

Beyond Plunderphonics: A prolegomena to any future revolutionary music

This is an analysis of “plunderphonics,” an obscure yet influential “art music” method introduced by Canadian composer John Oswald in the 1980s. Plunderphonics has remained undertheorized, becoming an apolitical catch-all for sample-heavy musical compositions in musician communities. However, it was formulated with explicit political goals in mind, and it expressed those goals through the creative use of music sampling technology, embracing the reversal of the compositional process originating in musical notation, in response to the technological developments of its time. After defining plunderphonics, what it aims to do, and how it succeeds and fails, I attempt to figure out why, given the radical political aims that drove it into postulation, those goals have remained unrealized. Concluding, this analysis shows how any future radical and political art movement must seek to address the technological developments of its day, and the structures and apparatuses that restrict those potentials.

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This essay is concerned with sample-based music, or put differently, music which samples other music for the purposes of creating new music. This idea forms the basis of entire genres like hip-hop, as well as many sub-genres of electronic music, which take their conceptual origin from the experiments of the *musique concrète* “art music” of the early 20th century.¹ More specifically, I aim to explore the philosophical implications of sampling, and how it relates to music composition, originality, and law, by analyzing a particular approach to sample-based music called plunderphonics, first put forth by Canadian artist John Oswald in the early 1980s.

Plunderphonics is, in short, music made with entirely, or mostly, samples of other music. This is the basic definition I have observed that people online in bedroom musician communities and non-scholarly discourse use when discussing it. The term lives on as more of a catch-all for sample-heavy music compositions, than it does as a term entailing an artistically radical view of the form of musical works. This is interesting to me, because when plunderphonics was originally put forth, it had explicitly political critiques in mind.

¹Cutler, “Plunderphonia,” 143–45.

I start here because I think plunderphonics, which started in highbrow art music crowds as a way of utilizing music reproduction technology to create music, has impacted *all* contemporary music, especially because music technology, the experience of listening to music, and the labor of recording music, has become almost completely digital now; no music is made these days without a computer—a creative, productive, reproductive, propagative machine—being utilized somewhere in the process. Innumerable bedroom musicians create music every day, using sampling technology to an exponentially greater extent than even the most technology-embracing artists did in the 1980s. But now, rather than the artist’s raw material being plundered from their local record store, the crates now being plundered contain all audio available online—this is the result of music creation technology becoming more accessible, democratized, and decentralized. Since the sampling technology that drove John Oswald to put forth plunderphonics is now more advanced and accessible than ever, so too is the dialectical relationship between technology and art that plunderphonics aimed to explicate, more relevant than ever.

Despite all this, there is not that much scholarly work on plunderphonics, unlike some other approaches to art music. The scholarly work that does exist on it often gets caught up in the ensuing discussion of sampling and originality, or it analyzes Oswald’s plunderphonic works using the very same Western tradition of music theory and notation that plunderphonics sought to establish an alternative to.² And while these are important concerns, these analyses suffer because they don’t take up the theoretical convictions of plunderphonics: its realization that the compositional process of music has changed due to advances in technology, and its methodological commitment to unseating the primacy of music notation.

²Sanjek, “Don’t Have to DJ No More”; Holm-Hudson, “Quotation and Context.”

The analysis I put forth here starts by accepting that we are, like plunderphonics insists, in an age of recording's primacy, and following from that, that we are in an era where technological development has *severely* outpaced the legal structures which attempt to contain art: "if creativity is the field, copyright is the fence."³ In fact, the economic and legal problems that justified the creation of plunderphonics have actually gotten worse, while sampling has lost the shocking character it perhaps once had; people don't really get too bent out of shape about the latest pop hit sampling their favorite song from their youth like they used to. Thus, I insist that plunderphonics provides a useful object of critique for understanding the relationship between artistic methods and political conditions. Engaging in this analysis will show how revolutionary art in both method and politics remains *impossible* to realize—insofar as any such development will remain constrained by the economic conditions it exists within. But to get there, I will have to give an overview of what plunderphonics is.

