



The Present as Platform

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Abstract

Recent interest in platform studies has called attention to the ways technologies both afford and constrain creative ways of participating in social and cultural life. Digital platforms have become adept at collecting historical data and using it not just to predict future outcomes, but to produce the present through cultivated expectations of what it will have been. By exploring the case of amateur sound-recording media such as the mixtape, the writable CD, and online playlists, this paper explores how the material constraints of these media change the possibilities for what curated music can communicate. If one result is to mediate different temporal experiences by using timely music to elevate moments into events, then algorithmic music recommendations foreclose the affectability of experience by circumscribing it in advance as deliverable.

Keywords

mixtapes, algorithms, recommendations, event, experience

Platforming Time

As live streaming, status refreshes, launch events, and unboxing videos have become more commonplace, the conspicuously new has become more than spectacle. It has become *pre*-historical: newness imbued with a sense of historical momentousness ahead of its arrival. Though the acceleration of the cultural field wrought by ever-shorter news cycles, always-on digital technologies, and the relentless pulse of capital is well familiar, techniques to manipulate the felt importance of temporal experience have changed in step with the spread of digital technologies that promise both to deliver personalized content and to enable creative expression for their users. Certainly, within a digital culture that thrives on likes and re-tweets, clickbait and

notifications, the struggle to get more monetized attention is a struggle waged through attempts to deliver newness with great occasion.

In this paper, I am interested in thinking about how newness itself is being appropriated and commodified as a quasi-platform capable of being programmed and manipulated. By “newness,” though, it’s important to note that I am not referring to the materially new, such as the latest product or invention, or even to the conceptually new, such as a breaking news story or idea. Rather, the newness at issue here is the temporally new, that is, the unfurling of the temporal present itself so as to invite experiencing the present in the key of its novelty and micro-historical significance, even if only on a personal scale. The argument is that, by tacitly treating the present as a platform—as something programmable according to certain predetermined rules—digital technologies bent on molecularized personalization can approach the ultimate circumscription of phenomenal experience itself: the foreclosure of surprise and presence by anticipating desire and mediating its fulfillment, as if all experience could be born intensified in advance of its happening.

Recent scholarly interest in platforms has invested in the important work of showing how different media potentiate and circumscribe different possibilities of experience and expression. As an offshoot of media and cultural studies, the growth of platform studies has coincided with an interest in remix culture. The way Jean-Christophe Plantin and his collaborators describe it, as digital content providers began to enlist those who consumed their content to be unpaid producers of it as well—that is, with the rise of Web 2.0 in the 2000s—“scholars began to interrogate the political and cultural implications of these participatory forms of production and remix of content” (2018: 296). Henry Jenkins (2006), for instance, was among the first to lay some groundwork for platform studies to emerge by focusing on the burgeoning remix culture wrought by these new, more participatory forms of media, in which a greater capacity for programming, modifying, and generating new content on an existent scaffolding was shifting the difference between producers and consumers.

For Ian Bogost and Nick Montfort (2009), two of the more prominent voices in platform studies, the aim of the field is to “investigate the underlying computer systems that support creative work.” But this doesn’t mean platform studies are interested in technical details alone. The point is rather to connect a given platform’s

technical scaffolding—whether of a gaming console, computer system, social media service, or something else—to the specific ways that the particular scaffolding influences and shapes culture. In this way, emphasis on platforms, Bogost and Montfort write elsewhere, seeks to increase work “on how the hardware and software of platforms influences, facilitates, or constrains particular forms of computational expression” (2007: 177). One of the fundamental if implicit precepts of platform studies is accordingly the supposition that the types of data capable of being selected, stored, and processed by a particular platform—and in what ways and to what ends—simply differ depending upon the material limits of a given technology and the structure of its computational system. An Atari 3000, for instance, is capable of accommodating different forms of game design and gameplay than, say, a Nintendo Wii. Attending to these differences, the premise goes, might help to identify some ways that individual platforms uniquely afford and constrain creative ways of participating in social and cultural life.

