

[It is] in the phonograph record as a thing that its potential significance—and also its aesthetic significance—resides.

Adorno (1934/2002, p.278)

This paper sets out to divine a medium's message, that medium being the phonographic recording, primarily but not only in the form of the record. There are, of course, a plethora of excellent studies of recording and the record, but these have tended to examine the effect of recording on music (the work of Chanan, Katz and others), the cultural meanings and practices associated with recorded music (the seminal essays that form Eisenberg's *The Recording Angel*), or the wider sociocultural history of sound technologies (Stern's *Audible Past* for example). What remains less explored are the aesthetics of the record itself: how is the recording, as a technology with a well-documented history, also a signifying medium that has generated certain meanings, and modes of aesthetic production and reception? Adorno's essays on the relationship between music and the phonograph come closest to initiating such a project. So, Adorno-like, it is with the thingness of the record that I'll begin, initiating a series of linked epigrams, singles on the same theme as it were.

Time-binding. The sound recording did what no medium had done before: it captured and preserved the flow of time, turning sounding-flow into a virtual object. The recording can thus be described as a time-binding medium (Innis in Peters, 2004, p.138). In contrast to that other great 19thC invention, the photograph, which preserves a point in time, the phonographic record allows the revisitation of a time-stream, rather than a sequence of stills which creates the illusion of continuous time in the tellingly misnamed moving image. Despite this significant difference, all three media produce permanence from evanescence, reifying fugitive experience and turning it into a thing in the form of a print, a reel of film, a wax cylinder, a shellac disc. Adorno, again: 'evanescence and recollection... has become tangible and manifest through the gramophone recording' (1934/2002, p.279).

The Intractable Recording. It is perhaps a measure of the extent to which recording has been naturalised that we're disinclined to reflect on the ontology of recorded sound: yet it is worth denaturing. Reading the recording through the lens of photography tells us much in this regard. Of the photograph, Barthes writes that its referent is 'not the *optionally* real thing to which an image or a sign refers but the *necessarily* real thing which has been placed before the lens, without which there would be no photograph... in Photography, I can never deny that the thing has been there' (1980/2000, p.76). Prior to our digitally over-equipped era, which has given rise to a maelstrom of ontologically nebulous sound objects, the same was true of phonography: in order to be transduced and inscribed onto the surface of a rotating disc or cylinder, the subject had to be acoustically, which is to say physically, present as a sounding body immediately before the ear of the phonographic recorder. Barthes considers this necessary constraint to be 'the very essence... of Photography', the name of this essence being "'That has been," or... the Intractable' (p.77). Although he seems undecided whether or not to reserve it for photography alone, it strikes me that phonography—up to a certain point in sound history—can be defined by this same essence. The intractable fact that Edison was there, speaking, is the one undeniable fact of the following.

Audio Thomas Edison (1927). 'Mary had a little lamb'.

The Veridical. Edison wrote of the phonograph that it made possible 'the captivity of all manner of sound waves heretofore designated as "fugitive", and their permanent retention' (1878, p.530). Here at the dawn of recorded sound, an explicit contrast is made between sound as fugitive and recorded sound as permanent. With permanence comes what Barthes calls the intractable and with this in turn comes a tendency to read the phonographic recording as a veridical document, an empirical record of past reality, emanating an aura of truth-value. (As the saying goes, 'It is a matter of record that...') We should not confuse an aura of truth for truth itself, or put in another way, an image of reality for reality; nonetheless, this aura has a certain gravity, particularly for genres of sound art which have truck with the real. Soundscape, for example, relies on the listener's willingness to accept the recording as veridical: to accept the aesthetic parameters of soundscape is to agree to listen for verity, even when the soundscape is clearly *composed of fragments*—a pseudo-document as Michael Dellaira put it (1995, p.195).

Audio Chris Watson (2003). *Oi-Olool-Oi*, 1:40-2:10.

Voice and Verity. The tendency to interpret sound as veridical is nowhere more evident than in recordings of the human voice. Such a reading, it seems to me, is encouraged when a vocal recording has one of two qualities: either it is technologically transparent, as if the voice were there, right before our ears (like the face before the eye of the camera); or, it is technologically opaque in such a way as to provide indexical proof of the voice as real (the bandwidth reduction of a dictaphone, the bit-depth reduction of a digital answering machine). In both instances, our belief holds that the recorder, like the camera, never lies: the overt absence or presence of machine and medium functioning as sworn oath.

In sound art, contrasts between transparency and opacity are often used to narrative purpose. An example is *Sleep Exposure* (1979), by New Zealander John Cousins. This anecdotal work begins in the present tense as Cousins, close miked in a dry ambience, describes his dream of his grandfather, Pop. This is followed by a shift to a resonant acoustic environment in which Cousin's voice is distant and embedded in a gently percolating texture of disjointed speech-fragments and ambiguous pitched sounds.

