

A Critical Analysis of the MP3-Blog

Standardized Culture And The Regression of Music

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<p>Sammandrag:</p> <p>Detta slutarbete försöker utöka diskussionen om det populära och det opopulära, och dess olika distributionskanaler. MP3-bloggen har blivit ett allmänt sätt att införskaffa gratis och ny musik, och blivit ett digitalt alternativ till allmänna portaler inom musik, så som radio, TV och magasin. Adorno beskriver konsumenten av populär kultur som regressiv och standardiserad av kapitalism, vari det bekanta och det familjära är det som är accepterat inom kultur. Att kritiskt tänkande och upplevelse av kultur blivit reducerat till en produkt. Arbetet tar upp för kritik om fria distributions möjligheter, så som i MP3-bloggen, om musik är påverkade av den standardiserade kultur Adorno diskuterar, och om de element som utgör en blogg påverkar valen av användaren. Detta slutarbete använder Theodor Adornos samling av essäer om kultur, kallad The Culture Industry, och kritiskt analyserar en generell syn på MP3-bloggen som en kultur-aktör. Theodor Adornos Culture Industry och bygger på en summariserad syn på MP3-Bloggen som kulturpåverkare.</p>	
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<p>Abstract:</p> <p>This thesis aims to expand the discussion about “popular” and “unpopular” music, and its digital distribution channels. The MP3-blog have become a common way of procuring free and new music, and have become a digital alternative to the public portals in music, as radio, TV and magazines. Adorno describes the consumer of popular culture as regressive and standardized by capitalism, wherein the familiar and known is what is accepted within culture, and never challenged. That critical thinking and the experience of culture are reduced to a commodity. The work brings up for criticism if free distribution possibilities, that of the MP3-blog, is affected by the standardized culture Adorno discusses, and if the elements that constitute a blog changes the user. This thesis uses Theodor Adornos collection of essays on culture, called The Culture Industry, and critically analyzes a general view of the MP3-blog as a culture-actuator.</p>	
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FOREWORD

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1 INTRODUCTION

As a young boy I always had music as my main interest, and that same interest soon grew to a passion about finding even more exciting artists every day. That passion consisted of grand view of the emotional state that music had on me, this ever-changing occurrence of soundwaves and imagery held powers that could change my mindset in a heartbeat.

Consumption of music was high on my agenda; the feeling of finding a new band or artist was like a drug, a craving that needed to be filled. But this urge of mine wasn't limited to the music itself, I was a cultural sponge of the visual aspects of the artist, the presentation, the sub-cultural styles and politics, the layers of lyrical content, and at the same time, what the artist was trying to convey. This analytical dissection of the whole construction of the artist/band had an important role for me, how to perceive the art that was coming out of the stereo and having this huge impact on me. I needed to understand the intent for what I was consuming, how does this product differ from the sensation on my taste buds after a sip of a Coca-Cola? As it is only a manipulation of the senses as anything else.

Much later in the future, my passion combined with the newly available Internet, comfortably evolved into a symbiosis. The effort of reading reviews from paper-printed magazines, by a random shot in the dark, and luckily purchasing a likeable work of music was long gone. Now, the availability of networks copying and sharing unknown pieces of music was a feast, a glutinous consumption of everything and nothing laid before you. One week one could be a country-fan and the next a disco aficionado.

From Peer to peer-networks, like Napster, sharing everything from blockbuster movies to PDFs on animal control, the lines between property rights and our own greed for inanimate digital commodities had been erased. Napster soon came to its demise, and so did all its minions, the conglomerates controlling the industry were ending an era and cleaning the digital world of its illegal activity.

This wave of mass-culture and influences that was brought via the Internet also created an unlikely cultural tide within the world of digital distribution. The people that were directly in the center of this shift of freely available works were affected by it and took it to their hearts. A generation that also produced their own cultural works. They understood the significance of allowing people to choose for themselves, and not to be spoon-fed through commercial radio and TV what to listen to, and, most importantly, what to consume.

As this revolt swept the developed world, a new medium arose to counter the commercial one, that of the MP3-blog. The format was the MP3 that would lead the digital expansion of audio.

The birth of the MP3-blog was a direct result of the dissatisfaction with the cultural commodification of music, the big business blockage of legal distribution and the blatantly numbing of music consumption. As our primary knowledge of new music derives from four of the worlds largest companies, at least 70% (80% in the U.S.) of the worlds consumption can be traced to EMI, Sony Music Entertainment, Warner Music Group and Universal Music Group, one can only assume that our "choices" and preferences in music are being controlled and branded to find its audience of its choice.

The MP3-blog aims to eradicate predictable patterns of commercial interests and offer an alternative. I aim to critically, with the basis of Theodor Adornos works on media-philosophy, even though written decades before the Internet, assess the artistic content of the digital phenomenon. How this cultural phenomenon caused a shift in how we perceive and value the spread and content of culture online. As I see Adornos controversial views significant in determining the value and intentions of a new digital medium, and how it reflects on the commercial one.

1.1 PURPOSE

The less the system tolerates anything new, the more those who have been forsaken must be acquainted with all the latest novelties if they are to continue living in society rather than feeling themselves excluded from it. Mass culture allows precisely this reserve army of outsiders to participate: mass culture is an organized mania for connecting everything with everything else, a totality of public secrets. (Adorno, Theodor 1991, s.83)

The distribution of culture, within a capitalist society, is always closely connected to commercial profit. The Internet offered an alternative to creating culture, even though setting the possibility of producing and being influenced through illegal means, the cultural spread and availability to not be associated with commercialization of their content was made a reality.

Even though MP3-blogs refrain from the label that their content is in any way affiliated by capitalist interest or hierarchical pressure, one should question the authenticity and independence of MP3-blogs. as well as their self-proclaimed emancipation from greedy interest, and the claim that their sole purpose is to culturally enlighten and influence musical orientation.

The inherent value of the MP3-blog needs to be addressed. As a new digital medium, with influential impact over cultural progress, one has to critically analyze the cultural impact of the MP3-blog as a social phenomenon and its importance and ultimately power as an opinion-leader within musical genres.

Theodor Adorno's *Culture Industry*, offers a critical framework for a clearer view on the nature and significance of the MP3-blog; what its existence, culturally, implies and how it reflects on digital music consumption; how the declared pioneers of new culture of mass influence with its objective characteristics and freely distributed works acts within a market-economy of controlled (mainstream, commodity) and shared (freely distributed) schema.

Adorno's ideas help to dig deeper behind the motives and choices bloggers make when choosing their content, and to discover if a blog can fundamentally survive based on subjective reason alone, or if, by holding an anti-commercial stance, it is eventually destined to succumb to commercialization and celebrity.

