

The Commodification of Music: Performative Dimensions

Mariia Lihus*

Abstract: The article focuses on the phenomenon of the commodification of culture that is analyzed through the prism of the art of music. The premodern, mechanical, electronic, and digital stages of the commodification of music are defined and discussed. The article demonstrates the narrowness of the critical theory approach in considering the commodification of culture as a threat to the cultural value of art. The phenomenon of commodification is reinterpreted from the perspective of cultural sociology. In particular, based on the ideas of J. C. Alexander's strong program in cultural sociology, the performative dimensions of communication concerning cultural objects as commodities are considered. Such theoretical framework enables to justify the contextuality of the artwork's "aura" and its sociocultural value as a collectively created meaning in the process of performance communication. The research demonstrates that commodification creates new opportunities for the performative success of cultural communication widening its contexts. At the same time, it is emphasized that commodification may lead to the degradation of the sociocultural value of musical compositions in case of the audience's passivity in musical performances.

Keywords: commodification, music, aura, performance, value, cultural sociology

INTRODUCTION

Commodification is a global tendency of contemporary cultural development that indicates the transformation of cultural phenomena into commodities – products and performances that are produced and consumed. Since the beginning of the 20th century, commodification of culture has been widely criticized as a danger to the social and aesthetic value of cultural practices within human sciences. In particular, according to the representatives of the Frankfurt School of social theory, commodification depersonalizes cultural interactions and thus, is a negative manifestation of capitalism. From the perspective of

* Mariia Lihus (✉)

National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Ukraine
e-mail: mariia.lihus@gmail.com

this critical approach, against the background of technological development and political propaganda, cultural practices are transformed into cultural industries that, unlike spaces of free and creative communication, integrate society into a structure of the consumerist mass culture based on the idea of constant reproduction and replication of the commodities. As Walter Benjamin (1968, 221) puts it, “the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition” transforming human perception and dehumanizing cultural practices: artistic objects lose their aura and become products of mass consumption. Critical theory, therefore, is based on the theoretical assumption of the dependence of the cultural realm on the market that leads to the degradation of its manifestations, especially art via commodification in the modern era.

Even though the critical prism “permeates the modern sensibility of the social sciences” (Alexander 2011, 479), its interpretation of the market and cultural commodities ignores the consideration of commodification of culture and art as a consequence of social and cultural development that strengthens the communicative and transformative potential of culture through the creation and transmission of meanings. Technical reproduction and commodification of cultural objects and practices can be fruitfully reinterpreted in the context of the cultural and performative turns in human sciences of the last decades of the 20th century. Moreover, commodification can be conceptualized as a means of widening the contexts of communication between artists and audiences. In this paper, commodification as a phenomenon that does not challenge the cultural and social value of cultural objects and strengthens their relevance and resonance in common participation in cultural performances establishing the meanings of social life is considered through the prism of music art.

MUSIC AS A COMMODITY: FROM SCORES TO DIGITAL INFORMATION

Many centuries had passed before music gained a commodity status along with its manifestations as a collective practice of music. Timothy D. Taylor (2007, 283) admits that commodification of music was preconditioned by mediatization of the musical experience (the creation, performance, and perception of music) by the means of its fixation and reproduction. According to the specificity of these

technical means, the premodern, mechanical, electronic, and digital stages of the commodification of music can be distinguished.

Even though the invention of the (now considered standard) musical notation in the 11th century was the first step towards the objectification of music, the turning point of its commodification was the reinvention of the printing press in Europe that enabled the technical reproduction of music and ensured separation of the creation, performance, and distribution of the results of composers' creative work. At the beginning of the premodern epoch, music existed in the aural galaxy – in the memory of wandering musicians and their listeners and the musical scores of the clergy. However, during the 14th-16th centuries, the professionalization of musical performance led to the transformation of the musicians' social status: musicians turned from independent free craftsmen welcomed equally at the wedding and at court to professional producers bound to a single master (Attali 1985, 15). Such a stage of commodification of music can be defined as representational: music became a spectacle created by the producers, who received money from the clients, and an institutionalized and rationalized social enterprise based on the composers' authority embodied in the practice of public concerts. Public concerts accompanied by the processes of musical instruments' manufacture and the development of musical education as commercial public actions marked the appearance of the new commodified structure of musical communication. The representational character of the musical spectacle was defined by the embodiment of the musical text translated by the performer from the printed scores into sounds. The generation of these representations led to the restriction of creativity and reduction of the indefinite number of performative interpretations to the representation of the existent artistic samples.

