

Sonic Spectra. Retrofuturism of Vinyl Record

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Abstract: *This article explores the concept of retrofuturism in the context of vinyl records, focusing on their role as artifacts of retrofuturistic aesthetics in today's digital age. It examines the enduring appeal of vinyl, emphasizing its materiality, collectible nature, and sensory richness, which offer a distinct connection to music. Drawing upon the concept of hauntology, initially introduced by Jacques Derrida and subsequently developed by Mark Fisher, the article delves into the universal yearning for „lost futures” of modernism within contemporary culture. By examining the lasting impact of vinyl records within a broader landscape of retrofuturistic culture, this article suggests that hauntological undercurrents associated with vinyl are essential for understanding its continued allure and significance in a world increasingly shaped by digital media.*

Key-words: *vinyl record, retrofuturism, hauntology*

1. Introduction

In the digital age, where streaming platforms and compressed audio formats dominate the musical landscape, there is a notable interest in revisiting the past, exemplified by a resurgence of vinyl records (Hayes 2007; Bartmanski and Woodward 2015; Harper 2019). The vinyl record, originally designed to revolutionize the way music was consumed, now stands as a testament to the enduring allure of analogue media. In this article, we argue that vinyl records can be seen as retrofuturistic objects. While serving as an outdated, “retro” sonic medium in the 21st century, vinyl’s “futuristic” quality arises from its enduring legacy, fundamentally reshaping the landscape of music consumption in the 20th

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century. This transformation extended beyond a mere transmission of music across physical spaces, embracing the dimension of temporal continuity. Consequently, vinyl became an integral element of domestic existence, thereby forging a lasting imprint on the evolution of auditory culture.

2. Retrofuturism and hauntology

Every vision of future, whether optimistic or dystopian, is a representation of the times in which it was created. Guffey and Lemay (2014, 435) divided futurism into three eras: (1) early optimism, rooted in the 19th century and focused mainly on the past, (2) the “golden age” of the early 20th century lasting until the 1960s’ Space Age, and (3) a period of waning interest beginning in the late 1960s and 1970s. In the 20th century, popular culture anticipated future in the face of developing technologies. This had an impact on art, literature, film, television, architecture, and music. Futuristic aesthetics of those years evoke images of the 1959 Cadillac Coupe de Ville, movies such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* directed by Robert Wise, or electronic krautrock music that aimed to rewrite German culture from scratch, unburdened by the shadow of Nazism (Grönholm 2014, 376). Aesthetic tropes of these and similar works are now widely used, but their context no longer carries the same anticipatory function. This type of approach is referred to as retrofuturism. According to a definition by Elizabeth Guffey and Kate Lemay (2014, 434), “If futurism is a term that describes our anticipation of what is to come, then retrofuturism describes how we remember these visions”. Retrofuturism focuses on a very specific set of utopian visions, particularly technophilic futurism, which emerged mainly in the United States and Europe from the 1920s to the late 1960s. Retrofuturism blurs, mixes, and combines the past and the future, without making any predictions. It commemorates a popular vision of the future, combining nostalgia with sentimentality.

Retrofuturism can be understood in terms of what Fisher, following Derrida, referred to as hauntology. This concept, originally expressed as “hantologie” in French, was introduced by Jacques Derrida in his renowned 1993 work, *Spectres de Marx*, referencing an opening line of the Communist Manifesto: „A spectre is haunting Europe — the spectre of communism”. This sentence was a response to the condition of Western civilization after Francis Fukuyama's prematurely declared “end of history”. Derrida argued that this would lead to being haunted by the ghosts of the past, constantly resurrecting echoes of history from beyond the grave

(Fisher 2014, 29). Hauntology relates to the subjective experience of time. The present is “haunted” by the past and the future, which are abstract and absent, creating specters. Hauntology is an amalgamation of the words “haunting” and “ontology”, a philosophical study of what can be deemed to exist. “Haunting” pertains to the experience or impact of being visited by a ghost, but it can also describe something that is unforgettable and consistently exerts an influence on someone’s thoughts or feelings. In the context of hauntology, a presence and coherence of everything that exists depend on an intricate web of preceding and surrounding absences, granting it the consistency and intelligibility it exhibits (Fisher 2014, 25). When listening to a simple melody, at any given moment, you hear only one sound. Only one note is fully present at that time. However, it does not form the melody by itself, as the melody is based on the relation of the current sound to the previous one, which is no longer heard, as well as the anticipation of an upcoming note. In this sense, the melody is never fully present; it only exists through ghosts of absent sounds from past and future that linger in the present. Even the basic musical characteristic of sound itself, its frequency, is a function dependent on time. Sounds create melodies only within temporal frames.