This is important work. Yet, it can begin to lose its critical edge by attending too narrowly to computational systems without also considering the wider material and contextual ecologies in which people experience their creative interaction with what mediates those very experiences. In what is surely one of the most important and engaging works of media theory this century, John Durham Peters makes a case for these wider material and contextual ecologies by advancing the notion that media are at root elemental and environmental. “Media,” he writes, are “modes of being” (2015: 17). They order our very civilization, and include such mediums as the sea and the sky, even time itself, though always in concert with the techniques and technologies used to experience, measure, and record them. As Peters explains, for instance, “The ship makes the sea into a medium—a channel for travel, fishing, and exploration—but would not be such without the ship, at least for us” (p. 111). Similarly, I propose that many of the digital media technologies that seek to deliver personalized newness to their users (or to enable them creatively to customize it themselves), have, like the ship that makes the sea a medium, made the experience of temporal newness, the very unfolding present, into a channel for a mode of being marked by a manufactured affectability. More than just a platform that exposes time as an elemental medium of all experience, networked digital media are capable of operating as if time itself were the platform to be programmed and designed.

The “jump” from programming computers to programming experience itself is not as large as it may seem. Considering the extent to which networked technologies and mobile devices have become integrated into daily life—in our wayfinding, our work, our play, our bodies, even communication itself, let alone in such sectors as the economy, health care, warfare, and so on—it has become increasingly harder to distinguish between the ways people program platforms and the ways platforms program people. One need not subscribe to a hardline technological determinism to accept the truth in Friedrich Kittler’s maxim that “Media determine our situation” (1999: xxxix). According to Kittler, media are not passive vessels for content, but creators of world-changing epistemic contexts circumscribed by different *discourse networks*: “the network of technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store, and process relevant data” (1990: 369). Kittler saw that different discourse networks make their allowances in different ways, each accommodating certain kinds of communication and excluding others. Not unlike Foucault’s project in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*,¹ Kittler was less interested in the hermeneutic work of understanding discursive acts than in identifying the rules that organize discourse—what counts as “signification” and what doesn’t—in a given system (see Krämer, 2006: 97-98, and Wellbury, 1990: xii). To this end, one of Kittler’s most important insights was to recognize that time itself had become a discursive variable subject to manipulation through techniques that were capable of manipulating it to particular ends.

In *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, he forwards this thesis by distinguishing between textual media in the discourse network of 1800 (which structured romanticism) and technological media in the discourse network of 1900 (which structured modernism). Textual media can transcribe only the literary-symbolic registers of written language or speech into a technically processed code or notation. Ruled by the alphabet, textual media traffic only within this symbolic chain of signification. Signifiers get transcribed into letters and spaces and words and sentences. Technological media, conversely, record, store, and produce data from the material world itself, and hence refer to things that cannot be transcribed in the symbolic order. The gramophone, for instance, could record sound in “real time,” from amid the chaos and contingency of its live occurrence in a physical context. With technological media, from the gramophone to the computer, the ephemerality of the real could now be

repeatable, which meant that the irreversibility of time's incessant flow could now be manipulated as a cultural technique. The very axis of time was now subject to remixing.

Though Kittler is an important precursor to platform studies insofar as he validated critical attention to the material technicity of different media, his relative inattention to the social and cultural context of how media were used in practice leaves an opportunity that today's cultural studies and media theorists in particular might do well to seize. Raymond Williams would likely agree, having recognized that media are both technical *and* social phenomena, and hence that the relationship *between* these aspects is what matters (see, e.g., Williams, 1981; Freedman, 2002). Identifying the constraints in technologies and platforms of wide ordinary use, along with understanding their non-arbitrary nature, is also an essential first step for a critical practice that would follow the insights of affect theory and nonrepresentational thought in feeling around for the background conditions and atmospherics of exposure that prefigure the force of encounters between different texts, technologies, temporalities, and sensations.

In what follows, then, I offer a condensed, nonhermeneutic archaeology of a relatively familiar technology—in this case, musical storage and playback systems that enable people to make “mixtapes” and their variants—in order to show how what's possible in a given context of expression is delimited by those technologies that mediate it. In the same spirit of remix culture that first galvanized platform studies, and picking up from Kittler's discussion of the gramophone's ability to manipulate the time axis, I hope to show that the respective affordances and constraints of these different music recording and playback technologies do more than manipulate the time axis of that which they record or play, as Kittler foresaw. The process of “making a mix” using different media—including cassette tape recorders, CD burners, and streaming platforms—also illustrates in what ways each invites a different experience of passing time, ultimately to show how streaming media can co-opt the present itself as a kind of platform for mediating the affectability of phenomenal experience.