The main goal of this thesis is to illustrate the cultural importance of a counter-culture digital platform, which offers an alternative to the blatantly over-produced music-scene acting on commercial reasons alone. But simultaneously critically question the idea that blogs act only on a non-utilitarian base, without personal gain. To analyze with Theodor Adorno's works if MP3-blogs can inherently exist without commercial and personal motives within a society based on economic value. A media-critical analysis of mass-cultural digital distribution within a sphere of non-commercial basis, reliant on nothing but their own vanity and integrity.

1.2 DELIMITATION

As this thesis does not address issues of piracy and its ethical stance, or its software to acquire cultural content, it will not contain any further elaborations on the history or the development of illegal downloading or its networks that enabled users to do so. This thesis will furthermore not discuss more in-depth the statistics of the damage piracy has caused a decline in physical sales for conglomerates and their productions. I will focus on the cultural significance of the MP3-blog, as a unit independent from scrutiny of outsider input, as a subjective cultural critic of musical productions, and how the MP3-blog shaped new cultural influences in music, how we obtain and consume it through new advances in technology.

As the main focus and purpose is to promote music, as such, to bolster sales of music they see fit, the existence of the MP3-Blog did not have per se a great impact on sales or piracy to the music industry. The aim of the general blog is never to support theft, but reject the notion that the conglomerates preach, that every download of a song is equal to a stolen product.

The work will focus more on the “philosophy” of the MP3-Blog, and how it counters the mass-produced music-industry which fills our airwaves with repetitive and stupefying content that belittles the emotional state that can arise from great music. My thesis is a reflection on how this sub-cultural guerilla-style spectacle unfold and may evolve through actions of the consumer, tired of the range of culture, and decided to elevate new artists that bring a more existing and fresh take on music.

The MP3-blog has become more accepted and tolerated, and to some extent, even used by bigger companies to promote their brand. The impact of this is acceptance on the legitimacy of the unaffiliated MP3 blogger is considerable. This has been more apparent when Mountain Dew, Scion A/V and Smirnoff Vodka have created events and webpages that promote unsigned artists and make deals with bloggers to stay faithful to their content and brand. This in itself is questionable, but will not be discussed in this thesis.

1.3 QUESTIONS

The main questions addressed in this thesis are inspired by the Adorno's reflection on the culture industry and can be summarized as follows:

To what extent is the 'fetish character' present in the distribution of free MP3s, and what is the significance of the aggregators in this presence?

To what extent is the MP3-Blog and the sub-culture it gives voice to are affected by and ultimately vulnerable to mainstream cultural trends?

Does the MP3 foster or resist the "regression of listening" that Adorno describe in his depiction of the role of music in the conditions of the culture industry?

1.4 SOURCES

As MP3-blogs is a relatively new phenomenon, and have not been documented extensively, thus my own five year experience with writing, publishing and promoting artists via my own blog will have a bigger role. As my knowledge how the community works, how a blog is maintained and how it networks is vital. This information will be further elaborated with the help of Larissa Wodtke's work *Does NME Even Know What a MP3-Blog Is? The Rhetoric and Social Meaning of a MP3-Blog* (2008), who I have been in personal contact with and who has by far written to most extensive piece on MP3-blogging. The book was a master's thesis and covers the basic premises of blogging, functionality, interviews with high-profile publishers and more on how the impact of MP3-blogging has changed the music-scene and how it got the attention of producers, multi-national companies and promoters alike. Larissa Wodtke supplied me with a PDF of her work.

On the Reproduction of the Musical Economy After the Internet (2005) by Andrew Leyshon, Peter Webb, Shaun French, Nigel Thrift and Louise Crewe gives more statistical views on how the actions of the bigger names in the music economy are plagued by the existence of file-sharing, but offers excellent insights on how the product itself is valued, how the consumers abandon a market, de-valuing and treating the product as it is offered to them, devoid of content and significance. The work also incorporates Adornos critical views on popular music and its prospective fate, which is convenient and useful in my work, to further add to the discussion. This publications features a critical thought on how Adornos outlook on the reproduction of culture is somewhat inaccurate, which is interesting and will assist in disseminating my analysis of the MP3-Blog.

Music Blogs, Music Scenes, Sub-cultural Capital: Emerging Practices in Music Blogs (2008) by Beatrice Jetto provide theories how the authenticity of bloggers is challenged and that they are the filters of musical content:

I first consider music blogs as an emerging form of commercially independent fan production, a more recent digital reincarnation of fanzines, creating and circulating sub-cultural capital within indie music scenes at a local as well as at a virtual level. I describe how music blogs act as cultural gatekeepers filtering information in different but often overlapping contexts. Although music blogs have been considered as operating independently from the music industry I raise some issues in regards their authenticity and cultural autonomy from pressure of power within indie scenes. I argue that music blogs' cultural production is often shaped by personal motives as well as more commercial motives such as popularity and professional status. (Jetto Beatrice 2008, pg. 1)

The State of Music Online: Ten Years After Napster (2009) by Mary Madden offers excellent views of how free music will dominate the future to some extent, more on how in the beginning of an artist career to promote themselves by freely allowing people to distribute their music and allowing it to be remixed and mash-upped by fellow producers.

2 A SHORT HISTORY OF THE MP3-BLOG

The growth of technology, and subsequently, digital innovation has never been so rapid as in the past thirty years. The concept of music has changed from an elite privilege in the 18th century to a product of mass-consumption in the 21th century. And quickly centralized into an industry controlled by four conglomerates. The climate of music-consumption has morphed into a game of profits and denounced its qualitative conscious.

As we saw the birth of the Internet in between 1970-1980s, by the hands of Tim Berners-Lee, and with it came huge possibilities within the digital realm. As something first viewed as a simple time-consumer in the mid 80s, a failed assistance within academic work and an infantile entertainment system. In the early 90s when it first made its appearance there was next to no content or desirable quality to gain from it, but as it developed with its own users it soon came into its rightful habitat and significance within the global community.

The origin of the blog, in its present shape, can be traced back to more community- and commercial-based alternatives such as Bulletin Board Systems (BBS), UseNet, Genie, BIX, and email lists (mailing lists). All of which later evolved into more structured sites, for a more user-friendly experience, which came to call “forums”. Which still today is a viable and preferred alternative to online niche discussions and topics. Forums consist of an on-going stream of topics named “threads” in which users can partake in and also produce their own subjects, in which users can comment on.

This in turn grew into a more personal and open approach in digital discussion, and gave birth to Online Diaries, which, as the title gives away, is basically a diary online. And is summarized by personal accountancies and experiences, and then published online for viewers to see.

The more significant change in publishing online was with Pyra Labs blogging platform Blogger, which was later acquired by Google, who offered free space for bloggers to easily create their own blogs without the need for paid server-space. And could then focus on their content and set aside technical inconveniences. The term “blogger” or “blog” was popularized by Blogger, which was conceived out of semantic branding. Much in the same sense that people “Google” words online, and do not “search online”, for instance. And this same play on words contributed functionally to a more available and graspable definition of a system meant to publish content on the Internet.

