Vinyl is Dead, Long Live Vinyl: The Work of Recording and Mourning in the Age of Digital Reproduction

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If, as appears to be the case, we have now witnessed the final triumph of the digital over the analogue in audio recording technologies and music distribution, the near total eradication of analogue media forms from the listening practices of all but the most nostalgic or purist of auditory subjects, then it is surely the moment to take stock, to pause and reflect on what this might mean for our analogue past as well as our digital future. In the space opened up by this historical juncture, I propose in this paper a reflection on the temporarities of recordings themselves along with an analysis of some recordings which echo my own concerns in this respect: in both their manifest content; and their concrete materiality (the recordings to be examined having been released on a format not of its own time: vinyl).

The very word recording when taken, in its pluralisable and thus nominal form, straddles both the finite-as a noun and an inanimate physical object with a delineated ontology-and the infinite-the noun form being derived from a present participle, a form which gestures towards the uncontrollable, to that which is always in process. All recordings straddle these different temporalities, being a record of a past event at the same time as they are the possibility of the future reiteration of that event in a technologically-mediated (and hence different) form.

The etymology of the word recording, meanwhile, tells us already that this thing which is not always already has to do with loss. Tracing this word back to its Latin root recordari, we understand that recordings are always imbued with a function of remembrance, intended to allow that which has passed to be again. This function was perhaps more present in the minds of the early pioneers of sound recording technologies. This is precisely what is suggested by Jonathan Sterne when he writes: 'If there was a defining figure in early accounts of sound recording, it was the possibility of preserving the voice beyond the death of the speaker' (2003: 287). But this function is present in all recordings and describes not only the past of all recording formats but also their future. It is a future haunted by the spectre of death, of an object or event that is no longer, but which is the recording's capacity and function to make present again.

There are those who might argue that the digital era is one in which this is no longer really so; that the transcoding of the physical movement of sound waves into binary data necessarily means we are no longer dealing with a past which has again been made present. Instead, we are confronted by an entirely new entity altogether, an entity that entertains none of the indexical relations to its original that exist in digital technologies(this is the fourth-dimension or the virtual that Baudrillard talks of (2004: 65; see also Baudrillard, 2005: 27-28)). This position is summed up very well by Laura Marks in regards to visual media, but her comments are equally applicable to audio media and its related technologies. She writes:

'It is common for critics to note that in digital media the indexical link between image and represented object, the existential connection between them, is irrevocably severed. In photography, film, and analog video it is possible to trace a physical path from the object represented, to the light that reflects off it, to the photographic emulsion or cathode ray tube that the light hits, to the resulting image. In digital imaging this path is not retracable, for an additional step is added: converting the image into data, and thereby breaking the link between image and physical referent. Any iteration of the image may be altered, and there is no 'generational' difference to alert us to the stage at which the change occurred. For many people (usually, media theorists more than practitioners) this qualitative change occasionally fear for the status of the image as real. Practically, as a result of the potential digital alteration of any electronic image, video and photography can no longer serve as indexical evidence, for example in the courtroom. Theoretically, the semiotic foundation of photographic images in the real world is thought to be destroyed in digital media. (2002: 162)'

With regard to the audio realm and musical recordings, the digital era must surely appear to hammer the final nail into the coffin ofauratic essence whose loss in the era of mechanical reproduction was so lamented by Adorno. For those critics Marks talks of who fear for the status of the real, meanwhile, it may seem as though it is with the digital that a world of Baudrillardian, all-encompassing simulacra finally comes to pass—does not Baudrillard himself claim that 'the key concept of this Virtuality is High Definition. That of the image, but also of time (Real Time), of music (High Fidelity) ... High Definition marks the transition ... to an operational formula—and, precisely, a 'definitive' one, the transition to a world where referential substance is becoming increasingly rare' (1996: 29)? But to infer this kind of shift as we move into the digital realm is to fall prey to a lure, for where there may seem to be a break there is in fact continuity.1 This is so for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is misleading to believe that there is no transcoding whatsoever in analogue sound reproduction technologies. This can patently not be the case in any technological system which relies on the conversion of a waveform into electrical impulses—and this is so even if the transcoding at work might be argued to disassemble the original less in analogue technology than in digital technologies that rely on sampling. Secondly, it is similarly false to assume that there is an absolute indexical relationship between reality and analogue technologies, as though there were no existential ontology in play in the actual process of analogue recording and no possibility for falsification. Thirdly, as Jonathan Sterne has pointed out, all sonic events that are formulated in the knowledge of their own recording are necessarily already mediated and altered by that set of conditions; they are produced for the recording, as it were. As Sterne writes:

the medium does not mediate the relation between singer and listener, original and copy. It is the nature of their connection. Without the medium, there would be no connection, no copy, but also no original, or at least no original in the same form. The performance is for the
Finally - and here in a sense we are extending Sterne’s analysis beyond its own avowed intentions - there is continuity between technologies associated with analogue and digital sound quite simply because both produce recordings. Indeed, when one thinks about different technologies of sound recording at this fundamental level it is somewhat hard to understand how it is possible to claim that any format could enjoy indextical links back to its sonic source or, what amounts to the same, to claim that any recording format displays a higher degree of fidelity to its genetic origin than any other. For a recording, be it analogue or digital, marks a loss, the death of that which it remembers. It can thus never remain absolutely faithful to or resurrect that origin. Rather, it can only ever, like the work of mourning, produce something else entirely. We might, then, suggest that there is a kind of ontological consistency between recordings and the machines which render them possible: according to this logic both would in effect be dead, ‘bound to life and to the living present which [they repeat] originally’. And yet, as representations or machines for reproduction unable to run by themselves, both would at the same time be the model of death itself (Derrida, 1981: 227).

A recording is therefore similar to a memory in Derrida’s (memorial) analysis of the work of Paul de Man: it always ‘promises the resurrection of an anterior past’, yet is excluded from ‘the classical (originally Hegelian) schema that links the essence of a being to its past being (être-passé), Wesen zu Gewesenhheit’. Like a memory, a recording is ‘not essentially oriented toward the past, toward a past present deemed to have really and previously existed’; and, like memory, it ‘stays with traces in order to “preserve” them, but traces of a past that has never been present, traces which themselves never occupy the form of presence and always remain, as it were, to come’ (Derrida, 1986: 58).

A recording, then, along with this very word itself which attempts to reify an active process (the present participle) into a nominal form that can but recall its past - a past always oriented towards the future - is thus shot through with death. Twice. For whilst the sonic content that it carries can only ever signal the passing of what was (and thereby the incomplete presence of the recording in its own present), every aspect of the recording technologies required to capture, inscribe and read that content is also infused with a sense of its own imminent (and imminent) demise. If debates regarding high-fidelity reproduction and indexicality still rage with the advent of every new format or technological enhancement, this is surely only to cover up a more fundamental yet uncomfortable truth: namely, that no recording will ever achieve the apex of high-fidelity reproduction and actually become its origin-for that is an ontological impossibility, even in digital production. 3 What is more, every new format will die and be superseded by another which will assert its own presence (in the sense of its present-ness) rather than constituting a real advance along the path towards greatest fidelity. As Douglas Kahn writes, ‘determinations of sound quality usually prove to be creatures of the historical moment, not of some timeless measure of sonic realism’ (1999: 140). 4

Consequently, we might posit that every recording format (and hence any recording) only exists and is only ever present in relation to the death of that which it records, along with its future disappearance, its own death to come. Recordings are linked to remembrance because they recall-or re-create, rather-a past sonic event; but also because they are themselves a memorial of their own future passing, as they enact in their own time the work of their own mourning. We are here alluding of course to Derrida’s writings on mourning and friendship. Here, every friendship is from the beginning marked by mourning, since in any relationship one will see the other die and consequently perform the work of mourning-which is then for Derrida an extension of friendship, just as friendship is born alongside mourning. As Derrida writes of his friendship with Paul de Man, ‘it suffices that I know him to be mortal, that he knows me to be mortal-there is no friendship without this knowledge of finitude’ (Derrida, 1986, 29).

