



For the Record: Adorno on Music in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility

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For the Record: Adorno on Music in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility

THOMAS Y. LEVIN

If at some later point, instead of doing “history of ideas” [Geistesgeschichte], one were to read the state of the cultural spirit [Geist] off of the sundial of human technology, then the prehistory of the gramophone could take on an importance that might eclipse that of many a famous composer.

—T. W. Adorno (1934)

Fresh scholarship has finally begun to displace the longstanding misreading of Adorno in the Anglo-American reception of the Frankfurt School.¹ Adorno's position on popular culture—most often presented in the context of the polemical exchanges with Walter Benjamin—has generally been characterized as a myopic mandarinism blind to the utopian and progressive dimensions of mass media such as film. This black-and-white juxtaposition of Adorno and Benjamin—while perhaps valuable as a reductive pedagogical device for presenting an historical debate on aesthetics and politics—depends in large measure on somewhat hasty readings of Adorno's essays on popular music and jazz,² and of the

1. See, for example, Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London/New York: Verso, 1990).

2. Besides “On Popular Music” [written together with George Simpson], in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1941), pp. 17–48, and “Perennial Fashion—Jazz,” in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1967), pp. 119–32, there are a number of other texts by Adorno on the subject available in English. These include a review of Wilder Hobson's *American Jazz Music* and Winthrop Sargent's *Jazz Hot and Hybrid* in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, vol. 11, no. 1 (1941), pp. 167–78; an entry on jazz in the *Encyclopedia of the Arts*, ed. Dagobert D. Runes and Harry G. Schrickel (New York: Philosophical Library, 1946), pp. 511–13; and most recently, “On Jazz,” trans. Jamie Owen Daniel, *Discourse* 12 (Fall/Winter 1989/90), pp. 45–69. Here too, recent readings have recognized that the object of Adorno's critique is not jazz per se but rather a very specific moment in its history such as the music of Paul Whiteman (see, for example, Wolfgang Sandner, “Populärmusik als somatisches Stimulans. Adornos Kritik der ‘leichten Musik,’” in *Adorno und die Musik*, ed. Otto Kolleritsch [Graz: Institut für Wertungsforschung, 1979],

1938 study “On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening,”³ readings which simply reduce the often problematic analyses to variations of the “culture industry critique” articulated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. But as Fredric Jameson has rightly pointed out in his recent study of Adorno, “the Adorno-Horkheimer theory of the Culture Industry provides a theoretical description of mass cultural experience which can scarcely be reduced to sheer opinionated or elitist vituperation against ‘bad art.’”⁴ It is certainly true that Adorno’s opinion of film, from the perspective of an exile in Hollywood in the 1940s, was not nearly as high as Benjamin’s, which was in large part a response to the Soviet avant-garde over a decade earlier. Yet while Adorno was certainly not immune to “tiresome bouts of *haut bourgeois* anti-technological nostalgia,”⁵ his critique of mechanical reproduction should not be mistaken as an objection to the technology of cinema *per se*.

Adorno was no Luddite; rather, his negative response to cinema was a theoretically grounded objection to what he perceived to be the primacy of technology over technique in film. This dominance of technology is largely due to the surface mimesis of the cinematic medium, Adorno argued, that is, to the indexical iconicity of the photographic frames. As a result, film “does not permit absolute construction [because] its elements, however abstract, always retain something representational; they are never purely aesthetic values.”⁶ Recent

pp. 125–32). While Adorno’s failure to differentiate here is highly symptomatic given the sophistication of his analyses of other musical genres and periods, it by no means justifies a wholesale rejection of the work. As Bernard Gendron notes in an article entitled “Theodor Adorno Meets the Cadillacs” (in Tania Modleski, ed., *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986], pp. 18–36): “Despite its failures and excesses, Adorno’s 1941 essay ‘On Popular Music’ remains in my opinion one of the two or three most penetrating pieces on the subject; it addresses many important questions which are often neglected by those who tend to dismiss Adorno’s work” (p. 19).

3. This essay in particular—available in translation in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt (New York: Urizon Books, 1978), pp. 270–99—must be understood, so Adorno insisted, as a response to Benjamin’s “Artwork” essay (see Adorno, “Scientific Experiences of a European Scholar in America,” in *The Intellectual Migration*, ed. Donald Fleming and Bernard Bailyn [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969], p. 342, and the preface to *Dissonanzen*, vol. 14 of the *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann [Frankfurt a.M.: Surkamp Verlag, 1973], p. 10). Most commentators fail to recognize that, as such, it was written as a polemical “corrective” to what Adorno perceived as Benjamin’s “all too unmediatedly redemptive” arguments. If it is overstated, it is thus to an important degree out of this specific, rhetorical necessity. For a nuanced reading of Benjamin’s “Artwork” essay, see Miriam Hansen, “Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: ‘The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology,’” *New German Critique* 40 (Winter 1987), pp. 179–224.

4. Jameson, *Late Marxism*, p. 145.

5. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 358.

6. Adorno, “Filmtransparente” (1966), *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10 (1977), p. 357; translated as “Transparencies on Film,” Thomas Y. Levin, *New German Critique* 24/25 (Fall/Winter, 1981/82), p. 202. In Alexander Kluge’s anecdotal rendering of Adorno’s allergy to film’s photographic immediacy, the philosopher is claimed to have said: “I love to go to the movies; the only thing that bothers

Le Père Engramelle. Workshop for the Production of Mechanical Musical Instruments: Frontispiece to La Tonotechnie ou l'Art de noter les cylindres. 1775.



attempts to read Adorno against the grain have argued that in later essays such as “Transparencies on Film” (1966) even this prejudice—to some degree a function of the Jewish taboo on representation so central to Adorno’s aesthetic—is traversed by a recognition of the progressive and critical potential of cinematic montage to transform even photographic mimesis into constellations, i.e., a type of writing, thus acknowledging that cinematic technique is not structurally excluded by its technology.⁷ However, such a redemption of mechanical reproduction by virtue of its status as inscription is not merely a late development in

me is the image on the screen” (cited in Miriam Hansen, “Introduction to Adorno’s ‘Transparencies on Film,’” *New German Critique* 24/25 [Fall/Winter, 1981/82], p. 194). For an extended treatment of sound-image relations, see Adorno’s study of film music, *Komposition für den Film (Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 15), written in German together with Hanns Eisler in 1944 but first published in English in 1947 as *Composing for Films* (New York: Oxford University Press). For a discussion of this text, see my “The Acoustic Dimension: Notes on Cinema Sound,” *Screen* 25 (May/June 1984), pp. 55–69.

7. See Adorno, “Transparencies on Film”; Miriam Hansen, “Introduction.”

Adorno's writing on the cinema, but can already be found in publications from the 1920s. Indeed, it may be that the stakes of Adorno's resistance to film can only be properly understood through a consideration of his remarks on the technology of mechanical reproduction in a field in which he was professionally trained: music. For it is here, in a series of texts on the gramophone, that a rather different, more Benjaminian dimension of Adorno's position on the relation of cultural production and technological reproducibility finds expression.

Adorno's serious interest in questions of popular culture and technology was already clearly evident in his — largely overlooked — involvement as a young man with the *Musikblätter des Anbruch*, an avant-garde music journal founded in Vienna in 1919 as one of two house periodicals of the music publisher Universal Edition.⁸ Adorno began contributing to the *Musikblätter* in 1925, having been introduced, one surmises, by the composer Alban Berg, his teacher at the time and the first of the journal's many editors.⁹ In 1929, after years as a regular contributor,¹⁰ Adorno was invited onto the editorial board of the *Musikblätter*, joining the two other long-time editors Paul Stefan, a music journalist, and Hans Heinsheimer, the representative of Universal Edition.¹¹ He immediately pro-

8. The other journal, *Pult und Taktstock: Fachzeitschrift für Dirigenten*, was aimed primarily at conductors. Adorno published here as well, submitting essays in the mid-1920s on Béla Bartok, Arnold Schönberg, and on questions of interpretation; see, for example, the texts reprinted in "Musikalische Schriften V-VI," *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 18 (1984), pp. 279–81, 324–27, 335–44, and vol. 19 (1984), pp. 440–47.