Plunderphonics was a method of composing using previously recorded music as the basis for new music, in order to demonstrate how creativity and art have been closed off by legal structures. The term originated in the title of a 1985 address given by Oswald, titled "Plunderphonics, or Audio Piracy as a Compositional Prerogative." Beginning the speech, he remarks that,

Musical instruments produce sounds. Composers produce music. Musical instruments reproduce music. Tape recorders, radios, disc players, etc., reproduce sound. ... A phonograph in the hands of a "HipHop/scratch" artist who plays a record like an electronic washboard with the phonographic needle as a plectrum, produces sounds which are unique and *not* reproduced—the record player becomes a musical instrument.⁴ [A sampler, in essence a recording, transforming instrument, is simultaneously a documenting device and a creative device, in effect reducing a distinction manifested by copyright.]⁵

³Oswald, "Plunderphonic' CD Booklet," 17.

⁴"Bettered by the Borrower: The Ethics of Musical Debt," 131–32.

⁵The bracketed sentence is from the original speech. Curiously, it was removed from the revised version of the speech, which I will be using hereafter; see Oswald, "Plunderphonics, or Audio Piracy as a Compositional Prerogative," para. 1.

A phonograph is no longer simply a machine for reproducing a record: in the hands of an artist who knows how to “pluck” the record, it becomes an instrument unto itself. The reproduction of sound becomes, at a certain point, *production* of new, unique sound. What differentiates the phonograph from the sampler, is that a record player is intended only to reproduce sound in its original playback order, while the sampler is explicitly geared towards the transformation of the sound being reproduced. The sampler is a device which does not synthesize sound: its intended function is not focused on reproduction, but rather on ripping a piece of audio from its original context. This play of recontextualization is what constitutes the basic, most fundamental technique of plunderphonics.

The other major text on plunderphonics that I will be using for this analysis is “Plunderphonia,” an essay by English musician and music theorist Chris Cutler. It begins with a quote—or maybe a sarcastic anecdote—about a song by Oswald titled “Pretender,” one of the first tracks off Oswald’s 1988 EP titled *Plunderphonics*, an EP consisting of four tracks, composed between 1979-1988. The song is based around a reappropriation of Dolly Parton’s 1984 recording of “The Great Pretender,” originally recorded in 1955 by early rhythm and blues group The Platters. It provides for Cutler (and myself), a good example of what recontextualization was made possible by the technological advancements in music.

In “Pretender,” Oswald creatively utilizes different audio reproduction devices (a reel-to-reel tape deck and a record player) to modify the speed of the recording. As it begins, Parton’s instrumental drifts into audibility, starting from a very high pitch, descending into a lower one. As she begins to sing the lyrics “*oh yes, I’m the great pretender / Pretending that I’m doing well / My need is such / I pretend too much / I’m lonely but no one can tell,*” Oswald pushes the recording into an even lower pitch, and Parton’s voice reveals a certain masculinity. In the final

moments of the song, the pitch picks up quite a lot, with her voice rising back to its higher (and thus, feminine) tone. Oswald's manipulation in this song attempts to perform the creation of something new (and strange) through the modification of what could have been merely an accurate reproduction of a relatively minor country song featuring a recognizable voice.

By doing something that might sound as simple or uncreative as slowing down the pitch of a recording, Oswald brought out a new dimension from it: "the grain of the song is opened up and the ear, seduced by detail, lets a throng of surprising associations and ideas fall in behind it. The same thing is suddenly very different," Cutler remarks.⁶ These new associations raise a number of interesting observations and questions for the listener: *a woman's voice resembles a strong man's voice when lowered in pitch. Do men pretend about a lack of need too? Are men just as needy as women? Gender sure is funny sometimes, when her voice crosses that boundary...* Later on in the song, Parton sings lyrics in which she uses "gay" in its more archaic sense; it sounds different in this context. New textual "resonances" are brought to the fore by different contexts and different arrangements surrounding a familiar voice. One wonders if these meanings always lay within the text, just waiting to come out.⁷ The use of popular sample material is where the basic technique of recontextualization gained a unique character in the plunderphonic method: sampling was done for the purpose of making the familiar seem quite odd; the use of highly recognizable material was necessary in order to evoke this effect.

⁶"Plunderphonia," 139.