Yet there is a crucial difference here. For even though the mourning enacted in friendship is directed towards the other, that is to say the not-I, one can never know in advance which party will mourn the other, whereas it is its own imminent (and imminent) demise. This means that while one format is born in the mourning of its own predecessor, 5 another may claim, 6 (The only possible exception to this arises when two competing formats are released onto the market at the same time, as was the case with phonograph cylinders and gramophone records, VHS and Betamax, CDs and MDs, Videodiscs and DVDs.) So whilst it is true that a recording format’s being-in-itself (like Derrida’s ‘being-in-me or being-in-us’) is ‘constituted out of the possibility of mourning’ (Derrida 1986: 34), this mourning will be instigated by that format’s own death. This is not to say, of course, that each format is entirely inwardly specular and removed from all alterity. It is merely to point out that the process of mourning which permeates every format’s being-in-itself is instigated, not by the death or possible death of the other, but, rather, from the certain birth of the other, of another format. The rhetoric of market forces must, of course, try to convince us that this is not the case, since the commercial success of any new format surely depends on the extent to which its claims both to fidelity and to longevity are able to convince (or dupe, rather) the consumer. This was obviously very problematic for Edison’s original tinfoil phonograph cylinders. These enjoyed a very brief success as an entertainment device in the late 1870s. However, successive developments in the design of the material support of the format were always intended to increase the physical longevity of the recording media. Thus, wax cylinders enjoyed much greater longevity than tinfoil recordings. What is more, they also allowed for mass production suited to commercial viability-although it should be noted that early Edison brown wax cylinders required performers to repeat their performance again and again in front of a number of recording devices, each of which would produce a single recorded copy. In fact, true mass production only became possible once the pantographic method that used a master to make copies was improved in 1902 by Edison’s ‘Gold-Moulded’ process. But again, wax was soon to be replaced by moulded-celluloid cylinders which represented a significant improvement in the sound quality and longevity of these recordings. One Albany NY company even tried to convey a sense of this durability in its very name, the Indestructible Record Co. being a nomenclature intended primarily to back up the (patently false) claim made on the packaging of every disc that it ‘never wears out’ (Fig.1). The US Phonograph company of Cleveland OH made a similar claim when they chose to call their own recording label US Everlasting Records.
Regardless, phonograph cylinders themselves were soon to become obsolete due to the market dominance of Emile Berliner’s lateral-cut gramophone disc records. These in turn underwent various material transformations intended to improve both fidelity and longevity. Originally, gramophone records were cut into rubber, then later shellac, then celluloid, before settling on the plastic known as vinyl which has now become synonymous with the format. The introduction of the compact disc also saw unprecedented claims made about the format’s longevity. To back up these claims many salesmen in hi-fi shops, reviewers in consumer choice magazines and presenters on prime-time television did the unthinkable to these new shiny discs in order to show that they still played perfectly after being scratched or spread with jam—which, of course, they invariably did not.

Even today as music attempts to free itself from the strictures of material formats, does the promise of downloadable music come, not simply from its physical portability (as one can now download vast amounts of music onto hardware players the size of postage stamps), but also from the increased virtual portability and longevity afforded to digital music by the user’s ability to transcode one encoding format into another as technology progresses?

Yet here again, history would seem to suggest that claims to the effect that any recording format is indestructible can only ever be lies: both because of the material degradation of media over time (which is a problem for digital data storage as well as analogue media); but also because material or encoding formats are invariably superseded. We can then maintain our assertion that all recorded media are doubly a site of remembrance or mourning, reworking their inscribed content as an insufficient recollection of a time now lost at the same time as they perform their own eulogy in their own present, a present that is also their inescapably finite future. Recordings, with regards to both their recorded content and material ontology, therefore negotiate a middle ground between the finite and the infinite.

As such, they bring into play the same kind of temporality as the work of mourning which, in finitude (or death), allows a relationship with an other to access the infinite.

Granted, all of this may sound overly pessimistic and bleak. But we can see that the contrary is in fact the case as soon as we leave the realm of commercial imperatives and turn instead to the world of the recording artist—a term we interpret here very narrowly to include only those sound artists whose work can be said to enact an explicit reflection on either the recording process or, and this amounts to the same thing, on the recorded media in which they operate. In the imagination of certain recording artists, the finitude of a medium becomes not so much an end point as a starting point; by the same token, the passing of a medium or format becomes—as in Derrida’s affirmative conception of mourning (see Derrida, 1995: 43)—not so much a loss as an affirmation of renewed possibilities, the very point at which writing or inscription becomes possible and necessary.

As Joan Kirkby notes, in his theories of mourning Derrida distinguishes ‘between memory as interiorisation (erinnerung) and memory as a giving over to thinking and inscription (Gedächtnis)’. This is an important distinction since Gedächtnis, being ‘an externalising memory … is linked with technical or mechanical inscription, with writing and rhetoric. It is productive; it leads to external engagement in an ongoing dialogue with the other. It is, as he says, a “remembrance of the future”’ (Kirkby, 2006: 470, quoting Derrida, 1986: 29).

In what remains of this paper I therefore wish to propose readings of two works which enact this work of mourning as an affirmation, as a positive starting point, for a new dialogue or discourse on the very nature of the object being mourned: in this case, since its day has already come, the vinyl record. In order to do this, I could no doubt concentrate on one of the many records catalogued and commented upon by Philip Samartzis. In his conference presentation ‘Surface Noise’, Samartzis ‘seeks to trace the genealogy or surface noise as a tool of musical expression by surveying a range of artistic practices based around the record and turntable that privilege detritus, abrasion, repetition and decay as key compositional devices’ (2006: 61). Indeed, very many of the pieces mentioned by Samartzis could be analysed as examples of works of mourning as this term is understood here, which is to say works which take the finitude of the vinyl medium as a starting point, as a means to perform new inscriptions. Take, for instance, Milán Knizak’s...
CM von Hausswolff, *Operations of Spirit Communication*.

