The Elusive Allure of “Aura”: Sample-based Music and Benjamin’s Practice of Quotation

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ABSTRACT This article discusses both sample-based and electronic music in relation to Walter Benjamin’s infamous text, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” The applicability of “aura” to such music is questioned, in favour of other considerations, such as practices of collecting, remembering, selecting, and connecting. The relationships between performance, “liveness,” and technologically enabled forms of music are explored. Authors who have written about Benjamin’s text in relation to modern audio (re)production are compared and contrasted. I also reference interviews I conducted with a group of sample-based sound artists from Montréal, Canada, between 2004 and 2005. My discussion brings me to Benjamin’s use of Leonardo da Vinci’s disparaging comments about music compared with painting in the latter’s Paragone. I conclude by asserting that Benjamin’s practice of quotation is more relevant than his conception of “aura” in terms of discussing “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in relation to contemporary, reproduction-based artistic practices such as electronic and/or sample-based music.

KEYWORDS Technology theory; Technology; New media; Cultural studies

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“To cite the past is to resite the present and reveal in it the instance of contingent paths that lead us back while taking us forwards.”

(Chambers, 2001, p. 113)

Introduction

Walter Benjamin’s concept of “aura,” referenced by many writers on electronic and sample-based music, is biased toward the visual. Benjamin is quite blunt about this in an endnote to “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” wherein he approvingly quotes Leonardo da Vinci, who claims, “Painting is superior to music because, unlike unfortunate music, it does not have to die as soon as it is born…. Music which is consumed in the very act of its birth is inferior to painting which the use of varnish has rendered eternal” (Trattato I, 29, quoted in Benjamin, 1969b, p. 249).

The following article has two central ambitions. The first is to shift attention away from “aura” toward a more productive elucidation of practices of selecting, connecting, remembering, and collecting within electronic and/or sample-based music. In so doing, my aim is to investigate Benjamin’s own limiting of the applicability of aura in terms of it being “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction” (Benjamin, 1969b, p. 221). The second, related aim of this article is to point out Benjamin’s penchant for the art of selective quotation, as evidenced in his use of da Vinci, and to insist that the “age-old” relationship “between music and writing” (Adorno, 2002, p. 278) warrants greater attention, especially in terms of discussing how sampling in electronic music parallels writerly practices of citation.

Concepts such as selecting, connecting, remembering, collecting, and quotation are often under-discussed when focusing on the reproduction-based elements of electronic music. The introduction of these terms also further problematizes aura, as I demonstrate, because Benjamin treats the concept as a quality possessed by finished art objects such as paintings, as opposed to a feeling of being “moved” when witnessing and/or creating an artwork, regardless of medium. He writes that “[t]he authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced” (Benjamin, 1969b, p. 221, emphasis added). And slightly earlier in the essay:

Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership.² (p. 220; emphasis added)

The emphasis and main content of Benjamin’s most famous essay suggest that photography and film are what undermine the value of works of art as “things” to be experienced in favour of reproducible “experiences” to be experienced. But this applies only to visual arts such as painting, a point that Benjamin does not address. I maintain that music’s value as a form of cultural expression was always predicated on the notion of witnessing a work of art in real time as being paramount, even (and especially) in
the face of the “ephemerality” and contingency involved in the live presentation of musical works. The case of music offers an important counterargument against the significance of aura when the latter is defined through concepts such as “substantive duration,” “authenticity,” “authority,” and “tradition.”

I begin what follows with a summary of Benjamin’s articulation of aura as well as a brief discussion of his practice of quotation. I then move into a theoretical engagement with a series of authors who have discussed aura in relation to twentieth- and twenty-first-century sound recording and mixing practices. Two opposing positions are maintained in the literature: (1) that recordings, themselves inherently reproducible, nevertheless can possess aura as forms of studio-perfected artistic productions, and (2) that live musical events, even those that heavily involve technologies of reproduction, present unique, aura-filled experiences. Yet others reject the applicability of aura altogether, especially vis-à-vis music. In response to these claims, I extend the concept of the “live musical event” to include not only musical performance understood as presentation, but also (and importantly) as a form of musical production in and of itself. In this, I consider the reflections of sample-based artists who strive to “perform” their work, both inside and outside of the studio. In putting forth this position, I briefly reference interviews I conducted with a group of sample-based sound artists from Montréal, Canada, between 2004 and 2005. The idea here is to move away from upholding aura as an objective quality of works of art and toward an emphasis on its descriptive potential vis-à-vis the feeling of being moved by a work of art enough to want to interact with it through processes of quotation and remixing.

I then shift to an analysis of certain key components of sample-based musical practice drawn from my interviews: “selecting,” “connecting,” “remembering,” and “collecting.” These terms are elucidated with quotations from my research participants in order to highlight elements of sample-based compositional practice that resemble the quotation-based creative writing style employed by Benjamin. My discussion of “collecting” brings me to Benjamin’s use of da Vinci’s arguments around the relationship between music and painting from the latter’s Paragone. I conclude by asserting Benjamin’s practice of quotation as more relevant than his conception of aura in terms of discussing “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in relation to contemporary, reproduction-based artistic practices.

A quick word about sample-based music: producing such work involves selecting, connecting, remembering, and (re)collecting snippets of audio drawn from heterogeneous contexts into new, hybrid, remixed forms. But the following is not about defining audio sampling. The practice is too multifaceted for a complete and sufficient definition (if such a thing exists outside of statistics). Instead, I explore the kinship between sampling and quotation through the filter of aura in an attempt to shake the latter concept free from the ocular-centric, conservative rhetoric in which it was mired by Benjamin—recognizing it as a useful, but socially constructed and historically contingent, way of identifying the effect of works of art in “live” moments of interacting with them.