In the course of people generating content online, the varieties between interests and traits became more complex. As this vast amount of people contributing to creating original content this also meant that more and more would find new niche subjects to cover and write about. Blogs often cover topics and themes to optimize and attract, and to awake a interest, viewers who have the same liaison to the genre, that theme can range from photography, politics, erotica, fashion and, more detailed and obscure. The niche nature of user-generated media can be as versatile as any anonymous human curiosity allows them to be, which is virtually endless.

Music reviews have always been closely followed by its main inspirational source, the music industry, and have slowly changed its format to accommodate the new technological growth, and thus gradually starting to move from print to online media.

The combination of freely generated content via the Internet allowed people, without any affiliation to bigger outlets, to review and publish what they choose. And completely circumvent mainstream promotion and influence.

The first blogs to fall under the umbrella-term MP3-blog are Tonspion, Buzzgrinder, Fluxblog and Stereogum. Tonspion dates back as early as 1998, who took MP3s that record-labels distributed for free, reviewed them and shared them on his own website. This was one of the first occurrences where freely distributed music was used in this manner. Several stories that were featured on national radio in the U.S. catapulted the blogs into a bigger audience, and later got the attention of labels to use the blogs to promote more unknown artists by giving away a free MP3 for promotional use.

The combination of non-affiliated independent music reviewers and promotional music changed into what is now commonly referred to as a MP3-Blog.

Mp3-blogs are a somewhat new occurrence within the file-sharing age and is still considered to be in its early stages of development. Much of the early blogs growth and publicity are credited due to exclusive content offered by larger labels or high-profile artists to publish on their site, this contributed to a massive increase in readership and finger-on-the-pulse credibility for blogs, and exposed blogs as a valid source for finding more nuanced music. But to give full recognition to a few instances of promotion via blogs and crediting a massive cultural phenomenon to it would be naïve. But the events catalyzed to a continuation and awareness for artists, producers, labels and promo-labels to discover a new outlet for promoting music, and receiving it for free.

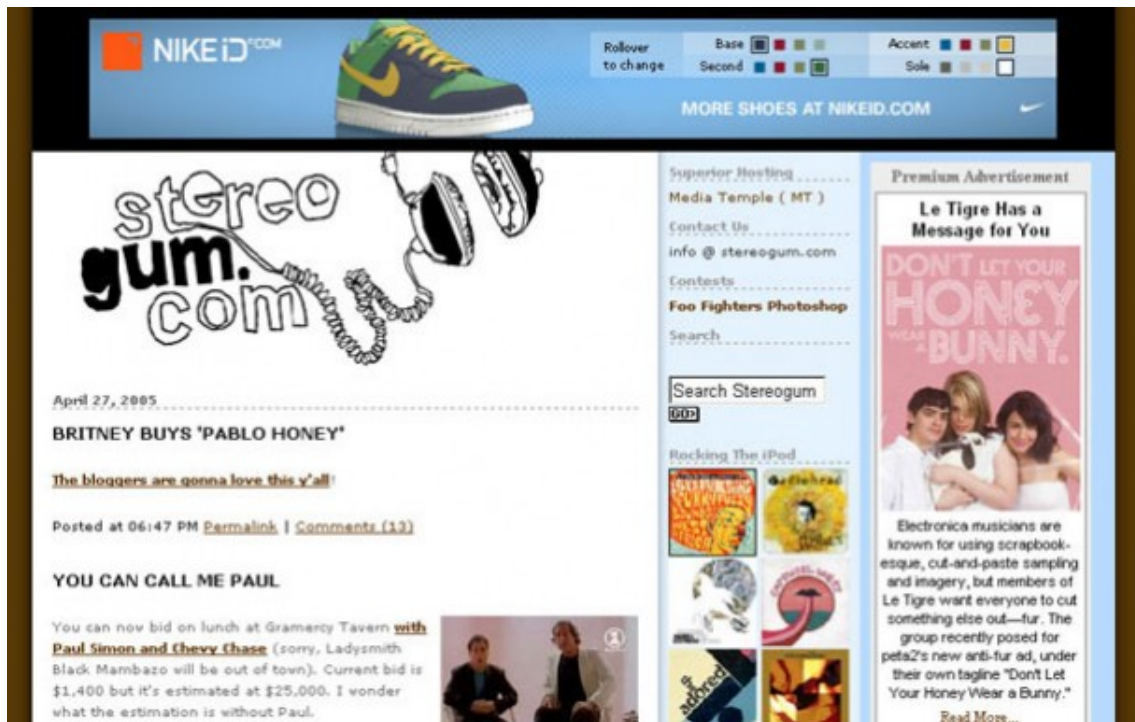


Figure 1. One of the first blogs to be considered a MP3-Blog, Stereogum.

2.1 THE STRUCTURE

To understand the fundamental values and reasons of a MP3-blog, we must first examine its physiology, what its skeleton contains and how it interacts with its readers. To visually understand the elements of a blog, what is needed for a blog to call itself a MP3-blog, and how the presentation of the content is portrayed. This is important for the reason of illustrating how blogs interact with their readers, how the content is introduced to its audience and to frame the social implications of this cultural occurrence.

A MP3-Blog consists of a web page, whether it may be on own bought server-space or public, then the music is uploaded within its own domain, and leaving the owner of the space accountable for its content, whether illegal or legal. Or if published through publicly available blog-managing systems (such as the popular Blogger). The one thing that sets the MP3-blog aside from common review-sites is its freely available MP3 for download to your own computer.

A post or review of the music is first summarized by a visual representation of the artist or band, this may be a photo or a logo, or a illustrative picture that symbolize the audio content, sometimes it is the publishers own for the sake of personality. Followed by a string of text that may cover genre of the music, emotions that the production awake, quality of the music, affiliation with labels and styles. Some blogs do not post any text at all, and let the blog remain as a publishing platform of MP3s that the author recommends without subjective thought in the post. What constitutes, and is the requirement for a MP3-blog, is that the holder of the blog offers MP3s for free to the reader, either legally or illegally.

A blog is furthermore often branded for a particular style or genre of music, which constitutes of a susceptible logo and a layout of all the different elements of the webpage, to display a image of the blog to attract and present a unique design. Blogs often add a search bar; so that users can easily obtain the track they are searching for, which leads to the archive, which catalogues the post often by date and year. The posts, if more than one writer, is marked with the authors name or acronym. And often, if not always, the

blog adds contact information in the form of an email where people can send tracks, promotional, interviews and other information.