Carl Michael von Hausswolff is a Swedish musician and artist much of whose work is concerned with making perceptible signals that are below the threshold of human perception. Since 1987, when he first discovered the theories of Friedrich Jürgenson, von Hausswolff (like Konstantin Raudive before him) has been greatly influenced by this figure who is today considered the father of the modern Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP) movement, to the extent that von Hausswolff has presented Jürgenson’s archive in many exhibitions. In 1957 Jürgenson claimed to have discovered human voices on recordings that he had made of his own voice and of birdsong, voices which could not have come from a physically present human being. As Joe Banks writes:

> Convinced that these recordings represented communications from alien life-forms and, for instance, his deceased mother, Jürgenson temporarily abandoned his artistic career to concentrate on these experiments and publicize his findings … [and his] publications, and particularly the idea that he had amassed evidence proving the existence of an afterlife, attracted considerable attention. (2001: 77)

Jürgenson, then, forged a slightly different link between death and recording to that seen thus far, since he believed that the process of recording was able to provide a portal to the other side of life and to inscribe on its media what it found there. In this respect Jürgenson’s ideas were hardly original. This same possibility had been evoked by Edison himself, who not only saw his invention as a means to preserve the voices of the living after their death through ‘family records’ (see Sterne, 2003: 202), but stated, in a 1920 interview in *Scientific American*:

> I have been thinking for some time of a machine or apparatus which could be operated by personalities which have passed onto other existence or sphere…. I am inclined to believe that our personality does affect matter. If we can evolve an instrument so delicate as to be affected by our personality as it survives in the next life, such an instrument ought to record something. (Lescarboura, 1920: 446, cited in Scheitle, 2004-2005: 247)\footnote{11}

Carl Michael von Hausswolff’s *Operations of Spirit Communication* (2006) is dedicated to Andrew M McKenzie (of the group Halfer Trio) and Friedrich Jürgenson, and it is in the context of the latter’s supernatural experiments in particular that we must consider Hausswolff’s own work. The latter consists of a series of sustained sine tones that thrrob due to the differential relations between them.\footnote{12} These tones form a sonic backdrop through which various “ghostly” phenomena appear to emanate sporadically: a parasitic electrical buzz; a heavily mediated (through the means of reproduction or recording) voice uttering something in an indistinguishable language; static crackle; machinic rumblings; a train horn; barely audible music from another time and place. These secondary emanations never seem to become the main focus of the piece, however. Even if they constantly haunt the main sonic content constituted by the droning sine tones, it is the latter that envelop us and assert their auditory presence on us as listeners, thus turning backdrop into foreground. This is a very different methodology to that of most EVP recordings. Most would attempt to banish the medium (or sonically consistent matter) in order to focus only on that which only occasionally breaks through the ether. So rather than being an attempt to actually record and document new electronic voice phenomena or sounds from the beyond, I would like to suggest that *Operations of Spirit Communication* does instigate a dialogue with the dead but that this dialogue takes place between all of the various components that together constitute this work, and which itself becomes a work of mourning for its own passing.

The 2006 release of *Operations of Spirit Communication* on the Die Stadt label is a recording constructed out of its own multiple pasts and deaths-themselves oriented towards the future that is constituted by the present of this recording; which in itself, of course, can never be fully present. This is to say, firstly, that this 12-inch long-playing record is a repress of a 2000 album that, in 2006, was given a new future by this re-release. Furthermore, this re-release was accompanied by the simultaneous release of an accompanying disk that elicits a reconsideration of the earlier work, *Operation of Spirit Communication* (2006a). This almost identically titled 7-inch single shares the same cover art as its larger format companion—but displays it in colour as opposed to black and white—and presents two new tracks recorded in 2006: ‘12 Sine Missing One’ and ‘1 Sine Missing Twelve’. The first presents us with a combination of sine tones similar to those on *Operations of Spirit Communication* but without any extraneous channeled matter breaking through this sonic content (in other words, there are just 12 sine tones minus the track of other voices). The second of these tracks (‘1 Sine Missing Twelve’), meanwhile, pursues the logic of its title by subtracting not only this track of random voices and sounds but also 11 of the original sine tones, leaving us with a single pure sine tone. We might then suggest that *Operation of Spirit Communication* encapsulates both the clinically perfect future of music in a digital, virtual age-Baudrillard’s ‘integral music’ in which sounds have been cleansed and expurgated and which, shorn of all noise and static, is, so to speak, restored to its technical perfection … a music reduced to a pure wavelength’ (2005: 27-28)—and also its imperfect, noise-riddled past grounded in analogue materiality. Considered in this way, taking into account both its sonic content and its material medium, *Operation of Spirit Communication* deploys itself in different temporalities. It is both its own imperfect (a record of what was, something of course rife with imperfection), and its own future perfect (a record of what will have been, not in relation to its analogue material support but to its sonic content, the
latter foretelling a perfect future that will one day become imperfect). Similarly, the long-playing *Operations of Spirit Communication* straddles various temporalities. It was composed at the Fort, Stockholm, in Spring 2000, but, as the liner notes tell us, it was:

Recorded at the Royal Chamber and at the Fort 1998-2000 and at the following events:

- EV+A, Limerick, Ireland, 2000
- Königreiche Eigaland-Vargaland, Podewil, Berlin/Reno Hotel, Bangkok, 1999
- 3rd International Biennial, SITE Santa Fé, New Mexico, USA, 1999
- The Quickening, Banja Luka, Bosnia-Herzegovina, 1998

Yet the final version consecrated on vinyl and released as *Operations of Spirit Communication* does not consist of multiple tracks, each of which would present us with the reproduction of one of these events or installations. Rather, it is made up of two long tracks, one on each side of the vinyl, each of which is a composite work composed out of multiple past events and recordings. As a review on the textura.org website reveals:

> the work was originally presented as a 1998-2000 sound installation that aspired to achieve communication with other worlds, specifically the dead (the installation picks up electrical and radio transmissions: microphones record the noise of electricity, sine wave tones are received, and cameras capture electric behaviour). (2006)

The artist's profile on discogs.com explains it (somewhat obtusely) like this:

> His compositions from 1979 to 1992 are constructed almost exclusively from basic material taken from earlier audiovisual installations and performance works, which consists essentially of complex macromal drones with a surface of aesthetic elegance and beauty. In later works, Hausswolff has retained the aesthetic elegance and the drone and added a purely isolationistic sonoric condition to composing. (nd)

Knowing this, one imagines that the cover art of *Operations of Spirit Communication* presents us with three different instances of the kinds of installations (or perhaps some of the actual installations) used to generate the audio content that is being presented here, as the front cover, back cover and inside gatefold all show (in somewhat blurry, out of focus or overexposed fashion) images of tables covered with an elaborate array of electronic equipment and a jumble of wires (see Figs 2, 3, and 4). Whilst most of this equipment cannot be clearly identified from the photographs (except for an eight-track mixing desk on the front cover), it is possible to ascertain that, on the front and back covers at least, the main piece of equipment is a CD player. Regardless of the intended function of the installation in each image, what is clear is that the communication figured here simultaneously links all of the past events and recordings that are being created anew as well as the temporalities of the different technologies in play. Indeed, *Operations of Spirit Communication* can be said to enact a remembrance of its own future, for it is a vinyl-only release which re-creates events from the past that were themselves dependent on vinyl’s posthumous future. What is more, the vinyl used for this release appears to embody the liminal state of vinyl’s own temporalities, since it is semi-transparent/semi-opaque, as if struggling to assert its material presence in the very midst of its future disappearance (see Fig. 5). It is possible to suggest then that, remaining true to his inspiration, von Hausswolff does channel a ghostly presence with this release, but that this work as a *medium* is performed by the temporal incommensurability of the work's *media* which, like all ghosts, are out of time.13
A very similar yet extended reflection on this same theme can be said to take place in Masami Akita (recording under his real name and not his more usual recording pseudonym, Merzbow) and Russell Haswell's 2002 recording *Satanstornade*. At first glance, this has much less to do with mourning than von Hausswolff's *Operations of Spirit Communication*—although the elaborate and vicious looking fighting and hunting knives and daggers from the photographs on the front and back covers may lead one to believe it has everything to do with death. (And it should be noted that many reviews of the album similarly describe it more in terms of the physical damage it could potentially inflict upon the listener than its actual sonic effects.)
However, if one looks more closely at the front cover (see Fig. 6) — and this is the same regardless of whether one examines the vinyl or the CD version — one realises that there is more to see here than may at first be apparent. For the text that would normally be reproduced in the liner notes or CD booklet is overlaid on the photograph in a clear varnish in such a way that it can only be seen when light reflects off the cover at a certain angle (see Fig. 7). This text gives the track titles, copyright information and associated legal warnings as well as details of the recording’s temporal, spatial and technological conditions of production. It reads (on the CD version):