Benjamin’s views on aura
In his much-quoted text “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Benjamin famously describes “aura” as a quality of art that is unique—that exists only
in a single place—“time and place” removed ..., like a painting or sculpture. It is important to note that aura is not described as a feeling evoked by a work of art, so much as an objective quality inherent to a work itself. For Benjamin, the late-nineteenth-century invention of mechanisms for the widespread reproduction of images marks an historical and cultural turning point, where the aura of “autonomous” creative works is exchanged for the possibility of ubiquitous presence. The ability to photograph a work makes it unnecessary for one to be in its presence to witness it. At the same time, the exciting potential for new experiences offered by moving images and creative photographic manipulations at the beginning of the twentieth century suggests that the withering of aura is perhaps not worth worrying much about. This is apparent in Benjamin’s description of the response of the “masses” to film as “progressive,” in comparison with the “reactionary” attitudes expressed toward paintings at the start of the twentieth century (Benjamin, 1969b, p. 234).

Benjamin (1969b) makes few remarks about processes specific to sound film production; they include the following:

- The shooting of a film, especially a sound film, affords a spectacle unimaginable anywhere at any time before this. It presents a process in which it is impossible to assign to a spectator a viewpoint which would exclude from the actual scene such extraneous accessories as camera equipment, lighting machinery, staff assistants, etc. (pp. 232-233)

Sound recording and reproduction technologies are acknowledged in this passage as involved in the withering of aura at the start of the twentieth century, but Benjamin does not specify why sound films are especially notable in this regard. Benjamin reflects on the benefits of sound recording in his day, but only in a brief comparison of the phonograph record and the photograph: “technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself. Above all, it enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonograph record” (Benjamin, 1969b, p. 220-221).

Despite these remarks, but unlike photography and film, audio recording is left undiscussed in terms of “progressive” potential. It is seen as part of the allure of film, but as adding nothing particularly significant beyond a mass appeal based in the novelty of hearing film actors speak: “[T]he sound film did not change anything essential. What matters is that the part [of the actor] is acted not for an audience but for a mechanical contrivance—in the case of the sound film, for two of them” (Benjamin, 1969b, p. 229). And within the endnotes: “The introduction of the sound film brought ... the masses into the theaters but also ... merged new capital from the electrical industry with that of the film industry” (p. 244). Sound was valued nationally according to its development of new opportunities for the electrical industry (where radio, phonographic recording, and microphones were key new “discoveries”) and internationally due to the ability to provide dialogue soundtracks in different languages through synchronized sound technologies (such as Vitaphone, used with The Jazz Singer in 1927), where “silent” film titles had been mono-linguistic.

Available technology during Benjamin’s time (1892-1940) did not allow for the audio cutting, transforming, and mixing practices we take for granted today, after the
development of magnetic tape recording and editing post-WWII, followed by increasingly sophisticated forms of multitrack mixing starting in the 1960s and then the widespread adoption of digital recording and editing technologies beginning in the late 1980s. Nevertheless, there were ample sound technologies that he could have examined, such as the phonograph (Edison in 1877), the microphone (Berliner in 1876), the broadcast of human voice via radio (Fessenden in 1906), the synchronized Vitaphone film-sound technology (Warner Bros. in 1926), or even early electronic musical instruments such as the eponymous Theremin (1919) or Ondes Martenot (1928). The withering of aura involves a cultural shift in which the value we place on witnessing “immediate reality” starts to diminish. Benjamin (in a technological-determinist move) suggests that this shift is caused by technologies of reproduction. Sound-recording technologies participate in this process, but they are not at the vanguard of new, progressive experiences for Benjamin. This is a curious “oversight” for such a thorough and methodical scholar, and it suggests he had a bias toward visual and literary works of art.

Benjamin describes aura by discussing notions such as the “authenticity” of objects, which he opaquely defines as “the essence of all that is transmissible from [their] beginning, ranging from [their] substantive duration to [their] testimony to the history [they] ha[ve] experienced” (Benjamin, 1969b, p. 221). He also focuses on “authority” vis à vis “aura,” a link that can be traced back to the latter term’s religious significance, tied to ritual and symbolic performances. As he says, “We know that the earliest art works originated in the service of a ritual—first the magical, then the religious kind” (p. 223). Benjamin also defines aura as something experienced in relation to “uniqueness” and “tradition.” “The uniqueness of a work of art” describes its aura, but in relation to a particular historical moment. “An ancient statue of Venus, for example, stood in a different traditional context with the Greeks, who made it an object of veneration, than with the clerics of the Middle Ages, who viewed it as an ominous idol. Both of them, however, were equally confronted with its uniqueness, that is, its aura” (p. 222). Benjamin’s ultimate message is that the auratic, unique qualities of witnessing a work of art in “the place where it happens to be” (p. 220) are permanently withering in the twentieth century due to the reproducibility of the “art-object” through technical means of mass production.

