JEREMY W. MORRIS (2015*) SELLING DIGITAL MUSIC, FORMATTING CULTURE.* OAKLAND: UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS. ISBN: 9780520287945.

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What, when, and where is "the digital music commodity"?

The concept of commodification is widely used in the humanities and social sciences. Searching Google Scholar for the phrase 'the commodification of' returns hundreds of articles with titles proclaiming that culture as well as nature have been subjected to said process; the list of commodified phenomena includes language, health, education, security, the body, and the past. At first glance, the meaning of commodification[1] seems obvious: something which is not a commodity becomes one, typically by having a price tag attached to it. But this process tends to not leave things untouched. Seen in a longer historical perspective, 'the commodification of music' does not simply imply that a thing called 'music' has been brought into marketplaces—the process arguably also periodically redefines what 'music' is.

In the tradition of critical theory, commodification is usually considered to be a 'structural tendency in capitalism' (Jameson, 2009: 257). A different approach is taken by cultural anthropologists who understand commodification as a 'cultural and cognitive process' (Kopytoff, 1986: 64). In any case, speaking of commodification as a tendency or a process necessitates a theory that can distinguish commodities from all that which is *not* (yet) commodified. Such a distinction, it may be noted, was pivotal to Karl Marx's analysis of the capitalist mode of production. While he did begin *Das Kapital* with a discussion of the commodity-form, Marx's critique of political economy was conditioned on the observation that the classical economists were wrong in defining labour as a commodity. According to Marx, it is not *labour* but *labour-power* that is commodified under capitalism (Clarke, 1982: 89; Heinrich, 2012: 91). But after Marx, critical theorists have

usually been more keen to denounce commodification than to delineate it.

Ten years ago, ethnomusicologist Timothy D. Taylor commented on the lack of theoretical insights into music's commodification. The commodity status of popular music, he noted, 'is so common that it seems to be self-evident, even natural' (2007; 2006). At the time of that observation, many observers regarded the practice of online file-sharing as challenging the commodification of music (Söderberg, 2008: 8). The recorded music industry still bet on the success of digital retailers like Apple's Itunes Store, selling music in the form of single-track downloads (IFPI, 2007). But since then, the industry has been transformed by the rise of subscription-based streaming music services like Spotify.

This trajectory of music's digitization has also inspired a new body of research, mostly within communication and media studies, addressing how music is put on the market today. This literature can broadly be divided into two categories. On the one hand are industry-oriented researchers who do not pretend to be critical, and whose research is chiefly based on interviews with music industry professionals. Their accounts tend to naturalize the commodity, asking not how music is commodified, but how the music commodity can be successfully "monetized" (Wikström, 2009; Waelbroeck, 2013; Johansson, 2013; Galuszka, 2015). On the other hand are those scholars who analyze the digitization of music through the lens of media history, focusing on particular media formats, interfaces, affordances, and social practices. Jonathan Sterne's *MP3* (2012) was pathbreaking in this respect; a similar approach has recently been taken by Jeremy Wade Morris in *Selling Digital Music* (2015) and also, to some degree, by Timothy D. Taylor in *Music and Capitalism* (2015).

Situated within new media studies, popular music studies, and communication studies, Morris' book is tracking the transition from music on CDs to music as digital files. Studying the digitization of popular music recorded during the 1987-2007 period, it aims to find out 'what this process can tell us about digital objects, the value of cultural goods, and the conflicted assemblage of technologies, users, and industries that contributed to the uses and meanings of music's new formats' (1-2). The goal thus is to move discussions away from issues such as piracy, devaluation, economic crises, and intellectual property toward a conversation about the process of cultural commodification (5). Morris takes this process as largely

determined by, or at least running parallel to, a technological transition that made digital files of recorded popular music sellable objects, and also shaped the idea of selling music as a file in the first place (5). Accordingly, his book is based on 'close readings of various audio technologies', in an attempt to chart a 'middle ground between legal/political economic analyses of media digitization and more user-centric research' (22). Centering his efforts on five case studies of key technologies that he sees as central in this 'transition,' Morris offers a 'chronological story' (22) which moves from media player software (Winamp), the rise of metadata (The CD Database) via file-sharing (Napster) to online music retail outlets (iTunes Store) before finally looking at the push towards cloud-based music services that barely had taken off at the time of writing.

As a consequence, most of the book remains focused on 'the digital music commodity' as a downloadable file, rather than as a streamable entity. It falls short, however, to provide a proper historical account, given that this 'commodity' is consequently essentialized: for 'the essence of the music commodity does not disappear' (210). Indeed, the term digital music commodity signals an allegedly crucial historical distinction between the CD and online distributed music, based on the idea that the latter would do without all that which once marked pre-Internet (digital) music distribution: 'physical retail stores, manufacturing plants, distribution trucks, and store shelves' (2). Here and elsewhere, *Selling Digital Music*'s argument remains firmly within one prepared by the first generation of digital media scholarship and its claims of 'endless shelf-space,' disintermediation, convergence, and participation (Anderson, 2006; Jenkins, 2006). In breaking with both analog and pre-Internet distribution practices, 'the digital music commodity marks an evolution of the commodity-form', according to Morris (11). At the same time, he rules out any substantial shift *within* the digital, assuming that a download service like Itunes Store and a streaming service like Spotify are basically selling *the same commodity*, albeit in different wrappings. This becomes especially problematic as Morris claims to have written not a study of particular media but an inclusive analysis of 'the digital music commodity', so that his findings are fully 'applicable to other cultural goods' (199) and can be generalized.