In the mid-19th century, the time of mechanical musical instruments' rapid production, commodification of music was accompanied by the transformation of the musical experience and the traditional communicative triad “composer-performer-audience”, where the composer and performer lost their universal authority. Music was mediatized by the player piano, the barrel organ, and the phonograph that functionally could replace performers and became objects of the consumption demand. Professionalization was replaced by amateurship due to engineering achievements: almost anybody could become a performer owning the means of the reproduction of sound that transformed the representational principle into repetition. According to

W. Straw (2002, 158), “the link between familiarity with a musical text and the desire to repeat the experience of listening to it has shaped the commodity status of popular music in its recorded forms”. In other words, the repetition as a fundamental principle of commodification of music after the invention of the phonograph recording resulted in a substitution for the authentic rituality of music as an event of communication. J. Attali (1985, 89) characterizes repetition as “the death of the original, the triumph of the copy, and the forgetting of the represented foundation”. Fifty years before the publication of J. Attali’s work, W. Benjamin in his essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” ([1935] 1968) similarly evaluates the new era of the mass culture based on the mediatization of artistic experience. For Benjamin, the consumption of the copy means the consumer’s reluctance to approach the artwork and change his/her context to experience the authentic aura of the original artwork. Therefore, repetition is claimed to destroy the original and legitimize a copy as a substitution for the genuine artistic experience.

The electronic epoch marked by the democratization of access to information via the mass production and distribution of radio, cinema, vinyl records, audio cassettes, and compact discs shifted the focus from creating, listening, and experiencing music to the exchange of time – the time spent on receiving musical recordings and collecting them. It was a time of the musical industry formation constituted by the following technological dimensions: music production (composers and performers), marketing (promoters, radio stations, etc.), and distribution (via different media). As a means of public control and embodiment of social power, music became monologous: according to J. Attali, it has lost its performative dimension as a social event that involves an interactive participation of the audience, performers, and a composer. J. Attali emphasizes that music’s instrumental application as a means of creating other commodities’ image in the era of repetition overshadowed music’s self-sufficiency: “music has become a pretext for asserting one’s cultivation, instead of a way of living it” (Attali 1985, 118). Moreover, the loss of self-sufficiency and authentic ritual dimension led to the value collapse and even “the end of aesthetic codes” (Ibid, 11), transforming the art of music into a process of repetition and exchange of goods.

The commodification of music in the modern digital age is determined by the occurrence of digital media. These days, in the era of an information society driven by information and communication

technologies, IT companies shape the musical experience on the basis of the principles of personalization, connectivity, and mobility. In the digital age, “a new ecology of musical consumption is emerging, based on subscription audio streaming services and Internet-connected mobile phones” (Hesmondhalgh & Meier 2018, 1556), so that music becomes information widely accessible that can be edited and shared. The musical information as a digital file loses its key signifiers and traditional commodity packaging (album art, band logos, etc.) and function via individual units that can be moved, played, or used separately. Such decontextualization preconditions the vanishing of the demarcation between the social roles of creators and performers enabling their self-presentation and communication via the new musical practices. However, despite the possibilities for music as a shared gift and creative interaction opened by the Internet, its status as a commodity has not vanished nowadays. Losing its materiality, in a digital form music remains an object of customers’ interest in the circulation of products and at the same time promotes agents’ creativity.

CREATIVE PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION OF CULTURAL COMMODITIES

The conceptualization of the commodification of art and cultural objects by the example of music as a degradation of their aesthetic and social value from the perspective of the critical theory is reductionist. This approach assumes musical commodities as mechanical products dependent on the laws of supply and demand that are governed by the audience’s passivity. This theoretical position also neglects the creativity of interaction of cultural agents concerning the manifestations of music as recordings and musical performances. Therefore, cultural consumption is mistakenly essentialized within the critical theory as a constant repetition of artwork’s copies regardless of the creativity of the audience and cultural contexts of their creative expression and performance.

