François

Lyotard called this the principle of 'performativity.' (Lyotard 1984: 37) Technology thus becomes the most efficient way of achieving the proof of an object. Given that technology costs money, an equivalency between wealth and truth or knowledge is thus established. Technology tends to link whatever objects or subjects that rely upon it to the economy. Expensive technology tends to imply better achievement. This case can be demonstrated in music by the large number of electronic music studios at college and universities in the world, each attempting to demonstrate a status of possessing state-of-the-art equipment. By reinforcing technology, one reinforces one's chances of arriving at the most truth. Since wealth is necessary to fund technology-based music production, a correlate between economic control and intrinsic-musical value is established.

This logic of equivalence, corresponding to exchange value, is often centered on the 'appearance' rather than the 'essence' of an object. This distinction is related to its evolution from symbolic to sign value status. For Theodor Adorno, the difference between 'essence' and 'appearance' entails the ideological effect of reification. (Adorno 1973: 95) For behind the reified appearances lies the nature of commodity production. Social conditions of capitalist production restrict the forms of musical thought and action. In most cases, people adapt to these conditions rather than oppose them or question their validity.

Similarly, Adorno's attraction to avant-garde music and art, particularly the music of the Viennese atonalists, was motivated by a desire to see avant-garde works defy the homogenizing effects of commodification, where music objects are reduced to exchange value criteria. (Adorno 1984: 155) Subjectivity is of little importance as an exchange

value. It plays the mere role of being just another object in the exchange. Adorno desired to preserve the subjectivity embodied in a work of art, thus protecting it from being stripped of all value, excluding exchange. He praises difficult art and philosophy since in his view, the struggle to comprehend and understand an art-work is necessary to ascertain its intrinsic value. (Adorno 1984: 155) The strength of modernism in the twentieth century reflects this strategy of resistance to overt marketing systems. Complexity became essential for a work of art not to fall prey to commercial conditions. Another method of resisting the commercial in music was to adopt the very 'low' elements in social life: obscenity, noise, distortion, and vulgarity. Both courses of action, complexity and crudity insured that a value system surrounding the work of art would not be dominated by exchange value.

In an era where the natural object is no longer credible, the code has raised simulation and consequently reproduction to a new stature. As Baudrillard feels, in the era of simulation, not the production, but the reproduction of objects become crucial. (Baudrillard 1988: 26) Acoustic music is centered on the production thus involving the subject and object in a meaningful exchange. Digitally created music is mass reproduced in an exact form before it is heard in many cases. The origin of the work and any associated contexts implied in its creation are undermined by its simulation and commercialization.

If capitalism is a society in which objects have now become the goal, exchange is merely a means. If individuals treat each other as objects and treat objects as the subject and the production-distribution-exchange-consumption circuit does not allow for any sustainable

symbolic representation, digitally produced music is faced with the challenge of finding a source outside this exchange relationship if it is to establish a symbolic framework of value. As we can see there are now attempts being made to discover new symbolic associations, hybridity forms drawn from 'exotic' cultures, ritualized musical forms drawn from modern and ancient spiritual movements, and the allure of cultural fashion have all become important paths searching for a new framework.

The logic of fashion leads into another realm of value taxonomy for digitally produced and exchanged music, that of the sign or status value. While many objects possess a utilitarian aspect, what essential to them is their capacity to signify a status. In a wealthy consumer society objects are produced and bought less to satisfy a need than to signify a status. Life style and status, not economic need, lie at the base of social life. This is particularly true of art objects, including music. The concert hall is much about a social gathering around shared class values, opulent buildings and 'beautiful' melodies create the environmental setting for symphony orchestras and their predominantly upper class patrons. The grungy, loud and raucous environment of the alternative rock club is the parallel setting for the rebellious and anti-social youth. In many cases the participants in these settings are not a uniform social make-up. Participants may be from outside the primary audience culture but may demonstrate a desire to be connected with the social strata through an association with its music. This is often a factor in determining who attends live performances, buys a CD, or downloads a particular audio file. The so-called 'new music ghetto' is a designation of a tightly homogenous group of listeners that share a similar sign value of music.

The digital object as sign, subjected to constraints of a commodity and exchange value system, to status identification, and temporal cycles of variations of fashion is destined to be shaped by these forces and prohibited from acquiring little symbolic and intrinsic meaning. As Malcolm Budd states,

The significance of music as an art-form has often been thought to derive from the fact that some or all musical works are symbols of states of mind or character, attitudes to life and other kinds of extra-musical phenomena. (Budd 1992: 104)

Budd aims to identify an art-work's artistic value isolated from the other values it may possess. His proposal is that the artistic value of a work of art, its value as art, is determined by or is a function of 'the intrinsic value of the experience the work offers.' (Levinson 1994: 94)

The artistic value that Malcolm Budd identifies is part of a complex system of traditional aesthetic and symbolic associations that involve the potential for representation of some quality beyond its structure or use and sign value. There are a variety of symbolic associations of a work from the perspective of creator and interpretant. For the composer, these may contain organic and structural principles, originality value, influence value and performance value. For the interpretant-listener, there are a large number of experiential values to be considered, each individual formulating them differently. These are all dependent on a system of valuation that places symbolic associations in a higher regard than those of use, exchange and status.

Digital music, by nature of its iconic representation, is at a distinct disadvantage to acoustic forms in cultivating a rich symbolic and artistic system of value. Its use and proximity to the other forms of represented information in modern society, the highly controlled and processed media and the commodity market place, implicate it with an environment governed by non-symbolic logic. Digital music has very quickly become a strategic consumption, an essential element ever present in the world of commodity exchange, fashion trends, media and marketing, status social associations, conformity and simulation. Its significance apart from these entities will only be understood in a measured distance from them. It must identify an existence not solely as an object, but as a mechanism for a new subject-object interplay and as a symbolic vehicle for a return of new levels of ambiguity, ambivalence, and as a language of silence, inarticulateness, the almost imperceptible.

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