Questioning aura’s applicability
Adorno offered counterarguments to the usefulness of aura in his correspondence with Benjamin while the latter was writing “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Adorno and Benjamin (1999) state:

Dialectical though your essay may be, it is not so in the case of the autonomous work of art itself; it disregards an elementary experience which becomes more evident to me every day in my own musical experience—that precisely the uttermost consistency in the pursuit of the technical laws of autonomous art changes this art and instead of rendering it into a taboo or fetish, brings it close to the state of freedom, of something that can be consciously produced and made. (pp. 128-129 [letter from March 1936])
Sheet music, for instance, contains a guarantor of artistic autonomy through the (inherently) reproducible component of the score. “Uttermost consistency” in obeying a composer’s technical specifications during the performance of a piece turns this act into the conscious interpretation of a work of art. Different performances will come closer than others in terms of technical perfection, and it is this contingency of reproduction that brings the process close to the state of freedom.

Adorno agrees that “autonomous” works of art have historically carried a quality of the magical about them. But he questions Benjamin’s claim that “[w]hen the age of mechanical reproduction separated art from its basis in cult, the semblance of its autonomy disappeared forever” (Benjamin, 1969b, p. 226). Adorno counters that autonomy can persist in contemporary art—and that to place too much emphasis on physical autonomy is to privilege a type of material uniqueness that may not be the most important feature of many types of work (e.g., music, film, photography). As James Lastra (1992) claims,

Adorno is concerned with the perceptibility of pertinent elements, given the dictates of a particular culturally defined form—the network of interlocking cultural practices that shapes our relationship to the staging, presentation, perception, categorization, and evaluation of a particular set of sounds, and therefore determines which elements are pertinent to this particular use…. [T]he attributes claimed to be indicative of the “copied” sound are, in fact, structural necessities of any staging of a sound, even an “original” sound, and in fact are necessary prerequisites for the identification of any sound as being an “original.” (pp. 71, 73; emphasis in original)

In responding to the suggestion that something is lost or blunted when sounds are recorded, Lastra follows Adorno in insisting that one cannot experience “original sounds” pure of all contingency. Technologies of sound recording do not so much reproduce sounds as they (re)present them. Once this is acknowledged, then the issue of copy versus original becomes “only one possible concern we could have about a representation (albeit a rather obvious one)” (Lastra, 1992, p. 72). The fate of aura as an objective quality of works of art based in their material uniqueness is of less importance than Benjamin’s emphasis would suggest.

Timothy Taylor (2001), although similarly strident in his criticism of aura in terms of its applicability to music (stating simply that Benjamin “is talking about visual art.” (p. 159), nevertheless still finds value in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in relation to the forms of electronic and reproduction-heavy music he discusses. “By insisting on using relatively inexpensive, easy-to-find equipment, electronica musicians are ensuring that anyone who wants to make their music can” (p. 163). The “do it yourself” or “DIY” ethos of much electronica (i.e., electronic and/or sample-based music) is compared with the possibilities for new types of authorship that were opened up by mechanical reproduction in Benjamin’s day, where the ubiquitous possibilities to have one’s opinions published “somewhere or other” (Taylor, 2001, p. 162, quoting Benjamin, 1969b, p. 232) meant that at “any moment the reader is ready to turn into a writer” (Taylor, 2001, p. 161).
Re-authenticating Benjamin
The above-cited texts notwithstanding, there is a tendency within much of the literature dealing with aura and music to try to make the terms commensurable relative to contemporary issues. Writing in 1977, Wes Blomster equates “electronic composition” with analogue (i.e., tape-based) editing and (re)recording of sounds. He claims that with the composition of electronic music,

production and reproduction merge into a single action …; a work is created of which there is only one realization and all who experience the work will encounter it in this single imprint. It would appear that a musical work has now been achieved which is vested with the same authenticity as the original oil painting. (p. 70)

Electronic music fixes the issue of music’s temporal, ephemeral nature. Electronic compositions created in sound studios are not only fixed and permanent, they are also infinitely reproducible. They are “ideal musical events,” to borrow a term from Thornton (1996, p. 76). Playback of an electronic composition brings us the exact sounds, volume levels, timing, arrangements, et cetera, that the composer intended us to hear. Copying such compositions in their entirety, employing their inherent reproducibility as recordings, does not diminish their aura—if anything, it enhances it, as it allows a potentially infinite number of people to hear the composition exactly as it was intended to be heard. However, even if Blomster’s views can be understood as countering Adorno’s point about the contingency of musical performance (at least for the genre of electronic music), the experience of listening to a work (both “live” and recorded) is still different for each person in relation to differences in listening environment, as these cannot be controlled by the composer.

Interestingly, if one inverts Blomster’s logic, an alternative way to retain significance for aura presents itself: could the uniqueness and contingency of musical performances actually impart a form of auratic authenticity? Philip Auslander supports Benjamin’s argument about the withering of aura as an indicator of artistic authority in terms of enduring material uniqueness. He argues, however, for aura’s continued relevance vis à vis the witnessing of works of art, claiming that “the cultural value we still attach to live events suggests that the auratic has not been destroyed completely” (Auslander, 2003, p. 166). Witnessing a musical performance is to be drawn into the drama of artistic creation, with all of its contingency and the possibility that things might flop. The liveness of such an event makes it a one-of-a-kind experience for a listener, as each member of an audience hears a performance differently, in terms of their physical proximity to the sound sources employed (i.e., speakers, musical instruments, voices, et cetera), but also in relation to the subjective associations they bring to the act of listening. This suggests, as I have already stated, that aura is a more useful concept when it is conceived as a felt response to a work of art more than as an inherent quality based in its substantive duration. As further proof of this assertion, and lying in-between the positions of Auslander and Blomster, Jonathan Sterne claims:

authenticity and presence become issues only when there is something to which we can compare them. For Benjamin, this process is best embodied in the cinema; it was ‘unimaginable anywhere at any time before this.’ [(Ben-
It is also an apt description of the condition of originality in the age of reproduced sound—whether we are considering recording, telephony, or radio. As a studio art, sound reproduction developed shortly before and then alongside film. The possibility of sound reproduction reorients the practices of sound production; insofar as it is a possibility at all, reproduction precedes originality. (Sterne, 2003, pp. 220-221)