The commodification of music itself does not diminish the aesthetic value of the musical artworks, whereas the repetition of copies does not reject the authority of the original because authenticity and reproduction are intertwined. Every change in the context and media space leads to a new life of the copy: its value is reconsidered at the background of the new semantic horizons. W. Benjamin defines this change as a decline of the artwork’s aura – the fixed and constant

context of the artwork that is inscribed in history. To his mind, high art has this fixed and sacred status, whereas low art forms are susceptible to replication. However, Benjamin's concept of authenticity and aura ignores that every time the copy appears in a new context, this replicated artwork gains a new aura that has to be explicated by the audience in the artistic experience via the will to approach the cultural object. As B. Groys (2008, 73) admits, "the aura, as described by Benjamin, only comes into being thanks to the modern technique of reproduction. That is, it emerges precisely at the very moment it is fading. It is born precisely for the same reason it disappears". G. Didi-Huberman (2005, 4) expresses a similar view on aura analyzing W. Benjamin's speculations. According to the scholar, aura is an open project, a restoration, restitution, and something that is uncompleted because it is constituted by the context. That means that the existence of aura as a specific representation of an artistic experience is always contextual because the status of authenticity or unoriginal replication is temporal and depends on the audience's experience and interaction concerning the artwork. Thus, technical reproduction and commodification itself are not key to the degradation of artworks' meaningfulness and aesthetic value.

Applying this idea to the musical realm, the cultural meaning of musical artworks is not derived only from sales campaigns. It is dependent on values and meanings that are communicated through the artworks' performances and created in the process of the artistic experience that are always contextual. According to P. Willis (1990, 60), the cultural meaning of commodified music depends on "consumer abilities to make value judgments, to talk knowledgeably and passionately about their genre tastes, to place music in their lives, to use commodities and symbols for their own imaginative purposes and to generate their own particular grounded aesthetics". Thus, musical consumption has a creative and reflexive dimension that may prevent the degradation of musical art, which without active participation in the process of music becomes a sum of static objects that are not critically evaluated by the audience.

Such contextuality of the musical artworks' meaning exemplifies that commodification itself does not challenge the aesthetic value of musical compositions. Even though a musical composition as a digital file stored on the computer, a recording transmitted via radio or television, or a live performance aimed to raise money for private or public purposes seems to be consumed as a commodity, it exists in the

particular cultural space and is inscribed in cultural narratives that shape its cultural meaning. In other words, a musical composition, possessing naked materiality, “is enmeshed in networks of meaning before its physical impact and immediately enters into other meanings and emotions after” (Alexander 2020, 384). This dimension of a musical composition’s discursive depth that W. Benjamin calls an artwork’s aura is constituted in the process of its experiencing and locating in the public space and does not vanish due to the objectification and commodification of music. Therefore, it may be fruitful to interpret a musical commodity from a temporal perspective as a phase in the life of things, a specific view on their performance, but not as a kind of a thing itself (Appadurai 1986, 17).

The musical artwork can be creatively produced and consumed as a musical performance. For instance, cultural projects, that communities initiate, attract new participants and support communal solidarity. Musical projects as such cultural initiatives are often aimed to accomplish social tasks with the help of artistic means that encourage people to turn from intellectual awareness or rational consumption to emotional empathy and active participation in communal activities or self-identification with the values declared and performed by its representatives. Such projects also enforce the mobilization of resources to realize particular social and cultural tasks. For example, the performers of the composition “We are the World” in 1985 gathered 54 million dollars for the charity foundation USA for Africa. The composition was aimed to draw the attention of the global community to the famine in African countries and spread a social message encouraging the audience to join the charity campaign and thus, became a social movement’s megaphone. This single was sold as a commodity but its cultural value was strengthened due to the relevance of a global social problem it actualized. Therefore, music revealed its status as a form of knowledge and collective communicative activity that informs and educates the audience.

Another demonstrative example is the Eurovision song contest – an annual European music competition aimed to define the best song out of those competing, and to promote the liberal values of equality, freedom, and solidarity. The contest is a kind of a hit parade – “the prime mover of the repetitive economy” in terms of J. Attali (1985, 106), where songs are evaluated by the professional jury and wide audience, and form a hierarchy that reflects and creates their cultural value and social power. From the perspective of critical theory, the

music performed within hit parades has a low cultural value. According to J. Attali (1985, 121), the low value of such music is caused by hit parades' monologous character, which "totally obstructs communication by way of object-related differences". However, the Eurovision song contest can be considered a cultural performance and a communicative event that demonstrates that music is a collective activity that creates, actualizes, and embodies cultural values via the communication of the audience and performers.