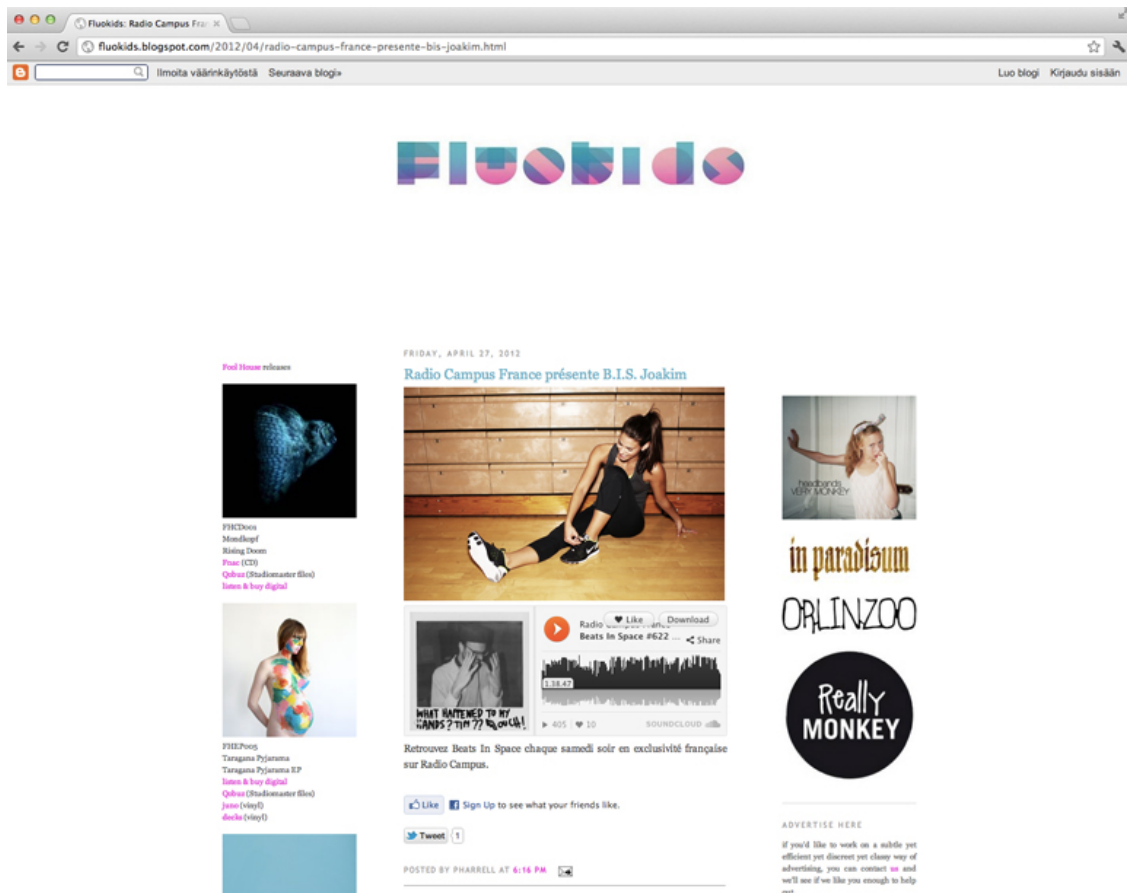


Figure 2. The MP3-Blog *Fluokids* (2012)

In the above example we see the MP3-blog Fluxblog, its a created and maintained by Matthew Perpetua. Fluxblog is one of the standard layouts of blogs, and has been a pioneer within the blog-community on how to effectively introduce cultural content to its audience.

2.1.1 STREAMING AND CONSUMING

In the subsequent demise of MySpace, we saw a emigration from the heavily ad-cluttered and complicated built layout, and without little or no options for the artist to further promote or sell their products. As the technical aspect and layout only offered difficult streaming which consisted of a pop-up window, the quality and lowered options for artists to display their music and interact with their listeners resulted in a disappointment and resentment towards the Specific Media LLT and Justin Timberlake owned company. Which clearly neglected the needs of the users of the site, and instead invested in expanding the commercialized side of the site with more ad-spaces and letting the user-experience fall into decay.

With the birth of Facebook, social media promotion of artists moved to more modern options. The traffic and quality of MySpace declined, so eventually non-commercial and ad-free options came along. One of the options for artists was the site Soundcloud, who the independent community embraced, much for its minimal design and comfortable and easy upload functionality.

Soundcloud is relatively simple and drew in more indie and up-and-coming artists, moving further to a user-oriented build, based on its availability to share via social media and to purchase works of music directly through the interface. Soundcloud managed to attract many artists and producers. And is now viewed as the epitome of promoting music on the Internet, much like a social media platform for musicians and promoters alike.



Figure 3. A caption of Soundcloud and the label Discotexas' artist A.N.D.Y

As mentioned before, Soundcloud is the streaming service that is favored in the MP3-blogging community. It functions much like a glossary of artists, and producers, that upload their musical productions to the site, and servers, and it is presented from the top down, by the name of the artist and particular song. Furthermore on the Flash-device, the streaming service, which is presented as a grey area in figure. 2, is also a “chain” where any user viewing the track can share it on most social media services (such as Facebook, Reddit, Digg and so on). And beside it is the link to purchase the content streamed, this is usually one of the bigger services that allows digital downloads to be purchased (as Beatport, iTunes and Juno). Soundcloud has designed the service to be as non-obtrusive as possible, and places the attention on the piece of music itself. A illustrative picture of the artist or label accompanies the track(s).

Below the streaming is an more explanatory information concerning the artist, genre of music, supporters, social media interaction and, perhaps, links to labels and purchase outlets. Soundcloud also allows the submitter to choose whether to give the track for free, for limited download or to acquire it for payment. The option to give one or several tracks at the same time for free is also a possibility. Which most artists do.

Much like any social media providers, Soundcloud has the option of interacting with listeners and fans, through messages or directly on the streaming of the track, where they can show their support and comment on the content created.

Most blogs have changed from a stand-alone streaming service for their MP3s, most blogs have used their own unique one or open-source, to Soundcloud. And have integrated it for their blog, mostly because it counter illegality, to some extent, and requires a simple code to add to their website and releases the blogger from any server-space purchasing. The issue of illegality is simply because the artist, may or may not, choose to give a track for free via Soundcloud and thus allowing the blogger to be freed from that responsibility.

2.1.2 AGGREGATORS

An aggregator is a database and website, that features a wide range of approved blogs (legal and qualitative content) through a constant updated roll of posts, and allows users to easily play music that are being blogged. As it is the most popular aggregator, Hype Machine, we document here its functions. The site pulls content from the blogs, and its posted track and features it on the site. The most viewed feature of the site is the “popular” page; it presents the visitor with the most “hyped” track, which are the songs that are featured the most on the selected blogs. A summary of many blogs in other words.

Registered users can also “heart” a song, which is a way of promoting it and showing other users that you liked it. This is also raises a concern for legitimacy and abuse, because MP3-blogs rely heavily on aggregators for their traffic, and may create networks or many accounts to “like” their track. Which in turn brings the blog and its track to the most visited page, and enables the bloggers to get increased visitors to their site. This problem was loosely tackled by Hype Machine by removing manipulation of charts, and the bloggers who have been doing so, the issues were brought up by restraining account floods and making it more difficult to obtain one with Hype Machine.