When technologies are employed in changing artistic practices, issues become apparent that formerly held little purchase (see Pinch & Bijsterveld, 2003). The possibility of reproducing images mechanically—a historical development that dovetailed with the advent of technologies of sound reproduction—laid the foundation for questions of authenticity, presence, and aura in the first place. Reproduction precedes the very concepts of originality and/or “liveness.” Aura, in other words, could not be recognized as such until it began to wither. It becomes a matter of personal conviction whether or not one holds the term to connote any specific meaning.

I now turn to analysis of Benjamin’s practice of quotation as a case example of being dramatically affected by works of art (in this instance, literary works) to the point where one is compelled to turn from a reader into a writer. Again, whether or not to describe such a feeling as “auratic” is somewhat a matter of taste.

The aura of quotation
Benjamin quotes no less than 18 books in his treatise, which makes an average of just over one quote per section (“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” is divided into 15 sections, along with a preface and epilogue). Most of these quotes have accompanying bibliographic information, although some name only the author, with no detail as to the particular text cited. Many of them are selectively edited through the use of ellipses. In her introduction to Illuminations, the posthumously published compilation of essays that includes “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” Hannah Arendt (1969) characterizes Benjamin as a rabid collector of books who then shifted toward quotations. “[H]e was a born writer,” she explains, “but his greatest ambition was to produce a work consisting entirely of quotations” (p. 4). She describes his habit of carrying little black notebooks in which “he tirelessly entered in the form of quotations what daily living and reading netted him in the way of ‘pearls’ and ‘coral’. On occasion he read from them aloud, showed them around like items from a choice and precious collection” (Arendt, 1969, p. 45). Benjamin was saving these quotations as the substance of the book that was to be his life’s work. The only issue with this plan was that what strung these pearls together was Benjamin’s connection to them, his practice of collecting and redefining their significance through reading, writing, editing, and sharing. His “magnus opus” was never finished, in part because he could not succeed in sufficiently excising his own reflections from the text. The compilation of quotations and thought fragments now known as The Arcades Project (Benjamin, 1999) is the posthumous remainder of this attempt at anonymous “remixing.”

Arendt quotes earlier collections of Benjamin’s works (Schriften) and letters (Briefe), edited by his friends Gerhard Scholem and Theodor Adorno (see Benjamin 1955a, 1955b, 1966). The third section of her introduction (“The Pearl Diver”) is devoted
to describing Benjamin's particular affection for quotations in terms of his writing. For Benjamin, quotations have great power to disrupt, edify, and transport a reader. “Quotations in my works are like robbers by the roadside who make an armed attack and relieve an idler of his convictions” (Benjamin, 1955a, p. 571, quoted in Arendt, 1969, p. 38). The “modern function of quotations,” for Benjamin, was not “to preserve but to cleanse, to tear out of context, to destroy” (Benjamin, 1955b, p. 192, quoted in Arendt, 1969, p. 39). Arendt maintains, however, that the discovery of this power came out of Benjamin's original intention to preserve. In the form of “thought fragments,” quotations have the double task of interrupting the flow of the presentation with ‘transcendent force’ (Schriften I, 142-43) and at the same time of concentrating within themselves that which is presented” (Arendt, 1969, p. 39). As Arendt explains, as of the writing of “Goethe’s Elective Affinities” (Benjamin, 2002) in 1924-1925:

quotations are at the center of every work of Benjamin's. This very fact distinguishes his writings from scholarly works of all kinds in which it is the function of quotations to verify and document opinion…. When he was working on his study of German tragedy, he boasted a collection of “over 600 quotations very systematically and clearly arranged” (Briefe I, 339); like the later notebooks, this collection was not an accumulation of excerpts intended to facilitate the writing of the study but constituted the main work, with the writing as something secondary…. It definitely was a sort of surrealistic montage. (Arendt, 1969, p. 47)

Here we find a description of Benjamin's writerly practice that resonates profoundly with sampling in electronic music. As a surrealist montage, sampling allows for associations to be developed between disparate snippets of audio, following the articulations proposed by one's reactions to the sounds one has collected, “based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of previously neglected associations, in the omnipotence of dream, in the disinterested play of thought,” to quote from André Breton's 1924 “Manifesto of Surrealism” (see Breton, 2005, p. 729). Sample-based composers collect aural quotations, as I discuss below. Record keeping of this process is often less than precise, although this ethos against attribution is changing. The Dust Brothers production duo claim to have “no idea” how many samples they used in the construction of the Beastie Boys' watershed 1989 album Paul's Boutique, but provide a best estimate as somewhere “between 100 and 300” (LeRoy, 2006, p. 45). Mash-up artist Girl Talk incorporated 373 into his 2010 album All Day (Lazar, 2011), and provides a detailed list for album downloaders (please see http://www.illegal-art.net/allday/samples.html). But is it the aura of the quoted fragment that makes it worth collecting, remembering, selecting, and connecting? This seems plausible, but only if aura is recast as a feeling associated with the experience of witnessing works of art, as opposed to an objective quality they possess. If this is the case, then music and technologies of sound reproduction, instead of being secondary enhancements to post-auratic works of art (following Benjamin's opinion of the sound film), become primary sources for understanding “aura’s” potential and limitations.