Audio John Cousins (1979). *Sleep Exposure*, 1:41-2:15.

Here it could be said that the technological opacity of the second part of the excerpt (evidence of transformation via reverb, editing, etc) connotes the voice as unconscious, irrational, emotional—a zone of the psyche in Doyle's words (2005, p.17)—an inner voice within the reverberant theatre of memory: the medium of the dream and anything but empirical. By contrast, the first part of the excerpt is technologically transparent—Cousins is heard as if he were speaking *before our ears*. Here, close miking and the absence of an ambient context connotes 'an emanation of past reality' (Barthes, 1980/2000, p.88) and by extension, the connotation of rational consciousness, of verity.

Authenticity and the "Real". It is well known that the veridical nature of the recording was almost immediately seized upon by musicians and others of an ethnographic bent who came to regard the recording as a means to preserve and access musical truth: Federico García Lorca, 'it is not possible to copy down [folk] songs on music paper; it is necessary to collect them with a gramophone so as not to lose that inexpressible element in which more than anything their beauty lies' (in Chanan, 1985, p.11). Lorca's comment suggests that at best transcription is transformative, at worst corruptive, and always incapable of capturing the essence of its subject. In contemporary parlance, what's lost is Frith's authenticity, the element that 'keeps it real'. For sound artists and composers who deal in the real, the simplest way around this impasse has been to incorporate documentary recordings into the work, thereby supplementing artifice with the authenticity of the (veridical) recording.

A number of examples suggest themselves, but for me Berio's *Naturale* is particularly interesting because it does not seek to establish an entirely homophonous or harmonious relationship between the composed and the recorded. Rather, the poignancy of *Naturale* derives from the distance it sets up between artifice (the instrumental writing) and recorded reality (the human voice), a distance traversed only when the voice's colours suffuse and warm the instrumental parts. In this way, the recording is marked as the wellspring of the work's discourse, granting *Naturale* its air of artlessness.

Audio Luciano Berio (1985). *Naturale*, 4:10-4:53.

The Analytical Recording. The connection between the veridical recording and the search for music authenticity, for essence or truth, suggests another interpretation of the recording. Closed-miked recordings, revealing a surfeit of sonic detail, are sometimes described in texts on sound-recording technique as *analytical* recordings. This description understands analysis in an empirical sense, rather than a psychoanalytic one. But the latter reading is worth pursuit and not only because psychoanalysts have been known to record the "conversations" they have with patients/clients. Walter Benjamin, for example, links technologies such as photography and sound recording to Freud's psychoanalytical work. 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' is the source that's usually quoted, but Benjamin's 'A Small History of Photography' (1931/1985) makes the connection more concisely: 'It is through photography that we first discover the existence of [the] optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis' (p.243). This suggests that the analytical recording reveals more than we may care to know, especially when we are listening to ourselves. The machine, after all, is unforgiving, incapable of adapting its superhuman power of exact recollection to suit the foibles of human subjectivity. As Beckett has Krapp say, 'Just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that' (1957, 24). No wonder that we tend to choose not to listen to ourselves but to surrogates capable of providing us with a flattering likeness of ourselves. In Adorno's words, 'What the gramophone listener actually wants to hear is himself, and the artist merely offers him a substitute for the sounding image of his own person... Most of the time records are virtual photographs of their owners...' (1927/2002, p.274).

There a number of sound works which explore the *frisson* engendered by the clash between human subjectivity and machinic objectivity. One example, again from John Cousins, is *Tense Test* (1986), which explores the paranoia provoking properties of the sound recording, replete with psychoanalytical overtones. The piece cuts between two elements: Cousins interviewing himself in an attempt to get to the communicative heart of the second element, a recorded interview between himself and a journalist. At first, the reflexive interview reads objectively—as rational and distanced analysis of an empirical, factual object (the recorded interview). But as the piece progresses, this aura of objectivity is fogged: Cousins and his doubles, as well as the listener, become increasingly confused as to what was objectively “then” and what is subjectively “now”. The result being that the truth promised by analysis of the recorded interview retreats in response to Cousins’ interpretative efforts: the recording as object, which parrots but cannot talk or think, becomes a mirror, refracting enquiry into noise, losing Cousins and listeners in a hermeneutic imbroglio.

Audio John Cousins (1986). *Tense Test*, 5:57-7:47.