9. Adorno's all-too-little-known work as a composer is available in two volumes edited by Heinz-Klaus Metzger and Rainer Riehn: *Kompositionen* (Munich: Verlag Edition Text und Kritik, 1980). Volume 1 contains piano song cycles; volume 2 chamber music, choral, and orchestral works. The complete musical oeuvre was performed in a gala concert entitled "Theodor W. Adorno: Der Philosoph als Komponist," in Frankfurt on September 17, 1988 as part of a commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Nazi pogrom on the night of November 9, 1938. The program also included the world premiere of two songs with orchestra from Adorno's uncompleted singspiel based on Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, which he wrote between November 1932 and August 1933. See Adorno, *Der Schatz des Indianer-Joe: Singspiel nach Mark Twain*, ed. and with an afterword by Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1979). The complete compositional works were just released on a Wergo CD (#6173-2). With the exception of an early essay by René Leibowitz ("Der Komponist Theodor W. Adorno," in *Zeugnisse: Theodor W. Adorno zum sechzigsten Geburtstag* [Frankfurt a.M.: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1963], pp. 355–59), studies of this dimension of Adorno's creative output have begun to appear only recently. These include: Dieter Schnebel, "Einführung in Adornos Musik," in *Adorno und die Musik*, pp. 15–19; Rolf Tiedemann, ed., *Adorno-Noten* (Berlin: Galerie Wewerka Edition, 1984); Sigfried Schibli, *Der Komponist Theodor W. Adorno* (Frankfurt a.M.: Frankfurter Bund für Volksbildung, 1988), and "Theodor W. Adorno: Der Komponist," *Musik-Konzepte* 63/64 (January 1989).

10. Well over two dozen of the articles Adorno published in the *Musikblätter des Anbruch* — including a series of musical aphorisms, articles on Gustav Mahler, Béla Bartok, Arnold Schönberg, Alban Berg, Anton von Webern, Hanns Eisler, on twelve-tone technique, on the new Brahms edition, on hit tunes and a study of the concert audience — are reprinted in volumes 18 and 19 of the *Gesammelte Schriften*; precise bibliographic information can be found in volume 19, pp. 641–54.

11. For a more detailed discussion of these two figures and the power politics surrounding the editorial board of *Anbruch*, see Heinz Steinert, *Adorno in Wien: Ueber die (Un-)möglichkeit von Kunst, Kultur und Befreiung* (Vienna: Verlag für Gesellschaftskritik, 1989), pp. 133ff.

posed a radical reorganization of the journal starting with the very title, which was shortened from *Musikblätter des Anbruch* to simply *Anbruch* (since the expressionist literary publication to which it had originally been linked had since ceased to exist). Fortunately, Adorno laid out his new agenda for the *Anbruch*—effectively a full frontal attack on what he considered to be the reactionary forces in the music world—in a pair of programmatic tracts written at the time.¹² Together with the actual development of the journal itself, these polemical texts document in great detail Adorno's early thoughts on the aesthetics and politics of music and, in particular, his conception of popular culture and technology.

Among the many changes Adorno proposed for the *Anbruch*, there is an adamant call to broaden its scope to include a focus on “light music” [*leichte Musik*] and kitsch. Anticipating elements of the “culture industry critique” developed together with Horkheimer years later, Adorno already asserted here that “light music” and kitsch are by no means the “collective” art they claim to be, but are rather an ideological surrogate structured by specific class interests. In strictly musical terms kitsch is not at all modern, he argued, but reactionary. However, this did not lead Adorno to dismiss it. On the contrary, he insisted unequivocally on the redemption [*Rettung*] of kitsch as an object “of the greatest importance.” The *Anbruch*, he suggested, ought to have a special issue and a regular column on the subject.¹³ In both, “light music” and kitsch must be defended (against those who would simply dismiss them) and also simultaneously criticized (to counter those who would simply champion them). As Adorno puts it:

In conjunction with sociological analyses there is also an entire field of music—previously denied any serious study whatsoever—which ought to be incorporated into the domain of the *Anbruch*; namely, the entire realm of “light music,” of kitsch, not only jazz but also the European operetta, the hit tune, etc. In doing so, one ought to adopt a very particular kind of approach that ought to be circumscribed in two senses. On the one hand, one must abandon the arrogance character-

12. The first of these texts, “Zum *Anbruch*: Exposé,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 19, pp. 601–2, is dated 1928 and was unpublished. The second text, “Zum Jahrgang 1929 des *Anbruch*,” first appeared as the unsigned lead article in *Anbruch* 11 (January 1929), pp. 1f, and was also reprinted in the feuilleton of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* 73 (January 25, 1929; Erstes Morgenblatt), pp. 1–2. It is now available in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 19, pp. 605–8.

13. The third issue of *Anbruch*, published following Adorno's official appearance on the editorial board in 1929 (vol. 11, no. 3), was in fact entirely devoted to the subject of “light music” with essays on operettas, film music, salon orchestras, and radio by Ernst Bloch, Ernst Krenek, and Kurt Weill, among others. Adorno contributed a text analyzing three popular hit tunes (“Schlageranalysen,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 18, pp. 778–87). Missing from the issue—and probably never written—was an essay on “Musik als Hintergrund” [music as background], which had been proposed by Siegfried Kracauer, one of the nonspecialist contributors Adorno had recommended for the revamped journal (see *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 19, p. 604).

istic of an understanding of ‘serious’ music which believes it can completely ignore the music which today constitutes the only musical material consumed by the vast majority of all people. Kitsch must be played out and defended against everything that is merely elevated mediocre art, against the now rotten ideals of personality, culture, etc. On the other hand, however, one must not fall prey to the tendency—all too fashionable these days, above all in Berlin—to simply glorify kitsch and consider it the true art of the epoch merely because of its popularity.¹⁴

Here Adorno is effectively calling for a reading of kitsch—and indeed of all mass culture—that is sensitive to both its reified and its utopian dimensions.

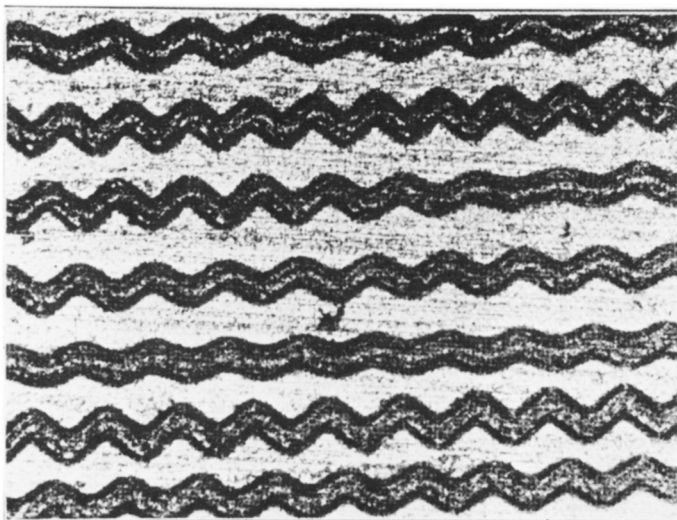
In a similar vein, Adorno also maintained that the new *Anbruch* ought to undertake a critical reconsideration of the wide range of *technologies* currently being employed in the production of both “light” and “serious” music. To this end, he proposed a new rubric entitled “Mechanische Musik” to be devoted exclusively to questions concerning music and machines. Such a column had in fact already been inaugurated in the *Musikblätter* years earlier by the music critic Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt, but had fallen into neglect. According to Adorno, this was because Stuckenschmidt had made the mistake of orienting the rubric toward the *producers* of mechanical music, i.e., the record industry, the gramophone manufacturers, etc., in hopes of attracting revenue from advertising. However, since the industry had its own journals, the *Anbruch* was hardly appealing as a propaganda vehicle, and the anticipated advertising did not materialize. Instead, Adorno conceived the column—now under the direction of Frank Warschauer—as a critical and pedagogical forum directed towards the *consumers*, providing them with both technical advice and musicologically knowledgeable criticism of work produced for various new media. Indeed, as is evident from Adorno’s unpublished memorandum on the new editorial direction of the journal, the scope of the new rubric was to be very comprehensive:

The section on mechanical music can not have a one-sided focus only on record criticism. Instead, it must also address problems concerning radio and possibly even provide regular reviews of the most important broadcasts of modern music (here too, critique!). Finally it must also discuss all the musical problems of the cinema, that is, both the older forms of film music as well as the newer problems of the sound film.¹⁵

In the later version of his programmatic sketch for the revitalization of the

14. “Zum *Anbruch*: Exposé,” pp. 601–2 (this and subsequent quotations, except where otherwise noted, have been translated by the author). For a slightly later version of Adorno’s position on kitsch, see the unpublished essay “Kitsch,” written circa 1932, and now in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 18, pp. 791–94.

15. “Zum *Anbruch*: Exposé,” p. 601.



Anbruch, Adorno articulated the socio-philosophical imperatives that motivated this call for a regular focus on the relationship between music and technology. “The purpose of the rubric on mechanical [music],” he writes,

is not merely to trace journalistically a conspicuous trend in current musical life. Rather, it will attempt to shed light on the very meaning of mechanization, will weigh the different tendencies of mechanization against each other and will try to have an influence on the politics of programming [for these mechanical media]. All this grows out of the conviction that the mechanical presentation of music today is of contemporary relevance in a deeper sense than merely being currently available as a new technological means. To put it another way, this position arises out of the conviction that the availability of means corresponds to an availability of consciousness and that the current historical state of the [art] works themselves to a large extent requires them to be presented mechanically.¹⁶

In light of this insistence on the importance of technology as an issue for contemporary musical practice of all kinds, it is not entirely surprising that alongside his extensive work on radio,¹⁷ Adorno also chose on a number of occasions to write

16. “Zum Jahrgang 1929 des *Anbruch*,” p. 607.

17. Adorno’s various essays on radio—including “The Radio Symphony: An Experiment in Theory” (*Radio Research 1941*, ed. Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Frank Stanton [New York: Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, 1941], pp. 110–39); “The Psychological Technique of Martin Luther Thomas’ Radio Addresses” (1943, written in English and unpublished during Adorno’s lifetime, now in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 9/1 [1975], pp. 7–142); “A Social Critique of Radio Music” [English original, written together with Dr. George Simpson of the Princeton Radio Research Project], *Kenyon Review* 7 [Spring 1945], pp. 208–17)—will be collected in a forthcoming supplementary volume of Adorno’s *Gesammelte Schriften* which will also contain the previously unpublished fragments of an uncompleted book-length study entitled “Current of Music. Elements of a Radio Theory.”

about the other influential mechanical musical apparatus: the gramophone. Indeed, at the time of Adorno's editorial overhaul of the *Musikblätter*, the first of his three articles on the phonograph had already been published in the February 1928 issue of that very journal.

Adorno's earliest essay on the gramophone, a series of paratactical reflections entitled "The Curves of the Needle,"¹⁸ ranges widely, speculating on the psychological appeal of the new medium (comparing its allure to the pleasure afforded by the photograph), its ramifications for the experience of music, its potential effect on hearing (such as its threat to the future of absolute pitch), and the sociology of its reception and commercial exploitation. The text begins with the question of how, like photography, the mechanical mediation of the gramophone transforms in various and subtle ways the events it records. "In the aesthetic form of technological reproduction," writes the twenty-five-year-old author, "these objects no longer possess their traditional reality." Clearly the gramophone does alter the dimensions of the live musical event, transforming everything—in a manner similar to radio—into chamber music, i.e. music for domestic environments. However, Adorno immediately points out that it is also an "obedient" and "patient" machine that does not impose itself upon the music it records but rather accommodates itself to it. Indeed, where the essay is nostalgic it is not a pretechnological world that is mourned. Rather, if anything is lamented, it is the decline of certain qualities characteristic of early recordings (and of early photographs as well): "In their early phases, these technologies had the power to penetrate rationally the reigning artistic practice." Contemporary vocal recordings, by contrast, lack the subtlety and authenticity of earlier ones, the records themselves are no longer as durable, and the apparatuses have increasingly sacrificed their former, unabashedly technological appearance for the pretense of bourgeois furniture. All these later developments are ideologically overdetermined, according to Adorno, who argues that they function to mollify the all-too sobering, critical effect of the technology at its inception. Linking the question of the politics of mechanical reproduction to the issue of the

18. Full bibliographic information can be found in the opening note of each of the three translations of Adorno's essays on the gramophone that follow. Unlike the two later texts, "The Curves of the Needle" was reprinted—almost four decades after its initial publication in *Musikblätter des Anbruch*—in a German record journal, *Phono: Internationale Schallplatten-Zeitschrift* 11 (July/August 1965), pp. 123–24. As Adorno explains in a note appended to this later republication, "The motifs have been retained unchanged and with no attempt to cover up the temporal distance; the author made changes in the language to the extent that he deemed it necessary." While the translation follows this later version—at the insistence of the publisher—the changes made in 1965 are more than just cosmetic. Indeed, a closer comparison of the two versions might well provide an interesting index of the extent to which Adorno's later positions on music technology had changed in the thirty-eight-year interval.

politics of Enlightenment itself, the very first section of the essay closes with a recognition of their shared *ambiguity* [*Zweideutigkeit*]:¹⁹

The positive tendency of consolidated technology to present objects themselves in as unadorned a fashion as possible is, however, traversed by the ideological need of the ruling society, which demands subjective reconciliation with these objects. . . . The ambiguity [*Zweideutigkeit*] of the results of forward-moving technology—which does not tolerate any constraint—confirms the ambiguity of the process of forward-moving rationality as such.

For Adorno, the history of technologies of mechanical reproduction and the history of Reason are both marked by a tension between their progressive potential and a simultaneous threat of appropriation by the forces of reaction.

Adorno's next essay on the gramophone, written under the pseudonym Hektor Rottweiler, was published in 1934 in the notoriously polemical Viennese music journal *23*.²⁰ As indicated by its title, "The Form of the Phonograph Record" focuses on the materiality of the medium itself, its *thingness* [*Dinglichkeit*], since, as Adorno puts it, "It is not in the play of the gramophone as a surrogate for music but rather in the phonograph record as a thing that its potential significance—and also its aesthetic significance—resides." The essay opens with a philosophical phenomenology of the gramophone record reminiscent of the extraordinary chapter in *The Magic Mountain* that meticulously describes Hans Castorp's discovery and fascination with the new technology in the sanatorium's salon.²¹ For Adorno, the most immediately significant feature of the curious black-surfaced objects is that they are "covered with curves, a delicately scribbled, utterly illegible writing, which here and there forms more plastic figures for reasons that remain obscure to the layman upon listening." That is, what is essential about the "form" of the phonograph record is that this spiral is a

19. It is interesting to note that, as Samuel Weber has pointed out, both Kant and Heidegger also articulate the question of art and technology in terms of a *Zweideutigkeit*, which Weber translates as equivocation or ambiguity. In Weber's rendering of Heidegger's formulation this reads: "The essence of technics is in an elevated sense ambiguous (*zweideutig*). Such ambiguity points toward the mystery (*Geheimnis*) of all 'dismounting' (*Entbergung*), i.e., of truth." (Martin Heidegger, "Die Frage nach der Technik," in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* [Pfullingen: Neske, 1967], p. 33). See Samuel Weber, "Theater, Technics, and Writing," *1-800 1* (Fall 1989), p. 17.