The preceding reflections were meant to highlight the aspects of aura that have been retained and debated in the academic literature vis à vis contemporary issues in-
volving reproduction-heavy forms of music. I turn now to my interviews with actual sample-based music producers, moving on to a new, but related set of issues: tracing the connections between sampling and quotation as forms of selecting, remembering, connecting, and collecting. In so doing, my intent is to outline a series of considerations that are describable as “auratic,” but which move away from valuations of authority and authenticity in favour of “liveness,” “engagement,” “freedom,” and being affected by music.

**Selecting sounds**

If sampling is to be considered as a practice of quotation, what is it that draws one to select a particular sound (or quote) over another? Benjamin describes quotations as imbued with “transcendent force” once placed into a new context, at the same time as they concentrate within themselves that which is presented (Arendt, 1969, p. 39). The draw, then, of one quotation over another has to do with one’s own response as a writer or sample-based artist to the element in question. It is not simply about a passive recognition of the aura of a certain passage of sound/text—it is about understanding how this passage can be recontextualized in an act of new authorship. This recognition begins with attending to one’s own responses to a particular passage and then moving toward an active engagement with the material in question. This moment is a “live” one. Recontextualization, however, does not always happen immediately. Recognition of the transcendent/concentrated potential of particular passages happens spontaneously—but a practice of sampling/quotation as a form of production also depends on processes of collecting, remembering, and connecting. These convictions stem from my own work as a sample-based music producer, as well as my 2004-2005 study, which asked participants (all sample-based composers) the question, “What is sampling?” among others.

**Connecting communities**

Sampling involves various types of connections—those between samples themselves, for instance—brought together in a new mix. But the adoption of sampling for compositional purposes also connects one with various communities of other sample-based artists, as well as different genres of electronic music, not to mention a plethora of old and new sampling technologies, understood as practices.

“[S]ampling in and of itself is just recycling, reusing an existing sound, but I think what’s happened with sampling is that it’s really been sort of a gateway to a whole new genre of sound creation” (Jackie Gallant, quoted in Chapman, 2007, p. 213). While admitting that sampling is “just recycling, reusing an existing sound,” Gallant immediately makes reference to a threshold, or “gateway,” enabled by sampling—a gateway open to anyone willing to tackle the learning involved. The contemporary arena for this type of creativity involves digital sound technologies, but one could equally point to traditions of lyrical “borrowing” in hip-hop, rhythm and blues, rock, and other pop music, as well as early analogue recording manipulations by the likes of Laurie Anderson, Pauline Oliveros, Hildegard Westerkamp, John Cage, Delia Derbyshire, Pierre Schaeffer, Jean-Jacques Perrey, Daphne Oram, and Pierre Henry. One strong family resemblance among all the work just referenced is a consistent desire to remix record-
ings in performative contexts that are also often recorded, both inside and outside the studio. The performativity of remixing connects different genres of sample-based music to each other, as well as to the history of music production more generally.

But the development of connections that sampling engenders is not simply with other composers of sample-based music, nor with the music one samples—it also involves one's listeners. This is where sampling understood as a practice of quotation becomes relevant.

People often come up to us and say that we’re so brave, and that they’re so thrilled that we would be so courageous as to be so out and to do this project. And that is something that we did not put in—that is not how I feel about it. I appreciate and I think it’s wonderful people can get that out of it, but I feel like that interpretation doesn’t take into consideration the fact that we’re actually poking fun on some levels with the lesbian community. (Bernadette Houde, quoted in Chapman, 2007, p. 283-284)

As the lead member of the (now disbanded) sample-based musical group Lesbians on Ecstasy, Houde articulates an acceptance, but also a slight discomfort, concerning the way her music is taken up by her listeners as an “activist” celebration of lesbian culture. The group sampled, mashed, and remixed lesbian-favoured songs (Indigo Girls, Melissa Etheridge, womyn’s music, et cetera) into thumping techno tracks. What is interesting is that even when the sampling was intended ironically, or as a critique of lesbian musical taste, Houde’s listeners interpreted her selections according to their own logic—establishing meaning and experiencing the “transcendent force” (Arendt, 1969, p. 39) of her quotations on their own terms. The connections that are made through sampling are interpretive and performed. If aura can be understood as being involved in this process, it is as a contested experience—felt by some listeners and not by others. Just as certain connections emerge for the sample-based composer in the process of composition, so too do connections reveal themselves to the listener in the process of listening.

**Remembering ourselves**

We experience sound and music in constant relation to what we have heard before. This is part of building an aural awareness of one’s surroundings. It is also how we develop a practice of listening. We start our mnemonic collections from the moment we begin to hear and remember. Tia DeNora writes,

> Music moves through time; it is a temporal medium. This is the first reason why it is a powerful aide-memoire. Like an article of clothing or an aroma, music is part of the material and aesthetic environment in which it was once playing, in which the past, now an artifact of memory and its constitution, was once a present. (DeNora 2006, p. 144)

As artifacts of memory, sounds are compared and contrasted with previously heard material. They are also deeply embedded in our thoughts and feelings around various moments in our personal histories. Sounds and music are constitutive elements of different parts of our selves and our collective identities. As such, what draws a particular listener to one sound, riff, or quotation versus another can be highly idiosyncratic or
surprisingly familiar. In addition, for sample-based composers, one’s practice of collecting, selecting, and mixing sounds also affects this process, as indicated by my discussion with sound artist Anna Friz:

AF: I think a lot of things that I put in there that I hear are not for other people. But it’s like traveling over a landscape that you’ve lived in all your life, versus coming to a country the first time.