Figure 6

masami akita: apple G3 notebook + various software
russell haswell: 1400C/166 powerbook + various software
...
recorded live direct to sony MD 4 track + direct stereo mixdown @ the abbey, london 14.6.99
digital MD to hardisk transfer by oswald berthold, pre-mastering & edits by russell haswell @ mego berlin 05.10.99 & 10.10.99
digitally mastered by denis blackham @ country masters in frimley 30.07.01 (Akita & Haswell 2002)

What is striking about this inventory of the technological details of the performance and recording is not so much the fact that the entire process takes place across different platforms and formats in a purely digital realm with no analogue technology at any stage in the process — that is not uncommon in an age of laptop composition. It is rather that, considering the wholly digital media used to produce and record this work, the artists should decide to release it on vinyl at all. And this is all the more surprising given that the text on the vinyl version explicitly points out some of the limitations of this medium. Firstly, the track order is different on the vinyl version in order to accommodate the need to have the sonic content split over two recording sides. Secondly, different edits were apparently required for this format (and indeed two tracks are shorter than their counterpart versions on the CD). Lastly, we are told that different mastering and transfer processes were needed to produce the vinyl version, for rather than containing the last line of text quoted...
above, this version reads:

edits for this format by russell haswell in coventry 01.07.01 & 03.07.01

vinyl mastered by rashad becker at dubplates & mastering in berlin 20.07.01 (Akita & Haswell, 2002a)

Even more surprising is the fact that after the legal warning on the vinyl version the following text appears:

the audio on this vinyl disc was originally recorded on digital equipment. we have attempted to preserve, as closely as possible, the sound of the original recording. because of its high resolution, however, comparison to the digital original can reveal the limitations of this vinyl version. (Akita & Haswell, 2002a)

Given all of this, one is surely justified in asking why Akita and Haswell would bother releasing a vinyl version at all—and, in the context of the present paper, what any of this has to do with mourning? The answer to both of these questions lies, I believe, in the title of one of the album’s tracks (track 1 on the CD, track B1 on the vinyl) and in a peculiarity of the vinyl version.

When one listens to the vinyl recording of Satanstornade, one can be slightly puzzled as to why each of the tracks on the B-side (which contains three tracks, whereas the A-side has only one track) ends in a locked groove which requires the listener manually to lift the stylus off the record and place it at the beginning of the next track. When looking closely at the surface of the vinyl, however, it soon becomes apparent that this is because each track does not segue seamlessly into the next. Instead, each track is separated off from the next by a section of vinyl inscribed, not with a spiral groove, but rather, with the preceding track’s title—the first of which on the B-side is ‘Fend Off Your Miserable Grief’ (see Figs. 8 and 9).

Figure 8

This returns us to our earlier reflections on the process of mourning. It does so, not only because of the title itself (which can be read to advocate a more affirmative response to a tragic event, such as a death), but because of the way in which this title appears on the disc. If this track title does propose that we engage in a more productive form of mourning, then the place in which it is inscribed is one that necessarily opens up a space of reflection. Furthermore, like the Derridean work of mourning examined above that brings Gedächtnis into play, it is one which is linked with a technical or mechanical inscription that leads to ‘a remembrance of the future’ (Derrida, 1986: 29). By inscribing the title in the space in-between tracks and forcing the listener to reposition the stylus on the disc after every track in order to continue listening, Akita and Haswell intensify two of the mechanical qualities of vinyl as a medium: its material reality as a plastic support into which a form of inscription or writing is etched; and the need for physical interaction with the disc and reproduction equipment at the start of playback and also during playback—the audio content of vinyl always being split over two sides.