⁷In this respect, plunderphonics begins by toying with the consequences of the ultimate deception: deceiving another of one's sex (a motif which appears in many of Oswald's works). See the cover art for Oswald's Plunderphonic (1988), *Rubáiyát* (1991), 69 Plunderphonics 96 (2001). Unfortunately, he writes some really irritating descriptions of what he's bringing out in this material, sometimes: "To many ears this supposed trick effect reveals the mellifluous male voice to be the more natural sounding of the two. Astute stargazers have perceived the physical transformation, via plastic surgery, hair transplants and such, that make many of today's media figures into narrow/bosomy, blemish-free caricatures and super-real ideals. Is it possible that Ms. Parton's remarkable voice is actually the Alvinized result of some unsung virile ghost lieder crooning these songs at elegiac tempos which are then gender polarized to fit the tits?" Oswald, "Album Notes," sec. "Dolly Parton."

Plunderphonics embraces that the advancements in music technology have changed both the composition of music *and* the way music is listened to. The relationship of art and technology influences both the composition and the listening of the work, since it was not until a certain point in technological development that music such as this could be created, and it is not until a certain point in aesthetic development that one could modify or reuse prerecorded work, and it be considered an artistic move rather than a deceptive move. This is why Oswald often characterized the method of his plunderphonic works as having simply been a result of his own listening tendencies.⁸ It's also why Oswald would meticulously document every single sample used in the songs in the booklets that came with his albums, including recommendations on how to listen in a reflexive way, detailed notes about how each song was manipulated, and further suggestions on how you could yourself modify the music on the disc at hand.⁹ This involved the listener in the process of artistry, by making the art in question be brought about by a change in how one listens. Technology has an underutilized ability to break down the division between creating and documenting, and thus between artists (who consume countless sources of artistic inspiration when producing) and listeners (who produce playlists, mixtapes, hum along, sing along, and play along). "As sound producing and sound reproducing technology become[s] more interactive, listeners are once again, if not invited, nonetheless encroaching upon creative territory."¹⁰

All of Oswald's concern for documenting the materials used and the process of creating plunderphonic works was as a result of his concern for the relationship between artist and listener—the passivity of the listener, in particular. So much music, we are exposed to not by choice, but merely as a consequence of being in public spaces. Oswald says

⁸Gans, "The Man Who Stole Michael Jackson's Face."

⁹Oswald, "Album Notes."

¹⁰Oswald, "Bettered by the Borrower: The Ethics of Musical Debt," 134.

All popular music is (as is all folk music by definition) essentially, if not legally, existing in a public domain. Listening to pop music isn't a matter of choice. Asked-for or not, we've bombarded by it. ... Although people in general are making more noise than ever before, fewer people are making *more* of the total noise; specifically, in music, those with megawatt PAs, triple-platinum sales, and heavy rotation.¹¹

The unavoidability and always-accessible nature of popular music may as well put it in the public domain *de facto*, but it certainly does not put it in the public domain *de jure*. Playing in every food service kitchen, every retail worker's hell, it claims every place that Muzak once found itself at home.

Popular music remains popular only in the sense that it is what everyone is exposed to (to varying degrees), but that popularity does not mean everyone is able to contribute to it; it is certainly not popular in the sense that it is "of the people," accessible and mutable by them, like musical commons. Popular music, rather than a progressive and experimental way of making music that could bring music composition out of its phase of high-minded intellectual labor work unsuited to the common person (as it was in the 1960s with groups like The Beach Boys and The Beatles), is now instead more like a "one size fits all" option.

The property of popular music is actually not meant to be something we become familiar with, in the way one becomes familiar with a much-loved sofa or a bike you've been maintaining for years. As Oswald puts it, "difficult to ignore, pointlessly redundant to imitate: how does one not become a passive recipient?"¹² As a result of copyright losing whatever notion of protecting and promoting artistic works it could have been said to have before, and popular music's "of the people" character having been reduced to the inability of the people to escape it, it has become impossible to listen to it in a non-passive, or "active" way. Intellectual property ensures that, assuming someone pays, you can listen, but you aren't allowed to play along, especially if you

¹¹137, emphasis mine.

¹²Oswald, 137.

reinterpret the work, modify the work, or treat it as a collective act of which you could decide to join in on.