OC: The question is, “Are the traces gone when they fall upon deaf ears, so to speak?” That’s what I’m fascinated with. What happens there?

AF: Right. Well, in the end it depends on your practice. Do you want there to be an indexical kind of reference, or not? And if you don’t care about that, then it doesn’t matter where it came from. It doesn’t matter what you used. Because no one will ever know. (Chapman, 2007, p. 188)

Sample-based composers, like any artists who sample, are faced with the question: How much do I maintain the recognizable identity of the samples I use when I am putting them into new contexts? In academic practices of textual quotation, the norm involves identifying the source of one’s selections even when paraphrasing. Attribution with sampling, on the other hand, is a complicated issue for reasons of copyright (see Charman & Holloway, 2006; Collins, 2005), but also due to differences in terms of intent. As Friz says, if indexicality is not what one is pursuing creatively, then there are few reasons samples should be used in recognizable ways (i.e., with little added digital signal processing, in longer chunks in terms of time, et cetera). Samples can be building blocks for sounds that are unrecognizable by the end of one’s process. Or one may use sounds, without mentioning sources, that one considers important, transcendent, concentrated, et cetera, but which at the same time are probably not recognizable to most listeners. But does this really matter when listeners will create their own associations anyway?

Remembering sounds from one’s collection, but also sounds that have been used by others, is an element in developing one’s production style. As sound artist Alex Moskos reflects with regard to sampling: “I think it’s an artistic practice, it’s a musical thing, it’s an art[.] [T]he can be done well[.] it can be done badly” (Chapman, 2007, p. 232). These sorts of judgments are subjective. Every time someone tries to set up rules or ethical codes for sampling, these barriers are subsequently broken, if they ever applied at all. It is in this sense that “remembering ourselves” through sampling is linked to a subjective judgment that is grounded in a collective sense of remembering the past and being able to “render” the remembering. The only arbiter of determinations such as “done well” or “done badly” is the listening subject—a listener whose past can come alive with every musical experience, but whose taste has also been informed by society’s collective memory. This is where listening itself becomes a performance, sometimes conscious, often not. And this is the point at which one starts to feel that the question “Are these sounds sampled?” occurs only to those concerned with the authenticity of their listening—of their performance—where authenticity is defined in relation to a putative form of originality attributed to “autonomous” works of art.
Collecting thoughts
As Arendt mentions, collecting quotations was a central strategy for Benjamin as a writer and critic. It is also a central strategy in terms of composing sample-based music. Working with sounds in this way involves understanding the inherent potential for shifting and remixing that different bits of audio have built into them. It is also about being familiar with different possible combinations based on associations drawn forth through remembering, as I discuss above. The collection practices employed by different sample-based composers are diverse, although they do share the types of motives around collecting that Arendt ascribes to Benjamin, such as the typical accumulation of more sounds/books than one will ever use (Arendt, 1969). Benjamin also describes the affectation of the collector as that of one who does not emphasize the functional, utilitarian value of objects—“that is, their usefulness—but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage of their fate” (Benjamin, 1969a, p. 60). This is perhaps slightly disingenuous of Benjamin, who found many of the quotes he collected instrumental in preparing his own written works. But as Rodgers (2003) has mentioned, the selection of source material for sampling is an ongoing, circuitous practice of collecting recordings (vinyl records, MP3 files, field recordings, or others). This is how one develops a pool from which to draw quotations to work with—an archive that can have dramatic effects on one’s style of production. As Jackie Gallant mentioned with regard to her own practice of sample-collecting, the sound sources that she turns into loops “end up mutating over the years” (Chapman, 2007, p. 200). She adds that what she ends up creating tends to have the energy associated with the styles of music that she samples from.

Not because the samples are in some way recognizable, but more that the energy and the spirit and the aesthetic in a very general way of my taste in music comes through in the end product. More just a level of energy, like a subtle kind of mindset about what the attitude about the music should be. (Chapman, 2007, p. 209)

Working with sounds that one has collected involves a type of collaboration; the samples one uses affect the final product, even when they are not used indexically. The same can be said of quotation. In both cases a relationship is negotiated through use—a use that puts forth new sets of meanings through the juxtaposition of different elements that are imbued with transcendental points of reference at the same time as they structure the context or the “present-moment” of their remixing. This is where the negotiations involved in sampling and quotation partake of the auratic, when the latter is understood as a particularly structured (and structuring) type of feeling (to borrow from Williams, 1961). This is a “live” feeling based in the freedom of developing creative connections through processes such as collecting, selecting, and remembering.

The da Vinci code
This mode of observation may seem crude, but as the great theoretician Leonardo has shown, crude modes of observation may at times be usefully adduced. Leonardo compares painting and music as follows: “Painting is superior to music because, unlike unfortunate music, it does not have to die as
soon as it is born.... Music which is consumed in the very act of its birth is inferior to painting which the use of varnish has rendered eternal.” (Trattato I, 29, quoted in Benjamin, 1969b, p. 249)