20. Founded in 1932 as a corrective to the unrigorous music criticism in Vienna, *23* quickly developed into a critical voice reminiscent of Karl Kraus' *Die Fackel*. The journal's title refers to paragraph 23 of the Austrian journalism law, which guarantees the right to force publication of a correction to previously published false information. As an indication of the intensity of *23*'s invective, one can point to the lawsuit that was initiated shortly after the appearance of its first issue by the established Viennese music critic Julius Korngold (1860–1945) against the journal's editor Willy Reich for defamation of character; the trial, which lasted over a year, ended with Reich being cleared of all charges.

21. See Thomas Mann, *Der Zauberberg* (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer, 1974/1986), pp. 883–906.

trace, which is to say, it is a form of inscription that is nevertheless not readily intelligible.

Pursuing the comparison with photography begun in the previous article, Adorno argues that the record is a faithful reproduction, an “acoustic photograph” intelligible even to the dog listening diligently for his master.²² And yet, like photographic inscription, Adorno adds—in a striking anticipation of the key move in Benjamin’s later discussion of the destruction of “aura”—the record *does* change the status of the acoustic event it captures since “the latter cannot be turned on and repeated at will but is rather bound to its specific place and time.” This results in the loss of what Adorno calls—in a more metaphysical than simply physical sense—the “third dimension” of the original work. It is no accident that one speaks of both photographic and gramophonic “plates” (*Platte* is the German word for “record”) since in both cases the term captures the two-dimensionality of a representation—described earlier as “fragile like tablets”—that can be displaced both temporally and physically, and also traded on the market like a commodity. “Records are possessed like photographs” and both, like stamps, were collected in albums in the nineteenth century. Taking up a topos from the earlier essay, Adorno describes all three as “herbaria of artificial life” in which the memories of a vanishing existence and temporality find domestic refuge.

Adorno’s response to what is effectively the destruction of the “aura” of the musical event through gramophonic reproduction is not, however, what one would expect. For while he describes phonographic reproduction unambiguously as a reification—Adorno states explicitly that the record makes it possible for the first time to own music as a thing—this reification is not negatively marked. Rather, it is read as the condition of possibility of the transformation of music into text:

There is no doubt that, as music is removed by the phonograph record from the realm of live production and from the imperative of artistic

22. The record as an acoustic photograph is, in fact, a figure that even precedes and then follows the invention and early development of the phonograph. As early as 1856 Nadar had the idea of a “*daguerrotypographie acoustique*” that would faithfully reproduce sounds. In 1864 he again describes such an apparatus—which he is the first to call a “phonographe”—and the possibilities of “time shifting” that it would afford:

One of these days it will come to pass that someone will present us with the daguerreotype of sound—the phonograph—something like a box within which melodies would be fixed and retained, the way the camera surprises and fixes images. To such effect that a family, I imagine, finding itself prevented from attending the opening of a *Forze del destino* or an *Afrique*, or whatever, would only have to delegate one of its members, armed with the phonograph in question, to go there. And upon his return: “How was the overture?” “Like This!” “Too fast?” “There!” “And the quintette?” Your wishes are served. Marvelously. Don’t you think the tenor screeches a bit?

(F. Nadar, *Les Mémoires du géant* [Paris, 1864], p.1; cited in Jacques Perriault, *Mémoires de l’ombre et du son: une archéologie de l’audio-visuel* [Paris: Flammarion, 1981], pp. 133–34).

activity and becomes petrified, it absorbs into itself, in this process of petrification, the very life that would otherwise vanish. The dead art rescues the ephemeral and perishing art as the only one alive. Therein may lie the phonograph record's most profound justification, which can not be impugned by any aesthetic objection to its reification. For this justification reestablishes by the very means of reification an age-old, submerged and yet warranted relationship: that between music and *writing*.

The notational system for music prior to the invention of the gramophone, Adorno explains, was an arbitrary signifying system, a structured collection of "mere signs." Through the gramophone, however, music liberates itself from the shackles of such notation, from its long subordination to the dictates of marks on paper, and *itself* becomes writing. But a writing of a very specific sort since this concentric hieroglyph, Adorno points out, "is inseparably committed to the sound that inhabits this and no other acoustic groove." The indexical nature of the inscription produced by mechanical reproduction thus recuperates the unavoidable reification of the acoustic event by transforming it into a "necessary" trace.

Suddenly it becomes clear why Adorno has *deemphasized* the various features of the musical event which *are* transformed—for better or for worse—through mechanical reproduction. When Adorno writes that what is captured on the record is "music deprived of its best dimension" and then immediately adds that this music "is not significantly altered by it," it is evident that this lost dimension is only insignificant because Adorno is concerned with something that is gained in the process: the nonarbitrariness of the acoustic groove produced by the indexical status of the recording. This is why he must insist that the form of the record is "virtually its nonform": it must efface itself in its indexical transcription of the musical event. The constant comparisons with the equally indexical medium of photography serve largely to emphasize this point. Indeed, one could argue that it is Adorno's commitment to the mechanics of indexicality that leads him to argue that the significance of the phonograph is to be sought in the development of the protogramphonic musical machines such as music boxes and player pianos. Why? Because the history of these machines is the genealogy of the indexical inscription of the acoustic. This is confirmed in a series of aphorisms entitled "Drehorgel-Stücke" [Barrel Organ Pieces] that Adorno published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* a few months before the appearance of "The Form of the Phonograph Record."²³ The significance of the barrel organ,

23. Adorno, "Drehorgel-Stücke," *Frankfurter Zeitung*, July 28, 1934; now in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 18, pp. 37–39; citations pp. 38 and 39. On the prehistory of gramophone, see Eugène H. Weiss, *Phonographes et Musique mécanique* (Paris: Hachette, 1930), and H. Weiss-Stauffacher, *Mechanische Musikinstrumente und Musikautomaten* (Zurich: Orel Füssli Verlag, 1975).

“whose cylinders anticipated those of the phonograph and thereby modernity itself,” is to be found entirely in its technology, Adorno writes, that is, in the “cipher [*Geheimschrift*] of its cylinders whose simple mechanics are already utterly rational.” Indeed, he adds, “In the encounter with the barrel organ, one gets a hint of that reconciliation with technology, which one day will be of greater significance than any Luddite attacks, when technology finally regains its proper place.”

The importance of the gramophone’s indexical trace also clarifies Adorno’s otherwise puzzling, repeated denial of the possibility of gramophone-specific music. For while the statement “there has never been any gramophone-specific music” might make sense as an aesthetic judgment, it is simply false as an historical claim. However successful they might have been from a musical point of view, what is described as the first experiments in gramophone-specific composition had already been carried out in 1930 by none less than Paul Hindemith and Ernst Toch at an event entitled “Neue Musik Berlin 1930” at the Hochschule für Musik. In a note published in the German music journal *Melos*, Heinrich Burkhard describes these works as follows:

This made-for-phonograph-record-music [*Originalschallplattenmusik*] was accomplished by superimposing various phonograph recordings and live musical performances, by employing variations in speed, pitch height and acoustic timbre which are not possible in real performance. The result was an original music which can only be recreated by means of the gramophone apparatus.²⁴

Together with Moholy-Nagy’s 1923 call for a transformation of the gramophone from a repro-ductive into a pro-ductive technology through the development of a “groove-script alphabet” that would be physically incised onto the record,²⁵ these are, of course, some of the pathbreaking moments in the archeology of the contemporary practices of gramophone-specific music referred to as “scratch” and “mix.” From Adorno’s perspective, however, both of these directions represent a move away from sustained indexicality; indeed, from the outset, the desire for gramophone-specific music was in fact articulated by its advocates as “an

24. Heinrich Burkhard, “Anmerkungen zu den ‘Lehrstücken’ und zur Schallplattenmusik,” *Melos* 9 (May/June 1930), p. 230. For comments by one of the “gramophone composers,” see Ernst Toch, “Ueber meine Kantate ‘Das Wasser’ und meine Grammophonmusik,” *Ibid.*, pp. 221–22, and his earlier essay, “Musik für mechanische Instrumente,” *Neue Musikzeitung* 47 (July 1926).