In proposing an answer to breaking this passivity, Oswald quotes oceanographer Bob Ballard, of the Deep Emergence Laboratory, describing the lab's plan for "apprehend[ing] the Titanic." After having determined where it laid, wrecked and having sunk to the bottom of the Atlantic: "you pound the hell out of it with every imaging system you have."

When, under property relations, this relationship between the listener and artist becomes apparent, the imperative for Oswald is to create a full index of what you are being forced into a passive relationship to. In other words, by doing analysis of what you are unable to modify, by not merely consuming but participating in the grasp of an artwork, you escape this passivity. This is all that culture's products consist of: the reinterpretation and reevaluation of past works is the only way new works ever emerge.

As a result of the material being manipulated needing to be familiar/popular in order to evoke the intended response, Oswald suffered legal troubles very early on as a result of his work. Interviews of the times often include discussion of how the possibility of making songs similar to those on the *Plunderphonics* album was stifled by these threats. How this affected his future compositions is clear in interviews:

Plexure [a later work of his] uses a far greater number of artists, but none are credited, and because of the way the samples are mixed together, and their brevity, it's a lot less easy to identify them. After all, even if you don't have the liner notes to hand, you know who the source is for *Dab*, the Michael Jackson track on *Plunderphonic* [sic], because the identity of the source is an important part of the musical context.¹³

The transparency of this process would change when he was served a cease and desist by the Canadian Recording Industry Association, in which they demanded that he surrender all

¹³Duguid, "Interview with John Oswald," sec. "Plexure."

undistributed copies of the *Plunderphonics* album, so that they could be destroyed by the Association on behalf of their clients (notably CBS Records and Michael Jackson, named in the press release).¹⁴ Otherwise, he would have likely been sued into ruin.

Prior to the threat, Oswald received no royalties, and copies of it were only distributed to “radio stations, libraries, and reviewers.”¹⁵ Libraries were notified only to create copies when they would be freely distributed; no monetary exchange involving the CD was permitted. He took essentially every step possible to prevent the discs from being sold, every step to keep money from being involved, every step that might prevent the possibility of labels or the artists sampled raising legal threats based on an estimated loss-of-profit. In his future releases, he would need to ensure that the samples used were obscure, their sources were not documented, and thus he would no longer be able to the listener full insight into the process of the songs’ creation. This combined, had both the effect of severely diminishing the strength of the response provoked by plunderphonic work. The CRIA’s response, concerned as ever with the preservation of property boundaries as they are, demonstrates well the relationship between technology, art, and law that is made explicit by plunderphonics: “what [Oswald’s work] demonstrates is the vulnerability of the recording industry to new technology... All we see is just another example of theft.”¹⁶

When new technological advances in art threaten to they challenge the maintenance of private property, they will only ever appear as threats to the “security” that this relation has granted to both the owner and the laborer. If a new technology can radically enable new work, it will have to be redirected towards maintenance of the bad condition and sapped of all liberatory potential. I wonder if Oswald genuinely believed he’d be free of legal threat after taking all these precautions, or if he really did intend his work to provoke this sort of reaction. Ultimately, it

¹⁴Oswald, “Press Release Regarding CRIA Cease and Desist,” para. 2.

¹⁵Oswald, para. 4.

¹⁶Oswald, para. 5.

doesn't matter. Plunderphonics runs contrary to the history of music hitherto, which so far, has remained quite comfortably situated within property rights that undergird the idea of what an original artwork is. By taking all the private property circulated as culture as the public property it ought to be, "[plunderphonics] cannot help but challenge our current understanding of originality, individuality, and property rights."¹⁷

The plunderphonic attack on property rights *necessarily* strikes to the core of originality. Chris Cutler remarks that the dominant notion of originality, based in property and the individual artist-creator, would be incorrect when looking at "ritual and folk musics": for when performing music in a ritual setting, it would be a transgression to not engage in repetition and propagation. This is not at all to say that there are not improvisational elements to ritual and folk music, but rather, "where personal contributions are made or expected, [they] must remain within clearly prescribed limits and iterate sanctioned and traditional forms"¹⁸ (somewhat similar to the way solo improvisation works in jazz, actually). But with the emergency of private property, it became necessary to be able to establish a product and its owner, and those propertyless forms of art needed to be pushed aside. Thus, the form of the musical score and the primacy of musical notation arose, and so too did the idea of originality become defined by claims of ownership.