Fisher (2014, 17) stated that the future is being “slowly cancelled”. He popularized the use of Derrida’s hauntology to describe a prevailing sense within the contemporary culture that “lost futures” of modernity haunt the present (Fisher 2014, 32). Those futures never happened or were cancelled by postmodernism and neoliberalism through the commodification of art. This leads to a cultural impasse. Fisher outlined two main aspects of hauntology. The first concerns what has already become history but still has an impact on the present as recurring, traumatic patterns. The second idea is related to what has not yet occurred but is already shaping our present as a form of anticipation or a guiding force that influences our current actions. Future is perpetually shaped by our present imaginings and has been molded by our past visions. Mark Fisher, along with Simon Reynolds, used the concept of hauntology to describe a cultural moment when a group of musical artists from various backgrounds emerged. They shared a certain style and approach that articulated a crisis of history, memory, and materiality. Practices common among musicians such as Burial, The Caretaker, artists from the Ghost Box label, and Mordant Music, include using sampled crackle sounds characteristic of vinyl records. This sound invokes a sense of materiality in an era when music exists mostly in abstract online spaces and streaming services. The crackling sound also may spark an

impression that “time is out of joint,” which is a phrase from *Hamlet* that Derrida cites in *Specters of Marx*. Hauntology takes into account a current condition of Western culture while simultaneously tapping into the nostalgic longing for a future that never arrived.

Statistically, 84% of people born in the 1950s declared higher household incomes than their parents, while for those born in the early 1960s, this percentage dropped to about 68%. Such a downward trend has continued ever since. Main reason for this difference is the lower and more asymmetrically distributed economic growth, leading to slower improvements of average incomes and hence increasing income inequality (Siminski 2021). This wage gap extends the precarity characteristic of the adolescent period, driven by economic and political reasons, to other age groups and, consequently, generational groups. Old content is being reprocessed to simply cater to a broader audience. It disrupts the continuity of cultural identity and the historical linearity of time by looping mainstream culture around same old symbols. This historical order is also disrupted by the possibilities of the Internet, where content from various periods, including several decades ago, is easily accessible with a similar amount of effort. Replaying a film, TV show, piece of music, or even a television advertisement associated with personal nostalgic memories leads to an interaction with that memory, and the received stimulus is much closer to the original than a reproduction (even in the form of a photograph). Not only the ability is problematic but also the frequency of our exposure. All this combined with a lower associated financial risk (compared to original or subversive forms), enables the commercialization of nostalgia on an unprecedented scale.

3. Analogue nostalgia

Tester argued that nostalgia contains a twofold sense of longing. The first pertains to the feeling of homesickness, where the nostalgic individual senses that they are not where they should be. This implies that nostalgia requires a certain transformation. The second involves longing for something distant or ancient, where the present is qualitatively different from the past (Tester 1993, 65). Past is an enriching reification of the present. Modern culture appears to excessively glorify the feeling of nostalgia, which can be seen in the widespread use of vintage and retro aesthetics. In the music industry, this translates into a return of favoring