Rather than a mere design quirk intended to increase the cachet of this product for vinyl fetishists and collectors, I would like to suggest that these inscribed track titles are intended precisely to introduce an
aporia. It is an aporia that impels us to reflect upon the material specificities of vinyl as a medium along with all of its attendant shortcomings compared to its-almost identical yet with significant differences-successor (and here counterpart), the CD. What is more, by opening up this space of reflection that seems ineluctably to invoke vinyl's successor, the medium also instigates a consideration of its own passing. For in this analysis, the track title, 'Fend Off Your Miserable Grief,' appears to posit vinyl itself as the object of mourning. Etched onto the vinyl, this title becomes an epitaph, both opening up a space of reflection and remembrance, marking the point at which vinyl (as the object of mourning) is silenced, and inscribing the vinyl with the absolute alterity inimical to mourning, this alterity coming here from within. As such, this inscribed track title (as with all of the others) constitutes a very literal aporia insofar as the stylus (or reading mechanism) is unable to cross the space in which it is inscribed. Interiorised within the recording surface, it remains (in its relation to the reading mechanism) nonetheless a 'non-totalizable trace which is in-adequate to itself and to the same. This trace ... interiorized in mourning as that which can no longer be interiorized, as impossible Erinnerung' (Derrida, 1986: 38). Disrupting 'the simple inclusion of a part within the whole', this title -- itself mute and so, like the name of the dead which constitutes our only possible relation with the dead in mourning, necessarily linked to 'memory as Gedächtnis to thought' (Derrida, 1986: 54)16 -- impels us to thought and becomes (as an effect) a memory that thinks (Gedächtnis) and which 'thinks itself' as a "part" greater than the "whole" (Derrida, 1986: 38). Consequently, if we are to do as this title instructs us and fend off our miserable grief-the finitude of Erinnerung-and affirm the power of Gedächtnis instead, we must accept that vinyl is inadequate to itself, that it has been superseded by the CD. This in turn means that we must no longer treat it (in mourning) as a romanticised or fetishised object imbued with levels of fidelity and advantages that in fact it never had—as many audiophiles still do. Something similar can be said to be implied by the image on the front cover of Satanstornade Here, the knives-a knife being of course a tool of inscription as well as other things-are presented very much as fetish objects: these are unmistakably ornamental knives whose interest lies, not so much in the actual physical inscription that they appear to promise, but in their symbolic status.

This analysis becomes all the more credible if one considers Satanstornade in the context of Masami Akita's recording career, as it is one of the first albums he made after switching from analogue to digital composition and production techniques. Satanstornade was composed and recorded live in the middle of 1999, a period of Akita's career characterised by a certain digital purism which was soon surpassed as he reintroduced analogue techniques once more. Accordingly, the hardware list for this recording (consisting of nothing more than an apple G3 powerbook, let us remind ourselves) could not be further removed from that of, for instance, the Merzbow release Last of Analog Sessions (released in 2004 but which documents recording from 1997, 1998 and 1999). The latter reads:

Masami Akita plays Self-built junk with contact mics, various filters and ring modulators, various effects pedals, EMS Synthi A synthesizer, EMS VCS3 Synthesizer, Moog Synthesizer, Tapes, EXD, Drum Machine and oscillators. (Merzbow, 2004)

Satanstornade is perhaps, then, not so much merely a requiem for vinyl as for analogue technology more generally. Of course, this is not to say that it should be forgotten entirely; indeed, we might suggest that this is precisely why the CD and vinyl were released simultaneously, for any requiem or epitaph intended to instigate an affirmative work of mourning necessarily remembers the past as a means to move forward, performing a 'remembrance of the future'. Like the wax tablets that form the basis of another concept utilised often by Derrida, the palimpsest (whose own material ontology and history return us to the beginnings of vinyl technology and the early wax cylinders examined above, some of which could actually be used as palimpsests),17 vinyl carries traces of its predecessor-as, indeed, does every other technological shift in the broader realm of musical production and recording technology. It is perhaps for this reason that both the cover art and the method used to present the text on the cover of the CD version are identical to that of the vinyl version, for this creates a correspondence between the two formats at the same time as it forces us to examine the material object very carefully, and in so doing to pause and reflect and realise that if the historic past of vinyl constitutes the present of the compact disc, it is also its future anterior. Indeed, just as surely as we can say that vinyl is dead, so one day we will be able to proclaim that the compact disc-and, who knows, perhaps even the digital-has had its day.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. Emily Thompson's descriptions of tone tests for the New Edison phonograph in the 1920s, which is to say a long time before the digital era, seem already to describe a world of simulacra in which there is no distinction between original and copy and in which the listener is able to accept a phonographic reproduction as 'real music' (1995: 160). Thompson's analysis is sensibly sceptical about the claims made in the press and advertisements of the time that the actual voices of singers and their phonographic re-creations were indistinguishable from each other. Her conclusions point out very well the extent to which notions of fidelity always require the willful participation of the listener—although she does suggest in her epilogue that 'perhaps our own definition of what constitutes "the real thing" today has moved even further from the human origins of "reality itself"' (1995: 160).

2. This observation suggests that the categorical error made by Freud in relation to the Mystic Pad that is
confused with the psyche is akin to that made by critics who conflate the originary sonic event with its recording.

3. Or should we say especially in digital production, for as Baudrillard notes, as manufacturers strive for ever greater perfection in musical reproduction, they end up creating something quite different from 'real music': they create an object which cannot be perceived at a distance. As he puts it: 'the more perfect the reproduction, the more it becomes virtual' (2004: 65).

4. For an excellent discussion of the concept of fidelity during the early days of Edison's phonography, see Thompson (1995).

5. This is the case across history, too. Thompson notes that 'by 1913, the Edison company consistently referred to its records not as reproductions but as "re-creations". The "re-creator," the phonograph, was no longer a machine but now a musical instrument' (1995: 140-42).