The creation of a score for a musical work produces the authenticity of an author's claim on it, resulting in its performances being understood as incarnations of some essential, notational form. Prior to recording technology, music was heavily reliant on the form of the score in order to be property at all. However, since plunderphonic music does not begin with a score, but with other music, it troubles the ability of law to maintain a clean distinction between composition and recording at the level of a musical work's form; any score produced from a plunderphonic

¹⁷Cutler, "Plunderphonia," 141.

¹⁸Cutler, 141.

song would necessarily be one composed of the scores of other songs. Thus, plunderphonics, by embracing technology at a structural level, problematizes the idea of originality that requires the score as the origin of a song.¹⁹ It does so because, as Cutler says,

it is precisely in this forbidden zone that much of what is genuinely new in the creative potential of new technology resides. In other words, the moral and legal boundaries which currently constitute important determinants in claims for musical legitimacy, impede and restrain some of the most exciting possibilities in the changed circumstances of the age of recording.²⁰

When law falls out of play, and questions of originality lose their legal implications (and the threat of reprimand), then a new kind of artistic creation can take place.²¹ For Cutler, plunderphonics has made clear what questions will need to be answered by new musical forms, now that music has entered the age of recording's primacy. Since these questions are being provoked in more precise ways, motivated by the methodological convictions of plunderphonics, we can more correctly articulate an understanding of the relationship between art and technology, originality and property, performance and notation, content and form, in a way that we could not before.

But as to if, as Cutler claims following that quote, the old paradigms of originality will have to "give way" to new ones, his analysis falls short. Copyright hasn't given way in any useful sense to the new possibilities that technology has brought to art: it constantly lags behind the technical developments of the day, ensuring that whatever it governs is to play within the long-standing rules of intellectual property. The old paradigms of originality just keep coming back in another iteration, and they remain enforced by legal structures that always have a need for there to be an original and a copy.

¹⁹Cutler, 140.

²⁰141.

²¹Oswald, "Bettered by the Borrower: The Ethics of Musical Debt," 136.

Cutler demonstrates an example of how this legal need breaks down while still restricting the art by analyzing John Coltrane and band's famous version of Rogers & Hammerstein's "My Favorite Things." He explains how "a great percentage" of the rendition doesn't contain any sequences of notes found in the original score,²² yet compositional copyright had to be designated to Rogers & Hammerstein, obscuring the compositional work done by Coltrane and his sidemen. The work of arrangement at least could be designated to Coltrane rather than Rogers & Hammerstein, but this fails to capture the actual nature of the collaborative effort that created the performance and recording; "nothing is expressed by [registering copyright to the bandleader of a group] except the power relations [of the band]," Cutler says.²³

Cutler also explains that, until the 1970s, to be able to claim copyright for an improvised work, you'd have to produce a score made from the recording. During the advent of advanced recording technology especially, copyright was clinging to notation as the origin of all works. So originality remained fatally bound up with the edict of law. It was worse if you wanted to earn royalties on a recording that started and ended with parts of a copyrighted score, with improvisation in the middle, as many jazz songs do. To do so, you'd have to cut up the song's performance into separate parts and claim copyright for them separately, give the parts their own titles, and split off the improvised parts from whatever song it was actually basing itself around.

It was necessary to emphasize a disconnect between the original material and the derivative material. The system of copyright has remained this same messy and obtuse legal structure into the present day. The entire concept of copyright is held up by the ability of creating a clean distinction between the original and the derivative; once that ability disappears at a technical level, copyright concerns have much less of an immediacy to them. When the potential

²²Cutler, "Plunderphonia," 142.