As Irma Richter explains in the preface to her translation of da Vinci’s *Paragone: A Comparison of the Arts* (English title), the work is “not a connected literary treatise, but is made up of notes copied from the original manuscripts of the master and dovetailed together” (Richter, 1949, p. v)—marking it as specifically interesting for Benjamin given his predilection for textual fragments. Richter also explains that da Vinci likely prepared the work as a series of notes to be used in oration. *Paragone* is a collection of numbered “trattati” or “treatises.” “The style is animated,” she writes in her introduction, “and occasionally contains exaggerations such as might occur in debates” (Richter, 1949, p. 4). This is particularly interesting when one considers how self-consciously da Vinci asserts a form of authenticity for painting that the well-established “liberal art” of music could not claim—namely that of “enduring,” “appearing alive” (from Trattato 29—da Vinci, 1949, p. 74), and “lasting a great number of years” from Trattato 30 (da Vinci, 1949, p. 75). The painterly practices under consideration by da Vinci were fairly new forms of “mechanical” arts. *Paragone* seeks to establish a form of “scientific” legitimacy for painting, a legitimacy that could be verified through observing how painting is greater than, or at least equal to, music:

The musician claims that his science is equal to that of the painter, for it, too, is a body composed of many parts—the graces of which may be contemplated by the observer in as many harmonic rhythms as there are, and with these rhythms which are born and die it delights the soul of man within him. But the painter answers and says that the human body composed of many members does not give pleasure in harmonic rhythms in which beauty has to vary and create new forms, nor is it composed in rhythms which constantly require to be born and to die, but he makes it to last a great number of years, and of such excellence that it keeps alive that harmony of proportion which Nature with all its force could not keep. (da Vinci 1949, p. 75)

Most of the discussion I have just cited occurs in between the ellipses in Benjamin’s quotation of da Vinci—which actually spans Trattati 29 to 34a, or about four pages of text. Benjamin was not shy about transforming his quotations through selective sampling, editing, and remixing. Trattato 29 begins to outline the metaphor of music as “the younger sister of painting”—ranking “lower” (da Vinci, 1949, p. 74) since it fades away as soon as it is born. But it is not until three or four reformulations later, in Trattato 34a, that painting is asserted as eternal through the application of varnish, a rhetorical flourish that da Vinci then distances himself from in the sentences following the end of the text Benjamin cites. What follows is the full text of Trattato 34a, which Benjamin selectively draws from in “editing” his quotation of Trattato 29:

That thing is most worthy which satisfies the highest sense. Therefore as Painting satisfies the sense of seeing she is more noble than Music which only satisfies the ear.

That thing is noblest which has the longest duration. Therefore Music, which
passes away as soon as it is born, is of less account that Painting which, protected by glaze, lasts for ever.

That which contains within itself the greatest number of qualities and varieties may be said to be the most excellent. Therefore Painting is to be preferred to all other operations because it can produce all the forms which are and which are not in nature, it is more to be praised and exalted than Music which is concerned with the voice alone. With Painting the images of Gods are made; round Painting are held divine rites which the Music serves to adorn. Lovers come to it for portraits of those they love, and by its means beauty is preserved which otherwise Nature and Time would destroy; by it we preserve the likenesses of our famous men. And if you should say that Music also lasts for ever if written down, we are doing the same here with letters. After giving a place to Music among the Liberal Arts you must place Painting there, too, or else withdraw Music. And if you say that there are vile painters, I reply that Music also can be spoiled by those who do not understand it. (da Vinci, 1949, pp. 76-77)

Written music as a form of record or score—the foundation of Adorno’s consternation with Benjamin’s conception of the “autonomous work of art” as inexorably linked to visual, non-reproducible forms of art—is here cited by da Vinci as a potential, and indeed perhaps irrefutable, counterargument to his position on painting. At this point da Vinci simply asserts an equivalence between painting and music as “scientific” endeavours, along with writing. If you accord the status of “liberal art” to music, then painting should be considered a similarly objective science, as its “harmony of proportion” has a longer timeframe of verifiability than the “harmony of rhythm” belonging to aural composition.

It is impossible to know how purposeful Benjamin was in his editing of da Vinci. But the critique against music that he presents through quoting the latter feels like a cheap shot. Benjamin is using fragments of da Vinci to prop up his own fragmentary style of theoretical writing, citing the latter’s “crude” observations to support a highly contentious position—namely, that music is not so significant when considering the relationship between works of art and technologies of reproduction. He sidelines music without addressing it head on, which works well as a rhetorical strategy since music is incomensurable with his preferred conception of aura as an objective quality of works of art founded in concepts of authority, substantive duration, and material uniqueness. The authoritative effect of this citation in particular is highly enhanced through Benjamin’s selective editing of Trattati 29-34a into one (re)collected fragment.

The upshot of pointing out such subterfuge is to call into question the relevance of aura in the first place. Aura, if it is a meaningful concept at all, is best understood as a feeling that can be evoked in different ways in different times through different works of art—even those that incorporate mechanical reproduction at their centre. Reinterpreting aura in this way de-emphasizes its significance, allowing for a productive analysis of Benjamin as a skilled sample-based theoretician and writer. It also treats the practice of writerly critique and (re)interpretation as an art form in and of itself. Finally, it allows the term to continue to be applied to contemporary reproduc-
tion-heavy artworks, but as one term among many. “Aura,” “rhythmic or proportional
harmony,” “a state of freedom,” “connecting communities,” “remembering ourselves,”
“collecting thoughts”—these are all different ideas that together begin to make up a
list of concepts whose family resemblances (to borrow from Wittgenstein, 1999) sketch
the parameters of the types of lived experiences one can have creating and witnessing
works of art such as electronic music and academic treatises.