The screenshot shows the Hype Machine website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with tabs for 'Latest', 'Popular', 'Spy', 'Radio Show', and 'Blogs'. A search bar is located on the right side of the navigation bar. Below the navigation bar, there is a banner with the text: 'Every day, thousands of people around the world write about music they love — and it all ends up here. Join us and find music worth listening to. Also on the iPhone, Android (unoff.) & Windows Phone (unoff.)'. The main content area is divided into two columns. The left column is titled 'The Freshest Blogged Music' and features a list of music recommendations. The first recommendation is 'Mariah Carey - Mariah Carey_I'll Be Lovin U_DESIGNER DRUGS REMIX Radio' with 3 hearts. The second recommendation is 'Lovebugs - Little Boy (Feat. Søren Huss)' with 2 hearts. The third recommendation is 'NICONE & SASCHA BRAEMER - Broken Heart (Original Version)' with 0 hearts. The right column features an 'ALBUM PREMIERE THIS WEEK' section for 'Eric Prydz - Eric Prydz Presents Pryda' available on May 22nd. Below this is a 'FAST FORWARD' section with a 'Hear this page in just 6 mins' button. The 'EXPLORE BY GENRE' section lists various music genres like chillwave, dance, dubstep, experimental, electronic, funk, hip hop, indie, instrumental, post-punk, rock, and singer-songwriter. At the bottom, there is a 'songkick.com • TOUR DATES' section with a 'VIEW 47 CONCERTS' button and a 'WORLDWIDE' button.

Figure 4. A screenshot of the biggest MP3-blog aggregator, Hype Machine.

Elbo.ws is another popular aggregator for MP3-Bloggers. It offers a wide range of MP3-bloggers and their posted content, but with the added feature of videos as well.

Elbo.ws functions much like Hype Machine in its basic aspect, though trying to maintain a more low-key presence and focusing more on a community-based comment on music and the technology surrounding it.

Elbo.ws seems to weigh much importance on the content and artist itself, and not so much on the blogger behind the post. Blogs are visible but not as apparent as on Hype Machine, and this is noticeable in the traffic that is garnered from the site as well.

Elbo.ws, as Hype Machine, does not allow blogs to publish content from mass-sharing sites such as Zippyshare, Mediafire, Zshare or any site similar to them, this is also a way to deter piracy and illegal boosting of traffic to blogs.



Figure 5. A screenshot of the MP3-blog aggregator Elbo.ws.

Contrary to The Hype Machine's rules, Elbows does not place a minimum on the amount of time the blog has been operating and expedites those blogs which reciprocate promotion, making inclusion easier and less exclusive. Once again, the rules for inclusion in the aggregator shape and reinforce MP3 blogs as a genre built on their MP3 links and fair use of copyright. (Wodtke Larissa 2007, pg. 22)

3 THEODOR ADORNO

Theodore W. Adorno notable work on culture and its industry provides the essential theoretical framework for dissecting this topic of mine. Adorno is one of the leading philosophers of the 21st century, his works continuously echoes throughout our contemporary cultural history, and he was one of the first to critically assess mass entertainment, cultural alienation and its social implications on humanity as a whole.

Adorno was born in Germany September 11, 1903 and passed away August 6, 1969. His non-conformist ideals was brought out by the displeasure of the war, and observing how fellow intellectuals and social critics to support the German war of 1939, and the national-socialist agenda. He is known for his critical theories of society and for being a most representative intellectual of the Frankfurt School of critical theory. His views on society and culture were greatly influenced by Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

Theodor Adorno presented a view on culture that is unparalleled even today with mass-influence of information. He introduced the controversial idea that in capitalist regimes all art, regardless of its shape or form, is bound to be commoditized and displayed for conformity, and thus leaving the act immune to critical thinking. Arts in capitalism do not challenge the viewer or listener, but offer standardized works to cater to the consumer, and to enslave.

Adorno described the culture industry as a key integrative mechanism for binding individuals, as both consumers and producers, to modern, capitalist societies. Where many sociologists have argued that complex, capitalist societies are fragmented and heterogeneous in character, Adorno insists that the culture industry, despite the manifest diversity of cultural commodities, functions to maintain a uniform system, to which all must conform. (Fagan Andrew 2005, Theodor Adorno, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Accessed 15.4.2012, <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/adorno/>>)

3.1 THE FETISH CHARACTER

Adorno is quite explicit in describing the role and impact of mass culture:

The masochistic mass culture is the necessary manifestation of almighty production itself. When the feelings seize on exchange value it is no mystical transubstantiation. It corresponds to the behavior of the prisoner who loves his cell because he has been left nothing else to love. The sacrifice of individuality, which accommodates itself to the regularity of the successful, the doing of what everybody does, follows from the basic fact that in broad areas the same thing is offered to everybody by the standardized production of consumption goods. But the commercial necessity of connecting this identity leads to the manipulation of the taste and the official culture's pretense of individualism, which necessarily increases in proportion to the liquidation of the individual. Even in the realm of the superstructure, the appearance is not merely the concealment of the essence, but proceeds of necessity from the essence itself. The identical character of the goods which everyone must buy hides itself behind the rigor of the universally compulsory style. The fiction of the relation between supply and demand survives in the fictitiously individual nuances. (Adorno 1991, pg. 40)

According to Adorno the inevitable being of mass culture is only a mere reflection of capitalist behavior, as they work on the same premise. The audience obey the rules by command, and accommodate themselves to that order, the individual has no own outside critical reflection on his existence within the cultural scene and adapts his tastes according to what the rest of the masses likes.

Adorno translates the very intrinsic value of any mass cultural outcome as inheritably bad, as it's made in the same function as with commodities, a product that can be bought and sold. The very nature of any production within the commercial boundaries is predestined to be in of predictable pattern and to offer what has already been offered. The parodying nature of individuality and freedom is apparent, the MP3-blog allegedly circumvents this mass cultural influence, and targets a more niche audience, this is explained by Adorno as fictitious, and as a mere delusion to appear out of reach of the hands of the capitalist scheme.

The fetish character of music is identified as the predictable. The existence of music have regressed into an infantile state, and commoditized, stripped of its purpose and value. The fetish is the loss of the autonomous and prescribed only to a function of the repetitive, the very intellectual and emotive attributes of music are not even present anymore. What exist are re-arrangements of productions and chords for the sole sake of profit.

3.2 REGRESSIVE LISTENING

As Adorno explains, the natural companion to the fetishism is ‘regressive listening’.