Mixtapes

Although the participatory affordances of platforms, from posting food porn on Instagram to making a virtual bookshelf on Goodreads, seemed relatively novel in the early 2000s, the ability of those with nontechnical expertise to utilize storage technologies and related hardware for the creative remixing of the aesthetic is not all that new. Certainly, DIY mixtape culture, and the technologies that support it, are precedents worth considering. What seems striking, though, is that the evolution of Web 2.0 has coincided with the rise of “curation” as a kind of catch phrase for culturally-savvy and aesthetically minded people, many of whom use the affordances of digital platforms to select, store, and share for others those aesthetic goods they hold to be worth sharing. One of my premises here is that it’s important to realize that the technologies and platforms involved in curating culture are not just neutral vessels, but rather involve particular cultural techniques for mediating a body’s phenomenal being-in the passage of time—that is, “experience” itself—by way of the aesthetic. “Cultural techniques,” as Bernard Geoghegan explains, “concern the rules of selection, storage, and transmission that characterize a given system of mediation, including the formal structures that compose and constrict this process” (Geoghegan, 2013: 69). In other words, before particular instances of curation can be communicated publicly and thereby given to attain some social meaning or significance, curatorial processes are constrained by the cultural techniques endemic to the media that make them possible.

The example of the mixtape is a relatively recent form of vernacular curation. The cultural salience of mixtapes in the liberal West is plain to see. It’s there in British novelist Nick Hornby’s bestselling novel, *High Fidelity* (later produced as a successful film, and more recently as a TV series), and it’s there on the street corner when aspiring hip-hop stars hand out their “mixtape” hoping to be discovered. *Rolling Stone* and other music magazines or blogs routinely publish their favorite songs or the favorites of famous musicians; Apple Music offers Celebrity Playlists; the broadcast news sometimes reports on what songs politicians or athletes have on regular rotation; Starbucks sells “Artist’s Choice” CD compilations. Cameron Crowe, the American movie director, revealed in 2000 that he had made a mixtape for every month of his life since 1978: “It’s as good as a diary.”

What's so special about the mixtape is not just its diaristic potential, but how it affords the chance to let personal expressions of taste communicate to others what cannot as adequately be conveyed by other discursive means. Mixtapes mobilize moods. And they are *curated* texts: in this case, the selection and arrangement of sounds, usually in the form of discrete songs, in order to affect experience through a personal identification with the intensities of an aesthetic medium. Some people, like Cameron Crowe, make mixtapes for themselves; others make mixes for occasions: parties, soundtracks, seductions, road trips, exercise. People make them as gifts for friends or lovers, family or strangers. Whatever the situation or audience, making a mix involves choosing particular songs, placing them in a particular sequence, and doing so knowing that these choices directly affect the listening experience, whether as story, mood, idea, or the emotional resonance that the mix is able to produce. As anyone who has heard or made a mixtape knows, curation can be a powerful form of communication.

The mixtape's curatorial power is so great that a number of scholars have even noted that mixes offer critical counterparts to voices of authority and oppression, making them integral modes of participation in public affairs. Here's how Jared Ball puts it:

As an expression of the colonized, the mixtape remains a kind of unsanctioned or dissident communication exercised by oppressed populations seeking to disrupt imposed media environments, which of necessity narrowly limit the roles and function of communication. The mixtape, evolving out of colonial antagonisms, asks for no permission, is bound by no laws of the state, and disseminates a national mythology essential to all national groupings (Ball, 2011: 155-156).