In particular, in May 2022, the song "Stefania" composed and performed by the Ukrainian folk-rap band Kalush won the competition. Their victory was not just a reflection of the consumers' desires or "a function of the intensity of the financial pressures" (Attali 1985, 107). It was a result of a successful and creative performance communication: through their authentic performance that represented the Ukrainian culture, the band not only reproduced the musical text but also communicated social and cultural meanings. They called on the world community to support Ukrainians in their struggle for freedom, independence, and dignity in the full-scale war started by Russia against Ukraine in February 2022. Their musical performance as a communicative event even in the hit parade format demonstrates that diminishing the cultural value of musical commodities and neglecting their performative manifestations is a reductionist perspective. Both examples justify that musical commodities as well as other cultural practices presuppose their creative production and consumption in the form of creative performances. Therefore, the commodification may definitely challenge the aesthetic and cultural value of musical practice in the light of the musical interaction and communication specificity just in case the communicational potential of music is reduced: if the musical experience is transformed into a passive perception of the predetermined meanings, music becomes a piece of information subject to utilitarian purpose.

THE PERFORMATIVITY OF MUSICAL COMMODITIES

The creativity of production and consumption of musical commodities can be fruitfully considered through the prism of J. C. Alexander's strong program in cultural sociology. This approach suggests theoretical means to interpret cultural practices and objects as performances and thus, can be a foundation to analyze the performativity of the musical commodities. Within this theoretical framework, markets can be considered as cultural constellations,

whereas music, as a practice, an interactive process and a communicative action, has a social transformative potential and requires interpretation as a space and means of the collective representations' construction (Lihus 2018). Therefore, such process of collective consumption and production of music is a particular market exchange that can be defined as a creative collective action that enables its participants to constitute meanings and express themselves, transforming the presentation of musical compositions into performers' and audience's self-presentation.

From the position of cultural sociology of Jeffrey C. Alexander, musical compositions as commodities or objects are performative things that have “a form and shape and texture that create the conditions for experiencing their aesthetic surface and discursive depth” (Alexander 2020, 391). In this context, musical commodities can be analyzed as the means to experience fusion by the audiences that “attribute to objects an aura of sacrality and beauty” (Ibid, 397). Unlike other kinds of art (painting, sculpture, theatre), music actualizes the opportunity for imaginative creativity and participation in performance through the corporeal presence because music presupposes not only visual experience, but corporeal experience in general. Even as a recording, music provokes interaction and thus, commodification of music may widen the contexts of communication between the participants of musicking. As Christopher Small (1998, 8) admits, musical compositions ensure their distinct interpretations that create meanings, and thus require active participation to constitute the contextuality of their aesthetic experience and cultural value.

Apart from the performers and audience that are constitutional components of music as a cultural performance and social event, J. C. Alexander (2004) considers *mise-en-scene* (practice and style of performing) and social power (peculiarities of status stratification that influence musical culture) to be crucial in cultural performances. Social power as a sum of policies supports or hinders creativity and music production. It also defines accessibility of the means of symbolic production – the quality of musical instruments used to create music, brightness of sound, style of performance, and musicians' skills of articulation and intonation that shape the *mise-en-scene* and ensure the performance of script that underlies any artistic event. The fusion of these components of cultural performance is preconditioned among other things by the market as a cultural constellation that is both restraining and enabling as it provides the

agents “with the tools to shape markets, social relationships, and contexts of commodification, in legitimate and meaningful formats” (Velthuis 2005, 4). These meaningful formats presuppose a social construction of cultural value via communication of the audience and performers and pricing. In particular, aesthetic, artistic, or cultural values of the works of art are constituted by the physical context in which they are displayed (*mise-en-scene*), the public foundations of recognition, and pricing as an objectified “way of constructing proxies for uncertain and elusive qualities” (Ibid, 160).