“The counterpart to the fetishism of music is a regression of listening. This does not mean a relapse of the individual listener into an earlier phase of his own development, nor a decline in the collective general level, since the millions who are reached musically for the first time by today’s mass communications cannot be compared of the audience of the past. Rather, it is contemporary listening which has regressed, arrested at the infantile stage. Not only do the listening subject lose, along with the freedom of choice and responsibility, the capacity for conscious perception of music, which was from time immemorial confined to a narrow group, but they stubbornly reject the possibility of such perception.” (Adorno 1991, pg.46)

The modern listening of music consists of ambient understanding, the act of enjoyment and passion from music has gone astray, as the effort in attention of the art, have been displaced by predetermined pleasure from the audience. The value and depth of music are no longer an option, and the audience rejects such notions of it, the regression of listening have gone to a state where it remains ‘retarded’ and ‘childish’ (Adorno 1991: 46-47).

Though Adorno understandably shows himself as elitist in some sense, as he generalizes all modern music and its audience, to an infantile state, dupes of modern capitalism and its commodification of art.

“There is actually a neurotic mechanism of stupidity in listening, too; the arrogantly ignorant rejection of everything unfamiliar is its sure sign. Regressive listeners behave like children. Again and again and with stubborn malice, they demand the one dish they have been once served.” (Adorno 1991, pg.51)

Though harsh, the message here is aimed at popular understanding of music, how the imperialistic machine of those in charge of modern music, have offered their consumers the same product in a neat order and feed them the same thing over and over again. The regressive listening is that of the non-critical and apathetic character of the consumer, who takes what is given to him and does not challenge its very essence.

“Nobody believes so completely in prescribed pleasure. But the listening nevertheless remains regressive in assenting to this situation despite all distrust and all ambivalence. As a result of the displacement of feelings into exchange value, no demands are really advanced in music any more. Substitutes satisfy their purpose as well, because the demand to which they adjust themselves has itself already substituted. But ears that are still only able to hear what one demands of them in what is offered, and which register the abstract charm instead of synthesizing the moments of charm, are bad ears. Even in the “isolated” phenomenon, key aspects will escape them, that is, those transcend its own isolation.” (Adorno 1991, pg.51)

The state of music has been limited to that of predetermination. And the regressive nature of listening is closely tied, according to Adorno, to the advertising industry. And therefore popular music cannot be prescribed to an objective representation, the audience resigns to comfort of what is being offered, and are being affected by forces beyond their control, that of the capitalist ideology.

This commodification does not solely exist in the product itself, but in the purchasing of a concert or experience, one is not content without buying the ticket and “seeing the artist”. The enjoyment is not derived from the musical composition itself, but from the buying of the artist, I own this, “I’ve seen him”. “But he has not made it by liking the concert, but rather by buying the ticket” (Adorno 1991, pg.38).

3.3 ANALYSIS

MP3-Blogs favor a system that holds one artist in as high regard and abolish his artistry as soon as the next one comes along, to further regurgitate the same monotonous behavior as the day before. This embracement of short-term memory journalism is recycled constantly; the same writing and collective embrace of the “artist of the month” delusions itself. The blog publishes content much to the eagerly awaiting audience and for his own vanity. The monopoly of artistry exists on its own subcultural macro-level, it is further established when we view the aggregator, following the trends to wind up near the trails of the highest-ranking publisher and blog-post.

Using Pierre Bourdieu’s approach Beatrice Jetto explains the problem as such; *Bourdieu recognizes a divide between those who dominate the field economically and commercially, and those who see themselves as independent from the pressure of economic power. This dichotomy is responsible for constant hierarchical struggle. On one side there are hierarchies based on economic and commercial forces and, on the other side, there are hierarchies based on authentic free artistic expression. Members of the scene can therefore gain status following one of the two types of logics.* (Jetto 2008, pg.4-5) “The scene” being the genre-specific blogger who write for their like-minded audience, this struggle is what to much avail bloggers will battle about internally, to promote the commercial and gain more traffic, or to publish unknown artists and gain insignificant amount of viewers.

As the MP3-Blog have come under the scrutiny of its existence based on its commercial versus altruistic value, enables it to exist via non-affiliated means, and by those merits

would allow it to counter the music industry by its large numbers. The very core attribute of the MP3-Blog is strictly promotional, it exists to bring forth unknown and music production of quality. But the question arises about the choices this power would give them, wouldn't this total emancipation from commercial goals render it capable of a mass-fluctuation in musical genres? And can that subjective idea of the publisher maintain a consistent leniency towards this persuasion. Now, every blogger does not abide to this rule, but it is implied based on the sub-cultural code of conduct and character.

The dilemma with the MP3-Blog is that of its very existence, its core is that of altruistic nature, but is drawn to the commercial one. The function is that the publisher of an MP3-blog can go long periods of time, writing long elaborate pieces, publishing content that is of high value but will eventually realize that the popular is what produces traffic on his blog. The known and familiar, the standardized, is what will garner an audience towards his enterprise, not that of content.

Music, distributed via the channels of the MP3-blog, must be to some extent considered a 'culture industry' and ascribed to mass culture. Though the MP3-blog declares its autonomous status, and as a constellation, one has to consider the existence and influences of the aggregators, the aggregators favor and popularize the "parroting" of music productions, the more the publishers post tracks that are "trending" the more traffic they will attain from the site, and will moreover gain more influence over the aggregator charts.

The 'fetish character' is apparent as the audience will affectionately praise and visit the blog who transcribes to the "trend": what is known and popular.

Beatrice Jetto shed some further light on this issue; *the way in which they construct and circulate sub-cultural capital is deeply affected by often contrasting hierarchies of power and autonomy from the commercial industry. Many music blogs often express a tension between the desire of being valued as authentic by few loyal fans and the desire of being popular in the music blogosphere and gaining status in the local scene. Music blogs that follow the art for art's sake are those that demonstrate a consistent and discerning taste over time, independently from the hype generated by the music blog-*

osphere at a virtual level and from the pressures of the music industry at a local level. This type of blogs embraces more an amateur philosophy by favoring personal motives instead of professional motives and popularity. Other blogs might sacrifice their indie ideals of authenticity in favor of their professional status. (Jetto 1998, pg.11)

As shown, the issue is complex; the whole existence relies heavily on personal integrity and rules. But concentrating more on the generalized MP3-blog, it might eventually succumb to that of the reputation and celebrity of the masses, and he who abides to the popular taste will gain more popularity. The change needed to reform contemporary listening rely heavily on fundamental shift in how culture is perceived, a move from placing value in objects and its practical value and renounce rules set by a market-economy.