25. See “Neue Gestaltung in der Musik: Möglichkeiten des Grammophons,” in *Der Sturm* 14 (July 1923), pp. 103–5; translated as “New Form in Music: Potentialities of the Phonograph,” in Krisztina Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), pp. 291–2, and in a different translation by Ed Cantu entitled “New Plasticism in Music: Possibilities of the Gramophone,” in *Broken Music: Artists’ Recordworks*, ed. Ursula Block and Michael Glasmeier (Berlin: DAAD and gelbe Musik, 1989), pp. 54–56.

attempt to get away from the phonetically transcribed, *photographed music* which was originally conceived and written for a different instrument.”²⁶

But if Adorno was willing to embrace the inscription produced by the mechanical reproduction of music, why does he seem to refuse to do so when it comes to film (whose photographic signifiers are no less indexical)? It is, one could answer, because the indexical traces of the photograph have the additional semiotic characteristic of *iconicity*—i.e., a formal surface resemblance which endows them with facile intelligibility. In other words, what distinguishes mechanically reproduced music from mechanically reproduced images is the combination of indexical “*necessity*” (the record as a motivated, not arbitrary, trace or sign) and *unintelligibility* (despite their motivation, these “reticent” gramophonic traces are not immediately readable). Music, Adorno writes, is recorded

at the price of its immediacy, yet with the hope that, once fixed in this way, it will some day become readable as the “last remaining universal language since the construction of the tower,” a language whose *determined yet encrypted expressions* are contained in each of its “phrases” (emphasis added).

Thus the same dual specificity of the phonograph record that distinguishes it from the cinematic sign also enables Adorno to see in it, for reasons that will become clearer below, an inkling of the “final language of all mankind.”

At first glance there is a striking similarity between Adorno’s evocation of a post-lapsarian utopia and the universal language topos that accompanied early cinema.²⁷ The parallel logic in what one could call the Esperantist conception of the cinema is evident, for example, in D. W. Griffith’s claim in a 1921 interview that “A picture is the universal symbol, and a *picture that moves* is a universal language. Moving pictures, someone suggests, ‘might have saved the situation when the Tower of Babel was built.’”²⁸ Just as cinema was heralded as a transparent, unproblematically accessible (because visual) alternative to national lan-

26. Rudolf Sonner, “Die Musikmaschine,” *Der Auftakt*, vol. 9, no. 5 (1931), p. 141 (emphasis added).

27. As Miriam Hansen has pointed out, this metaphor of universal language, which was “used by journalists, intellectuals, social workers, clergy, producers, and industrial apologists alike . . . drew on a variety of discourses (Enlightenment, nineteenth-century positivism, Protestant millennialism, the Esperanto movement, and the growing advertising industry) and oscillated accordingly between utopian and totalitarian impulses” (Miriam Hansen, “The Hieroglyph and the Whore: D. W. Griffith’s *Intolerance*,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 88 (Spring 1989), p. 362. For more on the universal language discourse in early cinema, see also Hansen’s “Universal Language and Democratic Culture: Myths of Origin in Early American Cinema,” in *Myth and Enlightenment in American Literature: In Honor of Hans-Joachim Lang*, ed. Dieter Meindl, et al. (Erlangen: Universitätsbund Erlagen-Nürnberg, 1985), pp. 321–51.

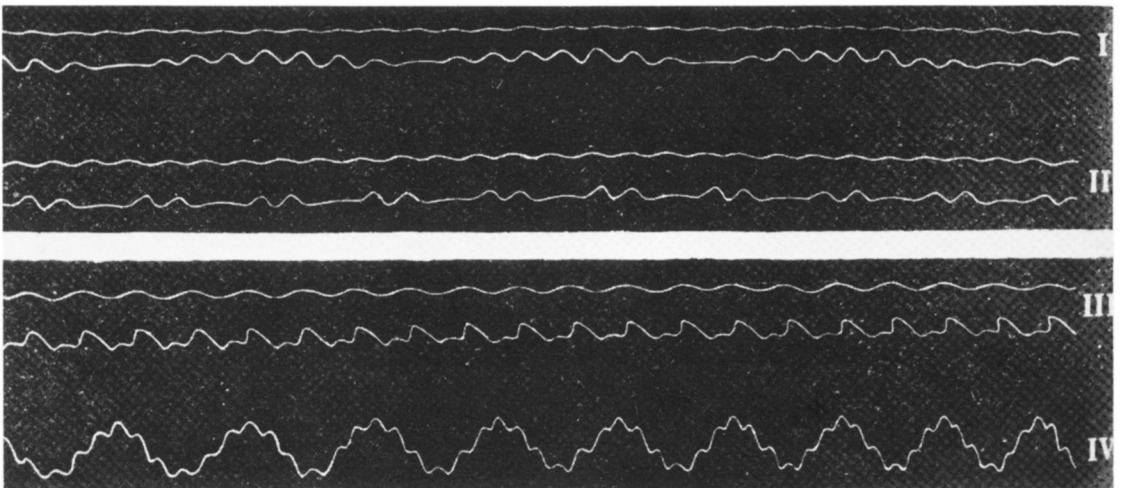
28. D. W. Griffith, “Innovations and Expectations,” in *Focus on Griffith*, ed. Harry M. Geduld (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 56.

guages, an analogous discourse of democratization and univocal, natural signs accompanied the prehistory and invention of the phonograph. During the first half of the nineteenth century, phonography — defined in the *OED* as “a system of phonetic shorthand invented by Isaac Pitman in 1837” — was heralded as a “natural method of writing”²⁹ and was arduously defended by worker’s groups as a means of making writing more widely accessible.³⁰ In the same vein, the “phonautographe,” invented by Léon Scott de Martinville in 1857, was an attempt to produce, as the machine’s subtitle explained, an “Apparatus for the Self-Registering of the Vibrations of Sound.” The resulting “natural stenography” would be, according to the title of Scott’s book on the subject, *sound writing itself*.³¹ Illiteracy would thus be eliminated by substituting hearing and speaking for reading and writing. Indeed, one of the most popular uses of the early phonographs — which, one should recall, could both play *and* record — was acoustic correspondence. The “phono-post” speaking postcards, which one recorded and sent through the mails, made writing superfluous, a fact stressed by

29. See Pitman’s 1840 treatise, *Phonography; or, Writing by Sound; Being a Natural Method of Writing, Applicable to all Languages, and a Complete System of Shorthand* (London: S. Bagster & Sons, 1840).

30. This accounts for its appearance as a topic of debate at the 1867 congress of the International Worker’s Association in Lausanne, a discussion that is summarized in G. Duveau, *La Pensée ouvrière sur l’éducation pendant la Révolution et le Second Empire* (Paris: Domat-Montchrestien, 1947), pp. 115–16.

31. Edouard-Léon Scott de Martinville, *Le Problème de la parole s’écrivant elle-même: La France, l’Amérique* (Paris, 1878). Earlier Scott had published a study of stenography entitled *Histoire de la Sténographie depuis les temps anciens jusqu’à nos jours* (Paris: Ch. Tondeur, 1849).



Léon Scott de Martinville. Phonautograph of acoustic waves. 1857.