²³Cutler, 142.

of a technology to reduce aesthetic production's reliance on labor power is discovered, it often challenges this distinction. "No one wanted to address the fact that recording technology had called not merely the mechanics but the adequacy of the prevailing *concept* of copyright into question."²⁴

Take for example, how websites such as WhoSampled make it easier to trace the lineage of artistic works over time. This can at once help the listener discover new music, help other sample-utilizing artists to discover the sound they've been looking for, *and* put artists in legal trouble. These sorts of databases point towards what a full index of art, even history, could do. But as they exist, they are made to serve the strict distinction between artist and listener. It is in this regard that plunderphonics failed, because the entire deck was stacked against it by legal and economic forces far more powerful than art. It was not that its political aims simply fizzled out; they were snuffed out. The CRIA's cease and desist may have been the fatal blow to whatever power recontextualization once had in plunderphonic works, but in being issued, it confirmed that the aim of the plunderphonic method was true; the threat was meant to say that one should not take up the challenge to private property suggested by plunderphonics.

With all this laid out, I'll now give a shorter and more digestible summary of what plunderphonics was, what it aimed to do, what it succeeded at, and what it failed at. Plunderphonics was a method of composing music that used previously recorded music as the basis for new music, in order to demonstrate what of creativity and art has been closed off by legal structures. It aimed to challenge the relationship of activity and passivity that currently exists between artists and listeners. In challenging this, it aimed to make-weird the familiar popular music that we are bombarded with on a daily basis, yet remain unable to actually interact with as the "public domain" works that they essentially are. This work of "making-weird" the

²⁴Cutler, 142.

familiar was based around the idea that, by recontextualizing these familiar works, their manipulation would bring forth new questions and new associations alongside the works, *without* making those works unfamiliar and obscure. It aimed to fully realize the breaking down of divisions between artist and listener that were long outdated and overdue for death, after certain technological advancements, for much of this division is kept alive only by law and intellectual property. The listener could come to understand their own passivity in the consumption of art as in part constructed by copyright law and intellectual property, rather than as a fact of the very concept of art.

Plunderphonics successfully showed the limitations of relying on a law and property-based notion of originality in art. It successfully showed how copyright (and thus, notions of property) inform ideas of what makes one work original and another, derivative. It successfully flipped on its head the relationship between notation and recording. It succeeded in demonstrating that the primacy of notation has long gone from us, and that music, after a certain degree of technological advancement, is now firmly rooted in the primacy of recording.

I think it is safe to say that plunderphonics did challenge the relationship between artist and listener, by making all of recorded music a possible source for a listener's own creation. But this relationship *was not* fully challenged, at least not enough to morph the listener's passivity into a newly discovered capacity for being an active listener. The listener's passive role has remained fully maintained by property relations because the current technology that has made music more accessible than ever before is the very technology that has bound it up even further with law and property, without any meaningful change in the relationship between artist and listener.

An artist can only safely admit influences insofar as they are careful to not make things too transparent. Streaming services, music recognition tools, and any accounting for an art's lineage, ultimately can only exist to serve the relationship between artist and listener: the listener is always to pay an amount, never enough to sustain an artist, and the property owner, not the artist, is always to collect. An unholy alliance of technology and legal structures, intellectual property, or in short, capitalism, has ensured that the producer and the consumer—whether they're dealing in art or anything else—remain unable to reach out fully across this divide to each other.

Plunderphonics failed in this regard because the entire deck was stacked against it by legal and economic forces much more powerful than art. It was not that its political aims fizzled out; they were snuffed out, quickly, by the Canadian Recording Industry Association. The CRIA's cease and desist was the fatal blow to whatever power of recontextualization once had in plunderphonics—but it was, simultaneously, necessarily to show the correctness of the plunderphonic method's embrace of technological advances that disrespect private property. But from here on, to avoid legal repercussions, the lineage of a plunderphonic work would have to remain unacknowledged and undocumented, and the work itself would have to consist of obscure, impossible to pick out “microsamples” of previous works. This is not particular to plunderphonics: this is also what happened with sampling in its more popular iterations, such as the landmark 1991 court case *Grand Upright Music v. Warner Bros. Records, Inc.*, in which Biz Markie was sued by Gilbert O'Sullivan's label for sampling a song of his, forever changing the relationship of hip-hop to samples by making it legally necessary to pay royalties to those you sample.

Plunderphonics has made it quite clear that we are in the age of recording's primacy, and it has made quite clear that notation is secondary to recording, since music technology (and technology in general) has risen to the task of making it possible to compose music without having learned anything about music theory or a traditional instrument. Recordings are now always there to provide new timbres, new tones, and new combinations of variables for you to manipulate in your digital audio workstation. Synthesizing sounds is no longer necessary—making plunderphonics has become easy. Plunderphonics was radical, but it was only as radical as art could be: not radical enough.