Throughout the whole book it is taken for granted that each *file* or *song* is a commodity. That makes sense when looking at a retailer like Itunes Store, where an apparent price tag is put on every single song. But pricing works very differently on streaming services like

Spotify. In the latter case, an ordinary user will confront only one single price tag: 9.99 USD/EUR/GBP for a monthly subscription. Only a few years ago, many economists and business journalists took for granted that the Internet would be 'the great unbundler'. As a prime example of unbundling, these commentators pointed to Apple's Itunes Music Store, selling singular tracks instead of albums (Akst, 2005; Styvén, 2007: 68; Carr, 2008: 149–156; Elberse, 2010; Pakman, 2011). But this was soon followed by a massive re-bundling, as companies like Spotify began selling music as a subscription service. Instead of music being marketed as discrete units, each with one price tag, there is now only one product on offer. As individual songs are made available within Spotify's interface, without having any individual price, does it make sense to regard each song as one commodity? If not, in what sense is music commodified? Why does the theorization of the commodity matter for understanding the relationship between production and distribution, or the role of digital platforms, within contemporary capitalism?

Morris' account shares a similar approach to the concept of commodification with the aforementioned books by Sterne and Taylor. On the one hand, they all use the distinctly Marxian term *commodity-form,* though in a sporadic manner (Sterne, 2012: 224; Morris, 2015: 2, 213; Taylor, 2015: 20–26). On the other, all three books also rely to some degree on the influential theories of cultural anthropologists Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff, regarding how 'things' can move in and out of the *commodity-state* (Sterne, 2012: 212–216; Morris, 2015: 9–10; Taylor, 2015: 10–11). These are two very different approaches, but none of the three authors provide any discussion about how to reconcile them – and in the end, none attempts to systematically apply any of the two theories to the turbulent reality of a digitizing music industry.

In its timeliness and the descriptive richness of its five case studies, Jeremy Wade Morris' *Selling Digital Music* certainly remains in many ways an excellent tracing of 'the music commodity's re-tuning' in the transition from 'compact discs to music as individual digital files' (198–199). Settling there, however, it consolidates a particular kind of atomism, or what could be called a *file-centric* understanding of the digital music commodity. This is problematic, again, since the author claims a broad validity of his findings not only for every digital music service, but for 'the process of cultural commodification' in general (5). 'The digital music commodity is an object in its own right', and 'a discrete sonic entity', Morris

postulates at the outset (16). Throughout the book, it is taken for granted that this commodity is also essentially a *file*, representing a *song* (11; 192; 209–210). Sometimes the digital music commodity is equated with simple audio data, other times it is presented as a bundle of audio data and metadata. What is never questioned is the notion of the *song* as musical atom and as the very object of commodification.

The interface, consisting of hardware and software, is what makes this object visible and audible, Morris writes: 'It is the point where user and commodity meet' (18). In other words, the interface is not analyzed as a commodity, nor as a commodifying device, but rather appears as an arena where the already commodified objects appear. This raises a substantial question about the definition of a commodity. Though he employs the Marxian notion of the commodity as *form*, Morris distances himself from Marx by stating that price 'is not its distinguishing feature' (2, 8, 11, 20, 192, 210–213). And when looking for 'the very core of the commodity', he finds not form but matter: a data file in a particular format (195). This view seems to be more in line with the anthropology of material culture, and early in the book Morris does indeed evoke Appadurai and Kopytoff to define commodities 'as artifacts in a particular situation, the commodity situation' (9–10). But in his subsequent analysis of digital interfaces, Morris abstains from asking whether such a situation is at hand. At some points, he follows a wholly different path, defining the commodity neither as form nor as situation, but by reference to a subjective 'sense of ownership' (20). This theoretical confusion results in an inability to ever state that something is *not* a commodity. Ultimately, *Selling Digital Music* fails at its explicit aim: telling the 'story of how the commodity form changes through digitization and why this matters for the music and media we love' (2).

Morris seems to assume that it is *the same commodity* which is made available by 'iTunes, Spotify, and many other digital retailers' (10). The formulation reveals a further assumption, namely that Spotify is essentially a retailer, i.e. a *distributor* of commodities that has already been produced elsewhere. Retailing implies buying commodities in order to resell (or rent out) *the same* commodities. If a company is selling commodities *different* from those it has bought, it is evidently involved in some kind of production. But the distinction between production and distribution does not appear in *Selling Digital Music*, due to the lack of a clearly defined notion of the commodity.

Whether a streaming service's activities are regarded as distribution or production does however have analytical repercussions.

In a final theoretical move, Morris concludingly asserts that music 'will not likely escape its commodity form' because 'we do not want it to. The commodity form helps us make sense of the objects around us and eases the transition to new practices and technologies' (211). This seems to put processes of commodification firmly back into the hands of consumers – as if it were up to us whether a song can be bought or freely shared. Barely two years after its publication, and in light of todays hyper-intermediated, financialized, and top-down controlled digital media ecology, this statement, and Morris' book in general, remind us of the openness once attributed to digital transition processes – a lost openness we now only can lament, or protest against.

Endnote

[1] *Commodification* is not the same as *commoditization*. While the first term has to do with a movement *into* the market, the latter stands for a change in the mechanisms of competition *on* the market. Commoditization implies that buyers no longer pay attention to the particular brand of a product, but regards it more as a raw material (the alternative sense of 'commodity'). This notion was established in business theory in the 1990s. Before that, the two terms were used interchangeably.

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