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Unlike the visual Esperanto of the cinema, however, the possibility of universal language held out by the gramophone is just that: only a possibility, a hope. While the traces of the gramophone are just as indexical as the cinematic signifiers, they are not, as Adorno is careful to point out, readily intelligible like photographs. Rather, they are both indexical *and* enigmatic. In this regard they can claim both of the contradictory qualities of the hieroglyph: "universal" and "immediate" by virtue of their "natural," necessary relation of sign to referent, and also esoteric, recondite and requiring decoding, due to their surface inaccessibility.³² Phonograph records are, to quote an astonishing early anticipation of Adorno's techno-cryptogrammic characterization, "cabalistic photographs [by means of which] sound can outlive itself, leave a posthumous trace, but in the

32. As an early nineteenth-century scholar has pointed out, ancient hieroglyphs were also, in fact, phonographic: "Hieroglyphic characters are either ideographs, that is, representations of ideas, or phonographs, that is, representations of sounds" (Hincks, *On Hieroglyphics*, cited in *OED* 7, p. 789).

form of hieroglyphs which not everyone can decipher.”³³ Despite their shared millenarian formulations, the universal language rhetoric accompanying early cinema is thus far indeed from the post-Babelian figure employed by Adorno in his recuperation of gramphonic reification by means of what is almost a theology of indexicality. The latter must be located, rather, in a very different tradition: the hieroglyphics of nature articulated in German romanticism and, in particular, as mediated by Walter Benjamin.

At the time of the second gramophone essay, Adorno’s thinking was quite marked by Benjamin’s work, especially his writings on the theory of language and allegory. Just two years earlier, Adorno had taught an entire seminar on Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* book at the Frankfurt University.³⁴ The 1934 text, “The Form of the Record,” not only quotes from the *Trauerspiel* book, but also pays a hidden compliment to Benjamin—described as “one of the most important contemporary aesthetic theorists”—for his discovery of the German physicist Johann Wilhelm Ritter’s reading of the work of another German physicist, Ernst Florens Friedrich Chladni. For it is here, in the context of the tendency among Romantic poets, philosophers, and even physicists to see nature as hieroglyphic writing, that one must locate Adorno’s reading of the cipher of the gramphonic spiral. According to the most general version of this romantic theory, manifest for example in the writings of Herder, all of nature speaks through its form, and the physiognomy of the natural world is cast as language, the “book of nature” that merely awaits correct deciphering. A more restricted variant holds that only those aspects of nature which have a formal feature reminiscent of inscription are to be described as hieroglyphs. Here nature seems to be saying something in a language that the human race can no longer understand, that it has forgotten. But this language is in fact the most ordinary language, the Ur-alphabet in which creation was, as it were, spelled out. Indeed, *unlike* all subsequent languages, what marks this primordial language is that it does not require any code at all since, here, sign and referent are the same. These hieroglyphs *are* what they mean. Their unintelligibility today is simply an index of the extent to which the present era has lost touch with that nature.

For the German romantics, there were generally only two ways to reestab-

33. Emile Gautier, *Le Phonographe: son passé, son présent, son avenir* (Paris: Ernest Flammarion, 1905), p. 28. The implication in Gautier’s remark that *some* people might be able to “read” the gramophone record is curiously confirmed by the case of Tim Wilson, a thirty-three-year-old Englishman who made the rounds of British and American talk shows in 1985 demonstrating his particular ability to identify unlabeled records, ostensibly by reading the patterns of the grooves (DPA press release, October 1985).

34. Benjamin’s influence on Adorno in the early 1930s is perhaps most clearly evidenced in the latter’s 1932 essay “The Idea of Natural History,” one of Adorno’s first major public lectures in his new professional capacity. (“Die Idee der Naturgeschichte,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1 [1973], pp. 345–65). For a detailed reading of this lecture, see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: Macmillan, Free Press, 1977), chapter 3.

lish contact with this Ur-language: either through the direct, but ephemeral, recreation of that language through poetry, or the more tedious, step-by-step relearning of that alphabet through the scientific exploration of nature. The task of physics was thus to make legible once again the currently unintelligible hieroglyphs of nature. Indeed, for the romantics, the discoveries of contemporary physics seemed to confirm the promising visions of the poets. In 1777 — exactly one century prior to invention of the phonograph — Georg Christoph Lichtenberg came across the fact that dust particles formed distinct figures on positively or negatively charged fields: here the mysterious phenomenon of electricity had finally become readable!³⁵ An even more dramatic find of a similar sort — which at the time was nothing less than sensational — was the discovery in 1787 by Chladni of the patterns produced by acoustic waves. Chladni's experiment consisted in spreading quartz dust on various plates that were then made to vibrate. Depending on the rate of the vibration, the sand distributed itself into lines, curves and hyperboles, gathering in those areas that were free of movement. Here, for the first time, one could associate acoustic phenomena to specific graphic figures which, most importantly, were “drawn” by the sounds themselves! These “tone figures” [*Klangfiguren*], as Chladni called them, were not arbitrary but were rather in some sort of a “necessary” — indexical — relation to the sounds. In the graphic traces of these “script-like Ur-images of sound,” one could see, as Ritter put it, “the notation of that tone which it has written by itself.”³⁶

As a visible materialization of a previously phenomenal event the gramophone record is very much like the tone figures. In fact, referring explicitly to Chladni, Adorno insists that contemporary music technology “has, in any case, continued what was begun there: the possibility of inscribing music without it ever having sounded has simultaneously reified it in an even more inhuman manner and also brought it mysteriously closer to the character of writing and language.” However, to appreciate the gramophone record in its materiality one must extricate it from its instrumental role as a mere means to rephenomenalize a previous acoustic event. Indeed, if Adorno maintains that its aesthetic significance can only be established by focusing attention on its form, on its status as an object prior to any rephenomenalization, it is because otherwise the record simply recedes behind the phenomenal events it stores and then reproduces. As a thing, however, it is a materialization, a reification which transforms an acoustico-temporal event into a trace. It is, in short, a writing, but a writing, as discussed above, of a special, indexical sort.

Cosubstantial with what it represents, the record does not “mean” the acoustic event but is rather like the proper name of the performance it inscribes.

35. On the details of Lichtenberg's discovery, see Walter D. Wetzels, *Johann Wilhelm Ritter: Physik im Wirkungsfeld der deutschen Romantik* (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1973), pp. 88ff.

36. Cited in Wetzels, *Johann Wilhelm Ritter*, p. 91



In this regard, the record, like the tone figures, evokes the notion of natural or sacred writing: no longer of the order of signification, this is the form of the divine name. Indeed, it is tempting to read the scene depicted on the pre-Nipper HMV record labels—a cherubic angel inscribing circular traces with a quill—as a figuration of this very claim. The virtually theological character of this interpretation of the record is, however, almost indistinguishable from the tone Adorno employs elsewhere to describe the linguistic specificity of music itself! As a temporally articulated series of sounds, he argues, music is like language. However,

compared to referential language [*der meinenden Sprache*], musical language is of a thoroughly different sort. And it is this difference

The Gramophone Company, London. Writing Angel trademark motif.

which constitutes its theological dimension. *What music expresses in its phenomenality is simultaneously fixed and hidden.* The idea of music is the form of the divine name. It is demythologized prayer, freed from the sorcery of influencing. It is the always already futile mortal attempt to name the name itself rather than conveying meaning.³⁷

Like the romantic reading of the hieroglyphs of nature, both music qua language and the gramophone record qua trace serve Adorno as figures of an Ur-language, a “true” or “divine” language, where these are understood (for both Adorno and Benjamin) not as a nostalgic origin, but rather as a limit, as a regulative ideal against which all empirical languages can be measured. Simultaneously fixed and hidden, these ciphers also figure our distance from that (nonsemantic) asymptote. Furthermore, Adorno suggests, the spiral crypt of the gramophone record may also contain a message regarding the apocalyptic and/or utopian significance of the modality of its own inscription—technology:

Ultimately the phonograph records are not artworks but the black seals on the missives that are rushing towards us from all sides in the traffic with technology; missives whose formulations capture the sounds of creation, the first and the last sounds, judgment upon life and message about that which may come thereafter.

Not only a figure of a “true” language, the gramophone record—as form—thus also reads as a hieroglyphic prognosis of our relationship with technology itself.