Where do we go from here? What will the next art form have to do in order to address these failures, the failure to actually respond to law, and the failure to disrupt the divide between artist and listener? In a section discussing the precedents to sound “plundering” that exist in other art-forms (collage, readymades), and what came before plunderphonics (the phonograph experiments of Pierre Schaeffer and John Cage, etc.), Cutler details how a sound recording's history does not present itself in its form, saying that

the fact of sound recording itself, its existence, its provision of a medium ... offers the sonic simulacrum of an actual sound event in a permanent and alienable form. Moreover, in principle, a sound recording, like a photograph, is merely surface. It has no depths, reveals no process, and is no palimpsest. It's just there; always the first, always a copy. It has no aura, nor any connection to a present source.²⁵

For Cutler, recordings do not offer, merely by form alone, a “palimpsest,” they do not present, once inspected, an entire account of their history. Recordings do not offer, merely by form alone, a “palimpsest,” and they do not present an entire account of their history. Recordings do not come with a meticulously kept manifest that details the music's journey from the absentminded day-job humming of guitarists and singers, the rhythmic teeth gritting of drummers, the

²⁵Cutler, 144.

performers' accumulated experiences of music, to the thoughts being made concrete via the instruments being played, the sound flowing through the technological familiarity of an engineer's accumulated career before ending up in a recording, and finally being propagated by those laborers who, after the recording is finalized, press songs to discs, upload songs to services, create press releases, and so on. A sound's form *alone* does not reveal any of this.

Continuing, he talks about the consequences of the inability to read a history off of sound, as they bear the idea of musical quotation (explored in more detail in Oswald's original speech), and meaning:

Now, it can easily be argued that performances with—and recordings which comprise—ready-made sounds, including other people's completed works, reflect a concern endemic in twentieth-century art with art media in and of themselves apart from all representational attributes. This can take the form, for instance, of an insistence that all that is imitation can be stripped away, leaving only sensual and essential forms with no external referents; or a belief that all semiotic systems consist of *nothing but* referentiality—signaled by the addition, as it were, of imaginary inverted commas to everything. But it is only a loss of faith, or illusion, or nerve, that stands between this century's younger belief in “pure” languages and today's acceptance of the “endless play of signification.” Moreover, plunderphonics can be linked, historically and theoretically, to both perceptions.²⁶

To break it down, an argument is being explained about the problematic nature to referencing; a concern for avoiding the referential or representational appears over and over among art music of the 20th century. There is a reappearing concern in art music, that it must be alone, and must stay *apart* from anything representational/referential, which leads Cutler to characterize art music (perhaps too quickly) as remaining entrenched in a “younger belief in ‘pure’ [musical] languages,” and the plunderphonic radical approach to referentiality and appropriation being aligned more an “endless play of signification,” itself a “loss of faith” in the ability to communicate meaning.

²⁶Cutler, 146.

Recording could fall either way. Recordings can be utilized for their ability to be “non-referential” and available to “purify,”²⁷ and thus provide some raw material to build upon and compose *using as an instrument*,²⁸ or they can be utilized because they may *only* gesture to what their context was, which necessitates embracing the inability to purify a sound.

Thus a recording may be considered no more than the anonymous carrier of a “pure”—which is to say a non-referential—sound; or it may be an instance of a text that *cannot exist without reference*. In the first way ... the composer “distinguishes completely sounds from their sonic source ... he has done with mourning the presence of the cause.” Here the goal is to “purify” the sound to strip it of its origin and memories (thought it may well be that same erased origin remains still to haunt it). In the second way, the recording—for instance a sample—may be no more than a fragment, a knowing self reference, a version, and may be used to point at this very quality in itself.²⁹

Sound either is “purified” by a composer who uses them, or it is a text “that *cannot exist without reference*.” Plunderphonics exists at the tipping point created by this sense of the potential for infinite possibilities from the manipulation of a text (or rather, a song): it could either form a constellation of meanings and interpretations, or it could be a lapse into the embrace of hermeneutic interpretation-play: a completely dissociative *lack* of any true meaning.