analogue mediums such as vinyl records and cassette tapes, as well as a focus on modular designs through the revival of classic synthesizers and development of digital platforms for modular synthesis. Chase and Shaw identified three conditions that constitute cultural nostalgia. Firstly, nostalgia is only relevant in a culture that operates on the framework of linear time, connecting its history as an ongoing process, where the present is a result of a particular past and a future goal. Secondly, there must be a sense that the present is somehow incomplete or in a state of decline when compared to the past, or it must be facing an impending crisis or a catastrophe (Tester 1993, 3). Thirdly, a presence of material or existential artifacts from the past is required, as they serve as a solid foundation for the nostalgic cultural community (Tester 1993, 4). These three conditions also shape retrofuturism, as it represents another facet of nostalgia. The first condition highlights the crucial role of the past in our culture, which establishes the present and helps anticipate the future. Retrofuturism brings a past vision of the future back to life. Although decontextualized, it maintains its core emotional and ideological content. Regarding the second condition, quoting Slavoj Žižek: „It seems easier to imagine »the end of the world« than a far more modest change in the mode of production, as if liberal capitalism is the »real« that will somehow survive even under conditions of a global ecological catastrophe” (Myers 2003, 63). In this time and age, capitalism is deeply ingrained into our society – it’s taken for granted and considered the norm. The general belief that it’s almost impossible to envision a viable alternative reinforces skepticism and an active dismissal of concepts capable of challenging the established *status quo*. Given the growing awareness of impending challenges tied to social inequality, a looming demographic crisis, climate catastrophes, and systemic reinforcement of injustice, the previous vision of our future may present itself as an escape into the realm of imagination. This is evident in the retrofuturistic aesthetic, which emphasizes the ease of operating complex devices and an overall optimistic outlook on the role of technology in human life. The third condition within this framework of futurism encompasses all works of science fiction and the legacy of the space and nuclear race era. Retrofuturistic images like jetpacks, flying cars, and space colonization, despite remaining unrealized, persist in collective cultural memory and are associated with technophilic futurism of the mid-20th century.

Columbia Records set the general standard for a format of popular music recordings by introducing the vinyl record in 1948. An ability to record longer compositions marked the beginning of the “album era” with long-playing records (LPs) dominating as the primary form of artistic expression

and musical consumption. The revolutionary nature of vinyl record as an audio medium lay in its transformation of the abstract nature of sound waves into a tangible, physical form, enabling the transmission of music and sound across time and space, thereby significantly influencing culture and giving to the general population an access to musical experiences. This medium democratized access to music and the dissemination of musical knowledge, enabling people to explore various sound forms without the need for expensive and socially privileged formal training (Bartmanski and Woodward 2015, 6). The vinyl record, once considered merely as a latest audio technology, has, in the 21st century, taken on primarily an aesthetic value, creating an aura of authenticity. Vinyl enthusiasts perceive sound recorded in vinyl formats as deeper, richer, with a noticeably textured quality. The sounds of pops and crackles, which are audio artifacts, only seem to enhance these experiences, making them desirable and considered an integral part of the listening pleasure (Bennett and Rogers 2016, 33).

4. The tactile dimension of the medium

The appeal of vinyl records also comes from their larger size, especially with extensive cover arts, much larger than that of CDs and significantly larger than the thumbnails displayed on streaming platforms on electronic screens. This unique size allows some of the album covers to function as standalone works of art in a visual context. In this perspective, the vinyl record takes on the form of a Gesamtkunstwerk, a total work of art that synthesizes various artistic forms. Moreover, the fact that vinyl records are physical copies, not just digital files, gives them unique character characteristic of collectible items. In an age where nearly everything is accessible in a virtual form, vinyl records become cherished items that offer physical experiences, such as their scent, touch, and visual aesthetics of the covers. Consequently, vinyl records evoke the concept of longevity and stability, characteristics inherent in retrofuturistic objects.

Playing a vinyl record is a multi-sensory experience that involves a unique ritual, from unboxing the record, often accompanied by additional artwork inside, to placing the needle on the record and observing the entire playback mechanism. The whole event has a limited time-space scope, intensifying the need to celebrate the present moment. Sensory integration helps build a connection with an object that is the vinyl record, which is part of an analogue musical experience. Turntables

allow for active participation in experiencing favorite music, something otherwise possible only through attending live performances. Music in the form of a data file is immaterial, and playing it in this format does not lend itself to leaving the same kind of trace in our memory as playing a vinyl record on a turntable. The digitization and widespread availability of music reduces it to the role of background and accompaniment of everyday life. Romanticizing vinyl records results from their materiality. The continuing popularity of vinyl in the 21st century, while still relatively niche, illustrates that the pursuit of specific pleasures can be just as significant as seeking the most convenient and profitable solutions. Style and ritual associated with playing music on this medium is as crucial as sound quality and musical content, challenging the conventional distinction between content and its medium of expression.