The perspective of cultural sociology of J. C. Alexander enables considering music as a performance, and musical compositions and practices as performative things. In this context, it is fruitful to define musical performance as an open and reflexive act of creative communication – a collective action based on the horizontal relation of its participants (Lihus 2018). In the performance, social determinants of its participants do not matter because the situation of performance itself transforms them into equal communicators. The audience is active and self-sufficient, its reaction cannot be defined in advance, and thus, musical performance is a source of creation of meanings and narratives based on the experience of its components’ fusion.

Commodification itself does not undermine this performative character of musical experience: reinforcing a distribution of musical artworks seems to be an unquestionable benefit for artists and an audience that can create and embody cultural meanings in communication. Moreover, commodification may liberate music from its instrumental perception and consumption: due to the broad access to the means of symbolic representation, technical means of music production, and indefiniteness of music’s final audience, the cultural value of the musical commodities is independent of the predetermined meanings. Gaining a wider context, art does not lose its critical function. Therefore, commodification may ensure music’s autonomy by its independence from the meanings imposed solely by social and political institutions, such as the church, the state, etc.

At the same time, commodification of culture and music particularly may have negative consequences for the cultural significance of artworks and the authenticity of the artistic experience via passive consumption of musical compositions. Such reduction of aesthetic and communicative potential of music transforms its performative character into a technical repetition of musical text that is not perceived as a cultural platform of deliberation, discussion, and

constitution of meanings. In this regard, the format of music's performance communication may be endangered due to the instrumentalization of music. Becoming a background that permeates public contexts, music loses its communicative potential. However, this risk is neutralized by the active participation of the audience and performers in the process of creation, distribution, and listening to music that is not determined by the economic value of cultural commodities only.

CONCLUSION

Commodification of cultural production is a contemporary factuality of cultural communication that impacts the collective and personal experience of cultural phenomena, in particular music and musical performances. In contrast to the dominating critical theory in social sciences that presents commodification as an antithesis of social and cultural life, cultural sociology provides a fruitful theoretical means to demonstrate the performative dimensions of commodification to reconsider its communicational potential. From the position of cultural sociology, the phenomenon of commodification rather creates new opportunities for the performative success of cultural communication than negates a sociocultural meaning of musical art. As a commodity, music can still be an interactive and intersubjective performative medium and a manager of social relations, forming a common context of the participants' coexistence in a social event that makes the collective representations embodied in the musical performance influential and transformative. However, commodification may endanger the performative success of artistic practices disregarding their cultural value if the situation of artistic communication excludes the creative participation of its participants.

REFERENCES:

- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2004. "Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy." *Sociological Theory*, 22 (4): 527-573.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2011. "Market as Narrative and Character." *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 4 (4): 477-488.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C. 2020. "The Performativity of Objects." *Sociologisk Forskning*, 57 (3-4): 381-409.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 1986. "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value." In Arjun Appadurai (Ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, pp. 3-63. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Attali, Jacques. 1985. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Benjamin, Walter. (1935) 1968. "The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproduction." In Hannah Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations*, pp. 217-252. New York: Schocken Books.
- Didi-Huberman, Georges. 2005. "The Supposition of the Aura: The Now, the Then, and Modernity." In Andrew Benjamin (Ed.), *Walter Benjamin and History (Walter Benjamin Studies)*, pp. 3–18. London: Continuum.
- Groys, Boris. 2008. "The Topology of Contemporary Art." In Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Eds.), *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, pp. 71–80. Duke University Press.
- Hesmondhalgh, David, and Leslie M. Meier. 2018. "What the Digitalisation of Music Tells Us About Capitalism, Culture and the Power of the Information Technology Sector." *Information, Communication & Society*, 21 (11): 1555-1570.
- Lihus, Mariia. 2018. "Performance as a Communicative Process." *Visnyk of the Lviv University. Series philosophical science*, 20: 119-127.
- Small, Christopher. 1998. *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening*. Wesleyan University Press.
- Straw, Will. 2002. "Music as Commodity and Material Culture." *Repercussions*, 7-8: 147-172.
- Taylor, Timothy. D. 2007. "The Commodification of Music at the Dawn of the Era of 'Mechanical Music'." *Ethnomusicology*, 51 (2): 281–305.
- Velthuis, Olav. 2005. *Talking Prices: Symbolic Meanings of Prices on the Market for Contemporary Art*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Willis, Paul. 1990. *Common Culture: Symbolic Work at Play in the Everyday Cultures of the Young*. Westview Press.