The “liveness” of an electronic musical performance or mixing or recording ses-
sion has to do with a feeling of dialogue with sounds. This “calling forth” of inspiration
takes place in the realm of memory, but it also partakes in a strong form of “pres-
ence”—meaning that it is contingent and happens in “real” time. Sounds samples are
allowed to maintain their own identities, all the while contributing to a mutually de-
developed mix. This mix becomes more than the conjunction of its parts. Creating such
a mix is a performance in itself. An electronic sound bank understood as a resource
pool for a sample-based composer becomes an earth upon which to build a world of
associations. “To cite the past is to reite the present and reveal in it the instance of
contingent paths that lead us back while taking us forwards” (Chambers, 2001, p. 113).
The practices of collecting, remembering, selecting, and connecting sounds are some
of the most auspicious elements of contemporary technologically enabled music,
whether live, recorded, performed, or remixed. Sample-based music is a practice of
quotation that treats sound objects as “the scene, the stage of their fate” (Benjamin,
1969a, p. 60) at the same time as it allows for the development of one’s own style and
voice as a sample-based composer.

The ethnographic work highlighted in the second part of this article reminds us
that practices such as collecting, remembering, selecting, and connecting, when re-
searched in relation to electronic and/or sample-based music, yield a network of con-
siderations that diminish the allure of aura. Benjamin’s inconsistent framing of aura
as an objectively verifiable quality of visual art objects made the concept inapplicable
to live music, along with photography and film. Reconsiderations of Benjamin’s an-
nouncement of the “withering of aura” in the age of mechanical reproduction have
run the full gamut in terms of asserting continued potential meaning for the concept:
that sound recording (and reproduction) technologies can produce “auratic” objects
(Blomster, 1977; Thornton, 1996), and that live musical events are of cultural value
precisely due to their authenticity and uniqueness (Auslander, 2003). Still others have
opted to abandon aura as a useful concept, focusing instead on Benjamin’s celebration
of the possibilities opened up by new technologies (Sterne, 2003; Taylor, 2001). In this
article I have sought to articulate another perspective for interpreting the significance
of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in relation to audio tech-
nologies, examining Benjamin’s writerly practice of quotation as engaging in practices
of collecting, remembering, selecting, and connecting similar to those integral to the
production of sample-based music. This is the most fitting way, it seems to me, to link
“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” to contemporary practices
of electronic and sample-based music—as a profound example of the power and po-
tential of quotation to transcend, interrupt, and make possible the production of new
works of art.
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Notes

1. The differences between electronic and sample-based music are difficult to pinpoint. The attribution of one label over the other is often a question of emphasis—are most of the sounds that are used generated via electronic musical “instruments” or by processing previous “recordings?” The history of this division can be traced in different ways. Timothy Taylor (2001) argues that serious music after WWII (and the advent of magnetic tape) defined itself along two axes, elektronische Musik and musique concrète, as exemplified in the works and writings of Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Boulez, respectively (see Schaeffer 1996, 1990 and Boulez 1981, 1991). Andra McCartney (2006) has suggested that the roots of the term “electronic music” can be further linked to oppositional statements on the part of people such as Herbert Eimert at the electronic studio at Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR) in Germany. She asserts that the historical desire to make this putatively aesthetic distinction has often been gendered and/or political in motivation. This claim is grounded in her reading of the rhetorical exchanges between members of the WDR studio (along with Boulez) versus Schaeffer at the Studio D’Essai de la Radiodiffusion-télévision Française (RTF). It is also supported by her ethnographic research into gender and sound-studio practices. I strongly agree, but I would also add that a corresponding tendency on the part of many contemporary authors has been to conflate sample-based and electronic music, understanding the former as a subcategory of the latter due to a mutual dependence upon electronic technology. This strategy, while consistent, effaces clarity within many different discussions. I have attempted to differentiate the two genres whenever necessary (and possible) in this paper; however, the attentive reader will likely notice a slippage between my use of the terms “sample-based” and “electronic.” This note is an acknowledgment of the socially constructed nature of the distinction. For studies of the relationship between hip-hop, audio technology, and sampling, see Hedige, 1994; Miller, 2004; Mudede, 2003; Rose, 1994; Schloss, 2004; and Tompkins, 2010. For discussions of the technological practices of other electronic musical genres, see Serazio 2008; Fales, 2005; Reynolds, 1998; Rodgers, 2003; and Thornton, 1996.

2. Benjamin follows this assertion with an endnote that explains somewhat cryptically that the history of a work of art such as the Mona Lisa also encompasses the kind and number of copies that were made of it in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. I suppose the limited number of traceable copies under discussion in this case simply added to the aura and uniqueness of the work’s history, as well as to the authority of the original, as opposed to rendering it irrelevant. This is endnote 1 in Benjamin’s essay. Endnote 3 also plays into my claims around Benjamin’s inconsistent bias toward aura applying only to art “objects,” in that it discusses the live art of theatre in comparison with film, claiming that “[t]he poorest provincial staging of Faust is superior to a Faust film, in that, ideally, it competes with the first performance at Weimar” (Benjamin, 1969b, p. 243). Again, as will become clearer later in my discussion, Benjamin’s endnotes are a source of subtle interruption within his own argument, adding and subtracting to his overall claims through the incorporation of incongruous, revealing citations and examples. In fact, the endnote that I discuss at length in this article, endnote 15, wherein Benjamin approvingly cites da Vinci’s ranking of music below painting, is inserted in a seemingly almost random place in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (Benjamin, 1969b, p. 234)—during a discussion of the significance of paintings being traditionally viewed by only one or a few people at a time, a practice that began to shift in the nineteenth century, whereupon large publics were invited to view paintings simultaneously in grand galleries (Benjamin, 1969b).

References