In its reification of both sound and time, the phonograph record recalls Chladni’s tone-figures in another sense as well: where music writes itself there is no writing subject. The record eliminates the subject (and the concomitant economy of intentionality) from the musical inscription. Here too it is similar to the structure of music itself since, according to Adorno, “music aims at an intention-free language.”³⁸ Along with the subjectivity of the interpreter(s), the record also eradicates the spatio-temporal uniqueness of the performance. It becomes a citation or, one might say, an allegory of a phenomenal moment (of more or less extended duration), that is, a present marker of a past event which is

37. Adorno, “Fragment über Musik und Sprache” (1953), *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 16, p. 252 (emphasis added).

38. *Ibid.* In his suggestive study of technologies of nineteenth-century writing, Friedrich Kittler states: “Since the advent of the phonograph there has been writing without subjects. Since the advent of this technology it is no longer necessary to assume that every trace has an author, even if he be God” (*Grammophon Film Typewriter* [Berlin: Brinkmann & Bose, 1986], p. 71; partially translated by Dorothea von Mücke with Philippe L. Similon as “Gramophone, Film, Typewriter,” *October* 41 [Summer 1987], pp. 101–18). The above remarks would seem to indicate that, if there is anything like a “beginning” to writing without a subject, it must be backdated at least to Chladni’s eighteenth-century discovery of the tone figures.

radically past: determinate yet irrevocable. Through the record, performances become historical as allegories. This is already manifest in the very terms gramophone, phonograph, and *Klangfiguren*: like the traces of sand, the curves of the needle are *figures* of tones, i.e., materializations (*gramme*) of phenomenal events (*phone-*) which allegorize them in the process.³⁹ The gramophone record may in fact be, as Adorno seems to suggest, an allegory of art itself:

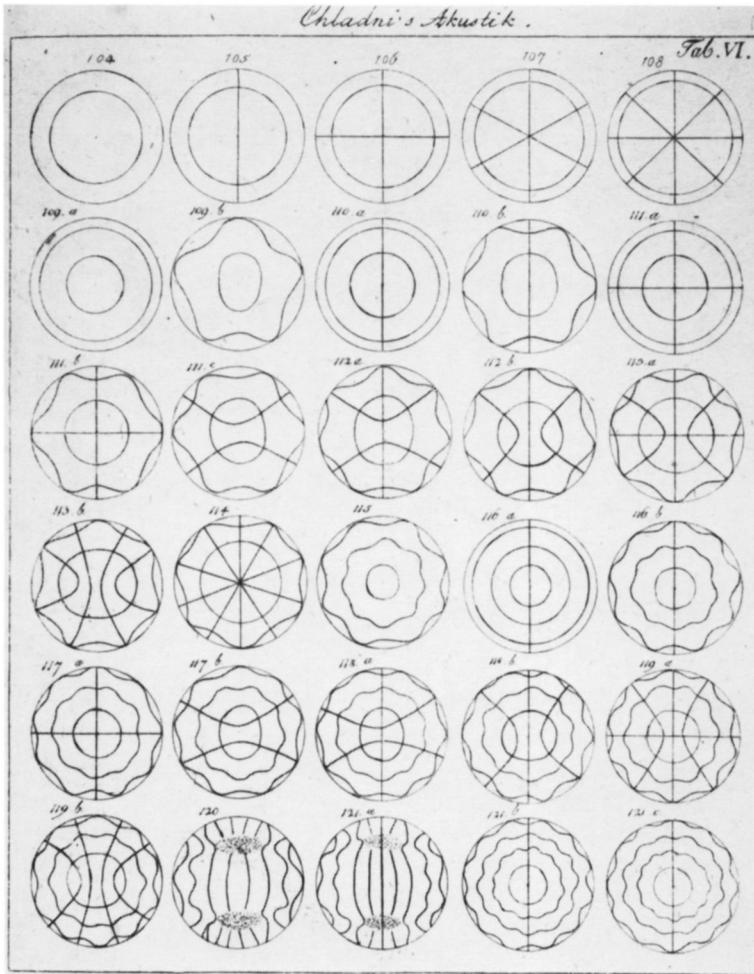
The truth-content of art only arises to the extent that the appearance of liveliness has abandoned it; . . . artworks only become “true,” fragments of the true language, once life has left them; perhaps even only through their decline and that of art itself.

Just as the gramophone record functioned to confirm Adorno’s model of music as language, in the last of the three texts devoted to the gramphonic medium it served to bolster his position on opera. In this article—entitled “Opera and the Long-Playing Record” and published in 1969 (the year of his death) in *Der Spiegel*—Adorno insists that the effect of phonographic technology on opera is nothing less than “revolutionary” (the pun is his).⁴⁰ The LP, the text claims, solves the dilemma of contemporary opera which has been forced to compensate for the drastic lack of truly contemporary operatic compositions by employing traditional fare in a series of equally unsatisfying ways: historical settings that are embarrassingly anachronistic; modernized stagings that seem arbitrary if not foolish; and concert versions that simply do not work. “It is at this point,” says Adorno, “that the long-playing record makes its appearance like a *deus ex machina*.” Taking up the figure of the record as inscription once again, Adorno insists that it is the LP that “allows for the optimal presentation of music, enabling it to recapture some of the force and intensity that had been worn threadbare in the opera houses. Objectification, that is, a concentration on music as the true object of opera, may be linked to a perception that is comparable to reading, to the immersion in a text.”

Here again Adorno privileges the mediated over the “unmediated” performance, arguing that the record is a better vehicle for opera than what he caustically describes as the “supposedly live performances” because it permits repeated audition. Listening to something a number of times, in turn, gives rise to a type of familiarity that is not a trivialization but is rather in the service of critical interrogation. In other words, a recording facilitates a close reading that

39. It is interesting to note that Adorno employed Chladni’s term as the title of his first collection of essays on music, a series of what one could call “figurations on tones”: *Klangfiguren: Musikalische Schriften I* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1959; now in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 16).

40. Indeed, Adorno here goes so far as to acknowledge that the two senses of *Technik* are both of great consequence for cultural production: “The same historical process, the same human forces of production are at work behind the technological-industrial discoveries and behind the purely artistic ones. That is why the two merge.”



is almost impossible in live performances. The LP, Adorno adds, also makes it possible to possess music in a way similar to visual art, a possession which is not, however, dismissed as mere commodification since “for anything unmediated to come into the world, even in art, there is almost no alternative to ownership or reification.” But such a gramophonic reification of opera provides Adorno with a crucial surplus value: for along with iterability, the record also simultaneously eliminates the visual dimension of the medium. Adorno’s position in the centuries-old debate as to the relative status of the visual versus the acoustic in opera is unambiguous: “the true object of opera,” he states above, is the music. Elsewhere this is made even more explicit:

What is most important is that all aspects of opera, including its theatrical aspects, must be subordinated to the primacy of the music.

*Ernst Florens Friedrich Chladni. Tone figures
from Die Akustik. 1802.*

Opera is only drama and only action to the extent that it is drama and action through music. . . . One ought to do without optical stimuli.⁴¹

While the absolute music aesthetic which informs this argument is admittedly not unproblematic, it does make Adorno into a gramophonic enthusiast—to a degree, in fact, which is largely unknown.

The long playing record—as opposed to the short early records that Adorno had called “acoustic daguerreotypes”—now provides a response to the question he had already posed in 1928 regarding the purpose of the gramophone’s archival capacity. These LPs enable the music lover to have an acoustic museum at home which—unlike the mausoleum-like opera houses—do not neutralize the recorded works. Rather, as Adorno puts it, “Similar to the fate that Proust ascribed to paintings in museums, these recordings awaken to a second life in the wondrous dialogue with the lonely and perceptive listeners, hibernating for purposes unknown.”