That does not mean that we are *unable* to perceive a history of sound, and that this inability is a “fact of sound recording itself.” When a certain kind of listening ear is *cultivated*, sound reveals much more than Cutler claims it does, especially when this ear is trained to think the history of sound as continuous with the history of technology. A few examples of this audible history come to mind. The pops and clicks of a record’s surface noise, and the increased high-end distortion and sibilance of a dusty record tell you something about the history of a recording, through understanding the mechanism of phonographs. Or, the echoey, distant, or high-end

²⁷Cutler, 146.

²⁸I have remained focused exclusively on tracing the history of plunderphonics as discussed by Oswald and Cutler throughout this essay. In the future, I would like to discuss “sampladelia,” which Simon Reynolds explains to be typified by the use of samples as instruments, and *intentional* obscurantism regarding samples, in contrast to the plunderphonic method. See Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 365–66.

²⁹Cutler, “Plunderphonia,” 146.

piercing sound of a shellac record, which essentially all records prior to the 1950s had, because microphones and players had to be physically arranged in the studio environment so that the recording would be *perfect* as it was pressed.

These observations are *not* unique to music, nor even art. The history of *anything material* can be traced through the mark left on it by the production process, when the listener or consumer has cultivated a knowledge of those processes, just like Oswald's methodological transparency sought to engender. The conviction that sound has within it a history of the labor which produced it, and that history is kept invisible to the producers *and* consumers, by forces that remain unchallenged and that benefit from keeping the production of art mysterious, immaterial, and a result of divine talent and artistic genius—this very conviction is what gave plunderphonics a reason to exist.

What has changed is that music technology has largely become digital. The production process has been refined to the degree that these analog markings can be removed quite well. There is a risk that once we are fully in the realm of digital production, the material of sound commodities will become truly homogeneous, such that their history cannot be heard.

If any new method of art music seeks to actually move forward the dialectic of technology and art, it will have to respond to the technological potentials that exist unfulfilled *now*, as plunderphonics did. But to address this concern for music and *only* this concern would not be a radical move. It is the economic conditions that are forcing creative expressions to be so weakly enacted; it would be in the addressing of those restrictions that would create a truly radical art.

As correct as this conclusion may be, it is unsatisfying. Because of that, it might sound like this is just another paper about how the problem is capitalism, and therefore the solution

must be aimed at abolishing it, that thing that we never seem to actually get around to doing. So in concluding this paper, I will quickly speculate about these present conditions.

Perhaps the next radical music-under-capitalism will look something like what is going on with machine learning experiments in music, with the semi-autonomous creation of music based off of a prompt and a stored up wealth of musical input taken from what is accessible online. I do not make this claim lightly, because there are a lot of rather justified worries among artists about machine learning music and graphic art. I don't like this solution, especially because these tools will allow companies to avoid paying artists for their labor to an even greater degree than they currently do. But, now that the machine learning technology has been made, the reduction in labor time that it represents means that the forces of production will definitely take it up, and force a legal response of their own, and it will likely be in their favor, unlike plunderphonics achieved. Most publicly accessible AI models have been trained on the labor of other artists who didn't give consent for their art to be appropriated: a blatant disregard for legality. The AI can't profess a singular, individual artistic identity as creator of what it makes, beyond the company and workers that chose what to train the AI's model on. But, unlike a human artist, limitations of neural networks currently mean they generally can't provide an account of which input lead to the output they create. There's no way to actually ask the model why it produced *this* particular sound from its input: this is the only sticking point, and it is a big one, because without an articulation of history and process, it just means the ratcheted-up exhaustion of commodities.

Whatever new radical music-under-capitalism is to go beyond plunderphonics in the digital age will need a blatant disregard for legality in its sources (because the history of culture is not one accurately represented through legality), a non-singular, non-individual, perhaps even

indeterminable creator (so there's no one person to threaten), *and* a full account of the origin, inspiration, and process that created the work (because plunderphonics got that right). But any future revolutionary music that simply tries again to outrun law with technology will remain just as unable to articulate or hypothesize art's liberation as it is now, if there is no focus on changing the material conditions that made it necessary.

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