According to Rodowick (2007, 20), “the material basis of film is a chemically encoded process of entropy”. Analogue media age and deteriorate – each replay of a vinyl record or celluloid film leaves irreversible qualitative changes and accelerates their decay. Just as in organic life, their aging process leads to permanent malfunctions or death. This fact may be crucial to understanding analogue nostalgia and the emotional attachment to analogue formats. Flea markets are particularly popular among vinyl record enthusiasts. Used, previously played albums carry traces of the fascination of previous owners, and the scratches can be seen as equivalent to scars and wrinkles on the skin. Fragility and imperfection of these media are added values, providing authenticity and tangibility to the music being played.

5. Analogue vs. digital

The fascination with vinyl records does not necessarily need to exist in opposition to digital formats. The materiality of music formats, such as vinyl records or cassette tapes, has been appreciated through online culture. The analogue-digital duality is a key element of retrofuturistic aesthetics. Digital media formats, such as CDs and DVDs, were always haunted by the specter of analogue formats because they were marketed as a new dimension of sound superiority over outdated media (Sexton 2012, 579). This also applies to the digitization of old albums originally recorded on tape. Analogue reissues involve the reuse of material, which leads to its gradual degradation. Each subsequent playback or recording increases the risk of demagnetizing the medium. Digital formats allow for both preserving sound in

an untouched state for eternity and facilitating various reissues by different sound engineers without altering the source material. Early digital audio media advertisements were engaged in conveying these messages and the gradual elimination of analogue. The benefits of digital media could only be established in relation to analogue since their quality was centered on the removal of distortions and artifacts characteristic of vinyl records. Despite the extensive adoption of digital technologies, they largely continue to serve as a means of providing access to analogue recordings. Additionally, they contribute to the emergence of a “substitute nostalgia” for old media, which may well be the primary incentive for their romanticization. It is worth noting that vinyl enthusiasts are often young people who grew up in the digital music era. In the contemporary landscape, new albums are not only available through streaming services and CDs but are also released in analogue formats. According to Bolter and Grusin (1999, 28), new media always define themselves in relation to earlier representative technologies. The innovation of new media derives from how they shape older media and how older media transform to respond to multiple challenges of new media (Bolter, Grusin 1999, 15). Retro culture is an integral part of digital culture, just as technology uses high-resolution screens and high-speed broadband connections (Parikka 2015, 3). Despite the element of nostalgia and analogue audiophilia, digital technology is not in any opposition to the vinyl record enthusiasts. Contemporary vinyl market is primarily developed on the internet, and the community involved in it, from pressing plants to record stores, does not avoid digital technology (Palm 2019, 646). In the claims of analogue audiophiles regarding the superiority of vinyl records, what is to be proven is that they are intrinsically tied to what true recorded music experience should be like and to the nature of media for musical reproduction, which should radically differ from the common way of consuming music. When it comes to raw sound quality, technical expertise seems to confirm the superiority of the digital format. However, for analogue audiophiles, quantitative parameters seem to be less relevant, and the essence of analogue's superiority lies in the imperfections and disturbances that can be subjectively perceived as more predictable and regular, making them components of the warm-sounding quality of audio (Adler 2012, 52).

The resurgence of vinyl records, extends beyond a mere revival of an obsolete audio format. They stand as an embodiment of nostalgia for a time when music was experienced in a tangible and multisensory way. Vinyl records in the digital age can be best described as a manifestation of retrofuturism, which arises from their enduring legacy, which fundamentally reshaped the landscape of music

consumption, not only in physical space but also across the dimension of temporal continuity. Retrofuturistic appeal of vinyl records lies in their ability to bridge the gap between the past, present, and future, offering a multi-sensory experience, a connection to its historical importance, and a unique form of escapism. Vinyl records, once revolutionary in their ability to transmit music across time and space, now serve as tangible relics of a bygone era, offering a multi-sensory and immersive experience that is both a nod to the past and a celebration of an idealized future. Despite any illusions of antagonism, digital technology plays a crucial role in the contemporary vinyl market, from manufacturing to distribution. It's not so much an "analogue vs. digital" battle but a coexistence that embraces both worlds. That's why the vinyl still thrives and probably will keep on thriving for many years to come.

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