In fact, Adorno was quite aware of, and made great use of, at least one of the most important capacities of a gramophonic library: citation. In the introductory note to a collection of essays entitled *Der Getreue Korrepetitor* (The Faithful Music Coach), Adorno explains that this book—a series of analyses of musical works—was originally supposed to have had an accompanying record, a plan that ultimately proved to be impossible due to copyright problems: “As a result, the author had to be content with the more traditional means of citation using musical notation, a practice which disturbs the textual flow without providing the living sound of the music which is precisely what is needed here.”⁴² Instead, Adorno advises the reader to go out and buy the appropriate records and, to that end, provides a limited discography at the back of the volume.

In his preference for gramophonic citation, Adorno was speaking from experience since all the texts collected in this volume were in fact transcriptions of a remarkable facet of his production: a series of radio shows which he did for the North German radio (NDR). Yes, Adorno was a rather engaged disc-jockey! The concluding essay in the volume, “On the Musical Employment of Radio,” reads, in fact, like a theoretical justification of his didactic mass-media practice.⁴³ To understand what might have led Adorno to an involvement with radio, it is important to remember that, similar to his response to the gramophone, he considered acoustic mediation not only adequate but even *superior* to live performances: through radio “the technologically mediated [sound] gains a corporeal proximity which the immediacy of the live performance often denies to those

41. Adorno, “Konzeption eines Wiener Operntheaters” (1969), now in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 19, p. 509.

42. *Der Getreue Korrepetitor* (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer Verlag, 1963); now in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 15, pp. 157–402; citation p. 160.

43. “Ueber die musikalische Verwendung des Radios,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 15, pp. 369–401.

whose goal is a concentrated reception.”⁴⁴ Even more significantly, however, and contrary to the received reading, Adorno did recognize the *strategic* value of the utopian and progressive moment in even the “regressive hearing” he had previously so condemned:

Oft disparaged qualities of the listeners such as curiosity, the desire for stimulation, and for sensation would not be the worst place [for an alternative media practice] to start. In the grey uniformity of the flattened out and reified consciousness there are desires—about which the ethos of authenticity gets most upset and which it ascribes to the decadence of the masses—which are the refuge of a better state.⁴⁵

This recognition has concrete ramifications for Adorno’s practice: the former critic of “atomistic” hearing now devotes increasing attention to the importance of the detail—even citing a long passage from *Composing for the Films* that calls for a strategic abandonment of internal construction in favor of compositions that emphasize surface, texture, and color. Simultaneously, Adorno insists that the structure of radio shows themselves must abandon the practice of simply playing one record after another. Instead, “the radio show must become the commentary of the musical work.”⁴⁶ This means that they must include what Adorno calls—using the English term—“running comment,” i.e., interspersed analytic observations that organize the chosen “citations” in a didactic and often polemical fashion. Not merely a theoretical suggestion, Adorno instantiates these imperatives on a number of occasions, most dramatically perhaps in a radio program entitled “Beautiful Moments,” which is nothing less than a commented montage of his favorite musical passages.⁴⁷

Adorno’s didactic imperative also leads him to call for a recording practice which, in its employment of sophisticated microphone techniques, is analogous to the close-up and the jump cut. Significantly, the analogy he chooses is cinematic: “A renewal of the practice of technological recording of music could learn a lot from film. One need not, for example, be embarrassed to cut together the final tape out of a series of partial takes, selecting only the best out of ‘shots’ that were repeated ten or fifteen times.”⁴⁸

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid., p. 383.

46. Ibid.

47. Broadcast on July 15, 1965, by the Hessische Rundfunk in Frankfurt a.M., the program “Schöne Stellen” was just under two hours long and contained fifty-two musical examples from thirty-seven different compositions by fourteen composers. All the individual recordings had been chosen by Adorno. The text was subsequently published in the *Philharmonischer Almanach II*, ed. Klaus Schultz and Peter Girth (Berlin: Das Orchester, 1983), pp. 101–18, and is now included in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 18, pp. 695–718. For an analysis of the program, see Helmut Haack, “Adornos Sprechen über Musik,” in *Adorno und die Musik*, pp. 37–51.

48. “Über die musikalische Verwendung des Radios,” p. 392.

Adorno advocating gramphonic montage? Yes. Such practice, he now argues, enlists the element of chance (which is unavoidable in all performance) in the service of reason, and exposes the falsity of the ideology of inspiration that is already incompatible with the iterated structure of traditional rehearsals. Finally, and without doubt most importantly, such a montage technique would, as Adorno's composition teacher Alban Berg already recognized (with regard to *Wozzeck*), "foster an analytic type of hearing which, in its capacity to distinguish primary from secondary voices, is in the end a polyphonic hearing."⁴⁹ What music would lose in homogeneity through such a process it would gain in sensuous articulation of the details. Adorno praises film for its radically *constitutive* aesthetic—not simply reproducing but *producing* something that exists only on screen. Both radio and recording practices, he insists, should also stop trying to imitate the concert hall performance and exploit instead the destructive and constructive power of montage in a didactic fashion:

Differentiated, selective and directed recording processes should sustain a relentless mobility toward the material they are transmitting. . . . Admittedly, these in a certain sense break down [deconstruct—*demontieren*] the works and in the process generate substantial protest. But, if it is only selection, repetition and dissection that can liberate hearing from neutralization and direct it towards understanding, then such a practice is simultaneously a response to the crisis of such works, to their immanent destruction.⁵⁰

Thus the model for such practice, for Adorno's *own* practice, is in the end the cinema. Adorno, the supposed knee-jerk Luddite and mandarin opponent of film, ultimately turns out to be taking various capacities of the cinematic medium as his structural paradigm:

Film is, despite the backwardness in its substantive and aesthetic aspects dictated by the profit motive, the most technologically progressive process because it is most free of a dependence upon a material that is handed to it already finished, merely to be transmitted and depicted. Production and reproduction collapse [in the cinema]; what is produced is only that which is seen on the screen. This is how radio ought to act as well.⁵¹

Not surprisingly, this also leads Adorno to change his position on the possibility of gramophone specific music as well. Abandoning his earlier insistence on the record as a nonform, he now calls for a phonographic recording practice that goes beyond the mere conservation of pregramphonic acoustic

49. *Ibid.*, p. 397.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 398.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 396.

events. Instead, citing at length a text by Karlheinz Stockhausen that calls for the birth of a “legitimate, functional loudspeaker-music,”⁵² Adorno looks forward to a use of the gramophone as a productive technology that will generate work unique to its capabilities.

Adorno’s complex and changing relation to the gramophone thus requires that one reconsider his position on mass media and technology in general. For parallel with an ideological critique of the culture industry and its commodification of popular culture, Adorno sees in the inscription produced through mechanical reproduction a decidedly progressive moment. While it is not until 1966 that Adorno accords this potential to the cinema — locating its power in a “montage which does not interfere with things but rather arranges them in a constellation akin to that of writing”⁵³ — this redemptive reading of the technological trace can already be found decades earlier in Adorno’s reflections on the recording of the acoustic. It is here that one finds a dialectical interpretation of mechanical reproducibility that cannot simply be located at one end of a facile “high-low” spectrum. As Adorno so often insisted, a cultural criticism worthy of the name must always grapple with both moments simultaneously: “To conceive twelve-tone technique together with *Madame Butterfly* on the gramophone — this is what musical knowledge in all seriousness ought to strive toward.”⁵⁴ Adorno’s writings on the gramophone record, as the translations below will confirm, explore just this sort of seriousness. As such, they remain worthy of attention to this day, and not only, as it were, for the record.

52. Karlheinz Stockhausen, “Elektronische und instrumentale Musik,” *Die Reihe. Information über serielle Musik* 5 (1959), p. 55; cited in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 15, p. 387; translated as “Electronic and Instrumental Music,” *Die Reihe* 5 (1959), p. 64.

53. “Transparencies on Film,” p. 203.

54. Adorno, “Motive IV: Musik von Aussen,” *Musikblätter des Anbruch* 11 (November/December 1929), p. 338; reprinted in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 16, p. 269.