6. Even though it seems at one point that this mourning for one's own eventual passing is also present in Derrida's formulation of mourning and friendship, it is still always the death of the other that occasions this specular reflection. Derrida writes:

   If death comes to the other, and comes to us through the other, then the friend no longer exists except in us, between us. In himself, by himself, of himself, he is no more, nothing more. He lives only in us. But we are never ourselves, and between us, identical to us, a 'self' is never in itself or identical to itself. This specular reflection never closes on itself; it does not appear before this possibility of mourning, before and outside this structure of allegory and prosopopeia which constitutes in advance all 'being-in-us,' 'in-me,' between us, or between ourselves. The Selbst, the soi-même, the self appears to itself only in this bereaved allegory, in this hallucinatory prosopopeia—and even before the death of the other actually happens, as we say, in 'reality'. (1986: 28-29)

   And later:

   The 'me' or the 'us' of which we speak then arise and are delimited in the way that they are only through this experience of the other, and of the other as other who can die, leaving in me or in us this memory of the other. (1986: 33)

7. This is not to suggest that there existed an absolute contemporaneity of these competing formats, but rather that there was always some temporal overlap which always came to an end with the dominance of one format over another.

8. See, for instance, Caleb Stuart (2003: 48), where he documents the experiments that David Ranada of Stereo Magazine carried out on compact discs at the time of this format's release onto the commercial market.

9. Sterne makes an interesting observation that supplements this argument when he observes that 'sound recording did as much to promote ephemerality as it did to promote permanence in auditory life. If we consider sound recording on the basis of its technical possibilities, repeatability is as much a central characteristic of the technology as preservation is. In fact, the former is a prior condition of the latter. Inasmuch as we can claim that it promoted permanence, sound recording also helped accelerate the pace of fashion and turnover in popular music' (Sterne, 2003: 288).

10. It is possible to claim that all recording technologies operate according to a process that could be described as inscriptive, even if some are more literally inscriptive than others.

11. For a summary of Edison's thoughts on the paranormal, see Gardner (1996).

12. For a discussion of this phenomena created by difference tones in the work of Phill Niblock, see Hainge (2004).

13. Derrida writes: 'Ghosts always pass quickly, with the infinite speed of a furtive apparition, in an instant without duration, presence without present of a present which, coming back, only haunts' (Derrida 1986: 64).

14. See, for instance, Segal (2002), who describes it as 'the most disorienting, exhilarating noise this side of war'; or Scott (nd), who comments that 'Instructions on the sleeve suggest headphone listening at maximum volume. Although this might result in early deafness, it's the best way to engage with the almost sculptural, grimy maestrom the duo deftly summons. At this volume and intensity you are pulled headlong in and forced to feel the noise'. The apex of such commentary is reached by Adam Anonymous (nd) reviewing the album for Drowned in Sound. He writes: 'Like being thrown headfirst into the most tone-deaf noise tunnel ever, with Slayer playing at one end and a malfunctioning tumble drier at the other, at first wince the question of 'what the bleedin' buggery is this?' may enter your battered mind. It's definitely pleasure through pain for those who enjoy having their heads fucking with'.

15. It should be noted that Akita had found these temporal limitations of the vinyl format to be a problem right through the 1980s. As Edwin Pouncey notes, 'although the sound quality which vinyl offered was an improvement on the unwanted hiss and clatter that made tape such a flawed medium, the trough with vinyl for Merzbow was the restricted playing time, and problems with volume levels' (2000: 31).

16. It is worth citing Derrida at more length here. He writes:

   everything that strangely links memory as Gedächtnis to thought is of the order of the name. The name, or what can be considered as such, as having the function or power of the name—this is the sole object and sole possibility of memory, and in truth the only 'thing' that it can be the same time both name and think. This means then that any name, any nominal function, is
'in memory of'-from the first 'present' of its appearance, and finally, is 'in virtually-bereaved memory of' even during the life of its bearer'. (Derrida, 1986: 54)

17. The Cylinder Preservation and Digitization Project of the Department of Special Collections at the Donald C. Davidson Library, University of California, Santa Barbara has in its collection a number of 'home recordings' which, as its website explains, were made on cylinders 'made from wax "blanks", which Edison claimed could be reused up to one hundred times by literally shaving off the old grooves' (Seubert, 2006: online). Such cylinders surely provide us with the first instance of re-writable audio media. For Derrida on the wax Mystic Pad, see Derrida (1981, 221-231).

References


Lescarboura, A. (1920) 'Edison's Views on Life and Death', Scientific American 123, 446.


Discography