This is why all attempts to reform mass music and regressive listening on the basis of what exists are frustrated. Consumable art music must pay by the sacrifice of its consistency. Its faults are not ‘artistic’; every incorrectly composed or outmoded chord bespeaks the backwardness of those who demand accommodation is made. But technically consistent, harmonious mass music purified of all the elements of bad pretense would turn into art music and at once lose its mass basis. All attempts at reconciliation, whether by market-oriented artists or collectively oriented art educators, are fruitless. (Adorno 1991, pg.58)

The MP3-blog, as a collective, can be viewed as Adorno’s “collectively-oriented art educators”, because their content still rarely touches the mainstream. Its existence is mostly based on self-recognition and promotional, it wants an audience but not on the wrong premise. It rejects the idea of ‘creating’ for monetary gain, as much as it thrives for self-exposure, in a vacuum of moral altruism and popular recognition. Adorno explains in the above quote that to find a “middle ground” between the ‘art scene’ and the commercial one is a pointless endeavor. That the attempt to create or promote music without any commercial basis would lose all mass-appeal, and thus true expression cannot exist.

This is explained further by Wodtke, she summarizes the difficulty of maintaining a free “self-owned” platform and the need for self-recognition; *Depending on how one views*

MP3 bloggers, either as fans or as new media music critics/journalists, idealism and realism in MP3 blogs' rhetorical purposes can clash; the seemingly explicit motive of altruistic promotion of music that the mainstream media ignores can be challenged by the reality that MP3 bloggers are often blogging to promote themselves and gain validation. (Wodtke 2007, pg.30). Wodtke refers to that bloggers can fall into the temptation of publishing to gain social status within the blogosphere and to artists, for the sake of their own vanity and possible celebrity.

The monopolistic hold on culture, which forbids anything that cannot be grasped, necessarily refers us back to what has already been produced in the past and institutes self-reflection. This is the source of that glaring and yet ineliminable contradiction between the presentation, elegant technical finish and modish procedures on the other hand, and the old-fashioned traditionally individual and culturally derived decayed contents on the other, the contradiction that is revealed in the standardization of what is individual. (Adorno 1991, pg.65)

Within the Mp3-blog community, if we contemplate free distribution of productions, the music is received with no cost to the audience. This functions first and foremost as early promotion, and is intended to promote and increase the size of the listeners and fans. But in this scenario to acquire the piece is free, releases it off commodification, as a single piece of digital existence, allows it without its physical form to exist. This technological advancement makes the product itself to merely function as a replica of another. The MP3 is in the digital world a copy of a copy. No consummation is present in this relation. But this connection does not perhaps relieve it of its product role.

Adorno explains the cultural engagement as a sole repetition of what has already been made, that the familiar will be what the masses attain. Regardless of how you deliver the content, the audience will consume that which has already been consumed. Furthermore, this idea reflects immensely on what MP3-blogs publish. The niche values and retro-romanticism content are vast within the community, from the most popular to the most underground, the artists re-package songs and art to lure in the audience of the standardized form.

4 AN ADORNIAN INTERPRETATION OF THE MP3-BLOG

MP3-Blogs existences are a cultural counter-weight against the influence of mainstream-outlets. It portrays itself as an autonomous critical filter of music, independent of commercial or affiliated bias. This would be, according to Adorno, a futile attempt and reconciliation between the “art-educators” and the market-oriented artists.

The MP3-Blog has allowed music to be easily available and offer an alternative to the multinational monopoly of music distribution, and has transformed into an underground digital collective of music aficionados. Though the MP3 has allowed faster and more convenient consuming of music, its inherent value is that of the commercial, it merely promotes the wider gap that is not represented by the conglomerates, as it does not sell as much or contain “hits”. Even though artists release tracks for free within the blog-community, its intent is to reach a wider audience, subsequently pass the conglomerates, and distribute via independent outlets. It does not exist for the sake of existing.

Adorno would denounce the value of the MP3-Blog as even a step further back in the progression of music, the “regression” of the listener has even more so succumbed to an ambient state, as the digital existence of the MP3 would further prove its uselessness. The digital replication of cultural goods would imply the further wasteful and vacuous meaning of listening to music. As the MP3 isn’t even real, graspable or attainable, it has regressed even more to an easily consumable being.

The aggregator of MP3-blogs place the highest trending song on their front-page and let it remain, as the traffic increases, and then replace it the next week with the current trend. *For the regressive listener, this effect (the rapidness of modern to grow old) is fantastically foreshortened. They would ridicule and destroy what yesterday they were intoxicated with, as if in retrospect to revenge themselves for the fact that the ecstasy was not actually such* (Adorno 1991, pg.56).

The MP3-Blog, as a cluster, has consolidated into a more meek representation of versatile culture. It conforms to the trend that is currently consumed and abides to a higher order. The hierarchical order in which the MP3-blog acts has much basis in popularity within their own niche audience and, as a group, will follow the trends that garner the most attention. There's very little to no escaping the tide of the masses, or the inevitable alignment with the current trend. Repetition and the standardized form is what works.

Adorno shows us the novelty factor of the digital expansion of goods, though hidden through a cluster; its collective result and attributes are the same. This is clearly present within the MP3-blog community. "The less the system tolerates anything new, the more those who have been forsaken must be acquainted with all the latest novelties if they are to continue living in a society rather than feeling themselves excluded from it".

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

As the MP3-Blog has to be generalized to analyze its existence and purpose, it is difficult to assess what its subjective summation is. The variety of personalities that publish is great. The distribution and its content via blogs range solely dependent on the integrity of the person behind the publishing. Both those who want profits and fame exists in the blogosphere, and they are the majority, but also those who maintain a steady purpose of altruism and genuinely want people to experience music. And that is commendable.

The writing of Adorno is somewhat elitist and shuns every genre and expression besides classical music. And that, in itself, is questionable. As classical compositions has been closely tied with the aristocracy and shouldn't be portrayed as innocent. By as Theodor Adorno's works are quite heavy, and requires much concentration to grasp, my own analysis of Adorno may be of subjective criticism.

Would Adorno view the MP3 as another scheme of mass-cultural influence or would he see it as a bypass of commodification? That was a question I struggled with to some extent, and would be interested in further exploring this topic and the existence of the MP3.

To summarize the questions cited in the beginning, **to what extent is the 'fetish character' present in the distribution of free MP3s, and what is the significance of the aggregators in this presence?** The fetish character is the repetitive, the replication of the familiar, the convenience of the listener to monotonous behaviour in music-consumption. The MP3-Blog offers an alternative to mass-culture and lifts up the acts which the mainstream outlets ignore, but functions on the same premise as the popular. The aggregators purpose was to collect all the alternative productions, and not to further promote the mainstream, via the MP3-blog and offer it through a joint platform. This action gave birth to three obstacles:

1. The mainstream will use this platform by using the right marketing techniques, and will gain credibility through these outlets. The difference between the

“commerical” and the “indie” will cease, and thus neutralizing the idea of the operation.

2. When the traffic through aggregators increases so will the posts that gain the most attention, hence the popular and known, this will put aside qualitative music over the mainstream.
3. The fast exchangeable posting of tracks on aggregators promotes dispensability.