The Spectral Recording. There is another psychoanalytic line that can be followed in the recording: the uncanny. Earlier, following Barthes, I made the point that the recording can be considered an emanation of the real. Barthes apologises for the banality of this observation, but also holds that its consequences are significant. It elucidates, for example, the *fin de siècle* tendency to regard the phonograph as a transcendental medium. Some examples, by way of illustration: ‘Death has lost some of its sting since we are forever able to retain the voices of the dead’; ‘phantasms of the living,’ a phrase used in the late 19thC by Frederic Myers of the British Society for Psychical Research to describe the apparitions proliferating through newly invented communication technologies such as the phonograph; more recently, Friedrich Kittler has written that ‘The spirit-world is as large as the storage and transmission possibilities of a civilisation’ (all in Peters, pp.139-144). The talking dead, phantasms, spirits: emanations of the real, but not the real. The uncanny, in other words. Barthes’ notion of the photographic spectrum goes some way towards explaining this phenomenon: ‘[Spectrum] retains, through its root, a relation to “spectacle” and adds to it that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead’ (p.9). Likewise, in the recording, time and space are bound so as to allow departed but audible presences to emerge from black boxes: spectres from spectra.

For these apparitions to be understood as spectres, we must allow a degree of the uncanny into our reception of them: what we hear must be recognisable yet unfamiliar, known yet strange, a thing but not the thing itself. We might then say that phonography makes the most of its medium when the *ostranenie* (Shlovsky, 1917), the *estrangedness*, of recorded sound is embraced. The spookiness of this is something that listeners have grown accustomed to in over a century of recorded sound. Yet still it provides an important backdrop to phonographic practices. Acousmatic music, for example, is predicated on sound without sounding bodies. This is not simply to say that acousmatic music, like all recorded music, is “by nature” estranged (or schizophonic), but rather, that acousmatic practitioners have made a creative fetish of it. At best,

this is an intensely poetic practice, revelling in the possibilities for intimation, suggestion, allusion, that inhere in a mono-sensory medium. At worst, it is a practice, which (indecently) leaves no room for the imagination but rather presents a succession of concrete images. This tension between the concrete and the abstract, overstatement and intimation, is a difficult one to negotiate: when to hide, when to reveal? When to state, when to intimate? Yannis Kyriakides' *Wordless* (2004) opts exclusively for the latter, and as such its success depends on the listener's willingness to enjoy intimation and the ever-receding goal of revelation: the referent, the human voice, is only ever heard as an absence, a sonic negative.

Audio Yannis Kyriakides (2004). *pensioner_0496*, 00:00-0:45.

Spectres and Affect. The previous example suggests the spectral nature of recording inheres in phonographic practices that are as much concerned with sound semantics as they are with sound for sound's sake. I'm thinking of the way in which presence in absence, the phonographic sign as a pointer to Barthes' *that-has-been*, grants phonography a certain native ability: that of creating affect which emerges from distance and separation—nostalgia and melancholy being the most obvious of these (*Naturale* is an excellent example in this regard). To illustrate, the musical style of the following excerpt from Cousins' *Sleep Exposure* clearly indicates its bygone-ness (it is Bing Crosby's 1947 recording of 'The Whiffenpoof Song'); this connotation is heightened by surface noise from the record. The evocation of nostalgia would be inevitable, were it not for the preceding stabs of noise from the needle in a locked groove: these point to a darker terrain, signifying a move across the border from nostalgia to melancholy.

Audio John Cousins (1979). *Sleep Exposure*, 3:38-4:01

Remove the torment from melancholy and the feeling becomes, perhaps, nostalgia. The word is a translation of the German *Heimweh* (homesickness), indicating a longing for something that exists at a spatiotemporal distance, which is to say, exists in the mind as a memory. For the recording to engender nostalgia, presumably it must house music which itself no longer has a home; this music thus representing a time and place that is no more. But it is not just the recording, as a cultural object, which generates nostalgia: the record itself also signifies nostalgia when it shows signs of age—crackling and hissing as indices of phonographic senescence. This aesthetic phenomenon is widespread enough not to warrant further comment, but by way of a final example, it is interesting to observe that surface noise, or its surrogates, are often the analogue of photographic soft focus: the haze around a sound figure nostalgically signifying, in a mellow tone, *that-has-been*.

Audio Yves Daoust (1989). *Suite Baroque: L'extase*, 3:00-3:28.

Coda. There are many other ways in which the phonographic record, as a signifying medium, can be interpreted: reading the record as a body, its senescence is a form of aging, a physical process resulting in transformations and accumulations of meaning (exemplified by Christian Marclay's *Record without a cover*, 1985). Taken further, this bodily reading suggests the degrading action of the stylus to be a wounding, transduction becoming

incision, and the resulting noise a scream (the music of the medium, perhaps?); read as mind, the schizophrenic of recording can be understood as a form of madness; read as writing, the recording can be understood to grant ephemeral sound the sovereign permanence of the score. This present paper has, I hope, provided some orientation as to the directions in which these and other lines of interpretation might be pursued.