



REVIEW | This is Not a Remix: Piracy, Authenticity and Popular Music

Margie Borschke

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Karlyn King

University of Birmingham

Kxk628@student.bham.ac.uk

If the philosophy of reproductions has gained new scholarly attention, it is likely to be attributable to the recent consumer return to physical music mediums in a digitized culture. The BPI (British Phonographic Industry) reported that vinyl records, CDs, and cassettes formed the second largest album sale format in the UK in 2017, second only to streaming (Butler 2018), whereas digital downloads decreased 23.4% on the previous year (ibid). This book is therefore a timely consideration of music's storage and the "material, rhetorical, social and cultural dimensions of copies and aesthetic dimension of distribution and circulation" (2) both pre- and post-internet. Rather than adding to the wealth of literature on music copyright control (as the title may suggest), the author aims to provide a "critical comparative reading" (9) of all such media "as a conceptual lens through which to explore the mutuality of matter and meaning" (164).

Perspectives in the book are underpinned by a thoroughly researched analysis of the concept of the copy, from Platonic universal to Baudrillardian simulacrum. It is argued that musical formats – whether physical or digital sound files – are all material and duplicable. However, Borschke extends this with a convincing argument against Lessig's (2008) remix culture of a technologically determined, democratized utopia featuring more recent remixes created on affordable digital software. Rather than the democratic remix being the most authentic version of copy for the digital consumer-producer, Lessig's definition ignores the vital history of analogue remix culture. The approach offered within Borschke's book instead contends that all remixes are not new musical products but copies, whether analogue or digitally derived. This is illustrated by the author through an intensive analysis of the disco-edit and the creative freedom that it allowed for DJs via double turn tabling, sampling, or reel-to-reel audio tape editing. However, in opposition to

romantic notions of authenticity debated throughout, Borschke clearly posits that such edits were (in essence) derivative and duplicable. However, this argument becomes a little muddled when the author suggests, that “copying and sampling are not synonymous” (100) in that copies, as a material form, precede sampling as a musical practice. And what is notably overlooked here is the notion of all music being derived from somewhere else, whether heard, written down, or recorded. The messy world of copyright is testament to the problem of attempting to police such confusion.

The social constructivist framework that Borschke employs here is, however, convincing. This is especially evident in Chapter Four – “Disco Edits: Analog Antecedents and Network Bias” – where the author makes her case for focusing on the use rather than the production value of records as the main driver behind disco as a musical force. In doing so, she argues that using two records to break a beat holds more power than simply producing edits on any format. This creates an active assemblage with agency, featuring “dancers, DJs, recordings and playback technologies” (89) as a force to be reckoned with. This framing of disco edits is placed in opposition to the passive, technologically deterministic response of the consumption group associated with Canadian philosopher, Marshall McLuhan (see, for example, McLuhan, Fiore and Agel 1967).

Chapter Five – “The New Romantics” – is a fascinating look at the MP3 blog as a digital place of origin and a means of diffusing copies of MP3s among consumers in direct contrast to the traditional, organic record store. In order to understand the MP3 blog, Borschke draws an illuminating analogy with folk culture whereby music would be passed down to others, via live vocalization, sheet music or recordings with little focus on remuneration. The use of this frame reconsiders the internet as a platform within which these processes take place, globally and instantly, and highlights elements that many consumers (and, it could be argued, scholars) take for granted:

If sites of access and distribution can imbue a song with authenticity, that is if we can place value on where a recording comes from, then perhaps blogs as digital bodies (boyd, 2006) were considered authentic precisely because they made the cultural intermediary visible. (143)

Therefore, Borschke argues, the grassroots authenticity associated with folk culture can be somewhat surprisingly applied to the power of the MP3 blog. This suggestion leaves romantic notions of digital democratization open for the reader to ponder, particularly in a world of paid advertising options for the cultural intermediaries involved. This publication provides a thought-provoking start to this conversation. Further research on how this applies to other genres such as classical music would provide a fertile area for comparison.

This book contributes to the immediate topic of multiformats and provides an insightful and densely detailed exploration and analysis of the notion of copy. How a copy can be more than its use value, considered instead in relation to notions of exchange, legal and ideological value in the current climate, is a fruitful area for scholarly debate. This publication is valuable to our understanding of the complexities and nuances of living in a digital culture within which some consumers are actively reclaiming physical artefacts, rather than more easily accessible digital versions.

References

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