The “regressive” nature of the fetish character are present in the MP3-blog and its outlet for the reason of popular conformity. The aggregators promote the commerical and the popular, and are counter-productive to its own goals, with a few instances of underground artists being promoted. The complexity to analyze the problem is the versatility of MP3-blogs, and its subjective values without the importance of the aggregator. But the MP3-blog do offer a wider spectrum of niche genres and orientations than the mainstream, but adapt towards the standardized culture Adorno describes.

The fetish character of the MP3-blog is inherit, its fundamental flaw is its dependence on traffic and its immediate function, its rapid creation of posts with its assembly line resemblance, and duty of posting for the sake of posting. The music is valued as such, rapid creation for instant gratification, and generally forgotten by the next day. This is the “regressive listener’s” behaviour, its necessity within a system that favours the standardized culture ascribed to the capitalist rules.

Furthermore, this phenomenon of the MP3-blog, its autonomous journalism and free promotional music, does present options for its audience. The distribution of MP3 for free are not as important as one would think, the costless nature of the product does not relieve it of its commodification as they functions are promotionals for future commerical release. Nor does the MP3-blog in itself bear any characteristics that it would denounce this action.

To what extent is the MP3-blog, and the sub-culture it gives voice to, affected by and ultimately vulnerable to mainstream cultural trends? The dangers of any new medium is the inevitable exploitation of them. The commercial powers are greater than that of any collective integrity. The MP3-blog have been, for quite some time, in its ear-

ly progression. It has seen changes from how the layout is presented, how the music is streamed and shared (open-source flash-devices to Soundcloud), trends within different genres, piracy law-suits with sharing sites, social media interaction and commercial influence. The challenge that lays before the MP3-blog is how it will be used by companies, the future will most likely be more commercially oriented, as most independent successful platforms will be eventually used, to some extent, by them.

The issue with the aggregators, and the popular demand in them, is that it attracts visitors, the current standard applies to to rest, and if one does not follow the trends it will most likely be translated into neglect of the MP3-blog. The problem is that more and more companies and networks are trying to influence the direction and popularity of the blogs, this have been illustrated through blog-communities that share “likes” on Hype Machine, sponsored events, ad networks that demand certain content and supply blogs with free gifts.

The mainstream have also adapted to trends that merge from the sub-culture, to use marketing techniques to “win over” the blogging-community by creating a massive hype around artists and offer remix-competitions for independent producers and luring them with prizes and money. This procedure is very common now. A high-profile artist, offers the stems of his or her song, and this is given for free to every producers who wishes to remix the song. This tactic is often for the sole purpose of widening the audience and producing hype.

Does the MP3 foster or resist the ”regression of listening” that Adorno describe in his depiction of the role of music in the conditions of the culture industry? The regressive nature is that of the repetitive, the absence of value, the familiar chords and that of the audience who rejects the notion of anything different than the known. The MP3-blog as a collective influencer shows great promise in offering wider alternatives of genres and styles in music, the familiar is mixed with the strange and intruguing. Adorno would not frown on the amount and difference in its cultural expression, but moreso in the displacement of the value of the music, the regressive state is commodification of the music. That the experience of the music is now marginalized down to a sinle entity of a digital line of code.

Adorno's fear of the fetishized nature would be that music would end up in an ambient state, that the participation and experience of music would transgress into a diminished existence. The MP3 enables this behaviour, it transformed into a limited activity, a non-attainable being. Without value, a copy made for the sole sake of mass-appeal. That part of the regressive theory is true.

But Adorno also stated that the regressive listener rejects anything that is 'different', much like any mainstream followers, this is however only partly true about the MP3-blog community. The Adornian fear of the ambient state is that the music-experience would be centralized into uniform sounds. The mass-distribution of music, and the MP3, has also allowed for many changes in genres and influences, this offers a massive range of artists and distinctive styles. Which contribute to cultural communication and enlightenment. Some parts of Adornian "regressive listening" is present in the MP3, but have also enabled a mass-increase in musical expression.

6 GLOSSARY

AGGREGATORS: *Aggregators such as The Hype Machine and Elbo.ws track MP3 blog posts and display the most recently updated posts on its front page. The services are meant to provide an easier access of collective audio-blogging and make it easier to search through recently posted MP3s. The Hype Machine features a list of the most popular tracks of the last three days, as well as the most blogged bands and most popular searches* (Wikipedia contributors. “MP3-Blog”, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MP3_blog. Accessed, 12.5. 2010.). The aggregator’s is a summary of qualitative blogs, keeping track of their content and posts it through one website.

CRAWL: Crawl, Bot or WebCrawler refers to a bot, a program that surfs the Internet for specific content and creates a mirrored copy of it. This is in the same manner Google offers links to the site and detailed webpages, their crawler is instructed in finding content and displaying it on the Google page through the search-function. In MP3-Aggregators the Crawler is instructed in finding music, videos and other content suited for their search engine.

FLASH: *The Adobe Flash Player is software for viewing multimedia, Rich Internet Applications and streaming video and audio, on a computer web browser or on supported mobile devices. Flash Player runs SWF files that can be created by the Adobe Flash authoring tool, by Adobe Flex or by a number of other Macromedia and third party tools.* (Wikipedia contributors. “Flash”, Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia. Available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adobe_Flash. Accessed, 2.3. 2010.)

HYPE: A marketing strategy help to increase the consumers need to acquire the product; this may be methods through social media interaction and “build” of the hype. Advertising to a niched audience and selling it as something “everyone” needs to have.

INDIE: Refers to independent artists or labels, non-affiliated with The Big Four, and release music with very little connections to popular music. Such as those occupying most of the airtime on commercial radio and television.

MP3: Is a shortened version of MPEG Audio Layer 3 and a patented audio compression format commonly used to storage sound and distribute it with minimal effort on the Internet.

REMIX/MASH-UP: A remix is an artist's own version of a track, this may be little variations or a total deconstruction of another artists compositions. A bootleg remix, is an illegally acquired and edited version of a track, it can be a song with its vocals isolated and made anew with only some parts. A mash-up is a blend of two tracks.

SOCIAL MEDIA: Is a technology that allows users, organizations and companies to interact via multimedia, and is based on user-generated content. The biggest suppliers of such services are YouTube, Facebook, MySpace, Blogger, Twitter and Reddit.

STREAMING: Is multimedia that is constantly received by and presented to an end-user while being delivered by a streaming provider. With streaming, the client browser or plug-in can start displaying the data before the entire file has been transmitted (WIKIPEDIA). It is the standard online for displaying audio and video to the viewer.

THE BIG FOUR: Are the record-labels that dominate 80% over the world's sales in music, and consist of Warner Chappell, Sony, EMI and BMG.

TRAFFIC: A word for visitors to a website, a cluster of information concerning the rate and amount the site gets incoming visitors.

UPLOAD: Is commonly used as a term to send a track onto a website or service so it can be accessible by other users.

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