This notion of the mixtape asking for no permission, being bound by no laws of the state, and disseminating a national mythology, begins to sound curiously similar to the idea of a public sphere as a communicative ecology that comes into being through attention to circulating texts.² Others have made similar arguments. Adam Banks also locates the mixtape relative to cultures of the oppressed, African Americans in particular, and suggests that the curatorial/rhetorical aspects of music selection has a community function. Focusing on party and radio disc jockeys in particular, he argues that the African American DJ "tells the stories, carries the

history, interprets the news, mediates the disputes, and helps shape the community's collective identity" through rhetorical practices that Banks sees as multimedia forms of composition (Banks, 2011: 25). Thomas Bey William Bailey, similarly, has argued that self-released audio, largely associated with the mixtapes of "Cassette Culture," can offer creative resistance to the media conglomerates whose technologies of music dissemination entrench existing power structures and are not always in the interest of the people (2012).

What Ball, Banks, Bailey, and others share is a belief that mixtapes—and hence the curatorial rhetorics enacted in their creation—serve a social purpose that is more than just the expression of aesthetic taste or the sharing of aesthetic experience through music. In the case of music, acts of vernacular curation can circulate a kind of affective sensibility capable of acting as its own reward insofar as it inculcates a mood, a disposition to be affected. The political scaling of mixtapes is accordingly not to be denied, as mixtapes have played important roles worldwide in political identity formation and counterpublics, for instance, in the Teshuva cassette culture of Israel (Leon, 2011), in the ethical listening associated with Islamic "cassette sermons" of Egypt (Hirschkind, 2009), and in the technocultural critique tacitly associated with the underground Noise music of Japan (Novak, 2013: 169-183). Yet, the media technologies that make it possible for ordinary people to create mixes have, in their relatively short history, already undergone major transformations with consequences for how such acts of curation can attain a political or affective heft and intervene rhetorically in social life. These transformations, I want to suggest, indicate evolving cultural techniques that contribute to shaping the feeling of the present's historical momentousness.

Cassette Tapes

In the time of its flourishing (after the 8-track, before the CD, overlapping with both), the compact cassette tape made it possible as never before for ordinary people to record an assortment of their favorite music and share it with others. With just a blank tape and a cassette tape recorder, anyone so equipped could record audio of all varieties: ambient, live, or recorded. Reel-to-reel and 8-track recorders had made this possible for the amateur as early as the 1960s, but these technologies were

cumbersome, of spotty quality, and more cost-prohibitive than their successor. With the introduction of the compact cassette tape and its recorders into the household, the “mixtape” became a widely practiced vernacular art—and a seminal precursor to our curatorial, platform-rich age.

The material limitations of a cassette tape accommodate and invite only a certain kind of curatorial form, excluding others altogether. A 60-minute tape, for instance, can only record 30 minutes of audio on each side. For all the kids in their bedrooms with a dual cassette recorder, this required some planning. They needed to time the songs they recorded so neither precipitously to cut the last one off when the tape unspooled to the end, nor clumsily to leave too much time remaining without room for another song altogether. The desire to leave a few seconds of silence between songs only complicated the procedure. For the meticulous mixtaper, this required listening to each song at least twice all the way through: once to time its length, and then again while recording it in the desired order relative to the other songs and the planned interval between them on each side of the tape. With cassette tape technology, the magnetic tape only recorded the music as it played. Press the Stop button too soon, and that chopped the song’s end. Hit Stop too late, and the recording had already captured whatever unwanted sounds came next.

Making a mix on tape, in other words, entailed a real-time commitment and a measure of attentive presence to the music. The music was not a background or soundtrack to some more primary experience; the technology made recording the music the experience itself. Not only did doing so require being physically present near the tape deck while the music being recorded played out loud at a volume high enough to be heard. It also required being aware of, and situated in, the temporal present of the song as it played, insofar as getting “lost” in song would risk a failure to stop recording at just the right moment. In this sense, to record the music was of necessity to experience the music, or, minimally, to hear it over the course of each song’s duration, let alone the nontrivial time it took to rewind or fast-forward between songs. (*That* time was perhaps the most tedious to endure, because it often took the guesswork of hitting Stop then Play over and over again until eventually arriving at the rolling tape’s brief interstice between one song’s end and another’s beginning.) The entire process involved an embodied presence that, because the

technology wouldn't allow eliding the actual music, made the time required to make a mixtape an "experience" in its own right: music not as *supplement to* experience, but an experience all its own.

Cassette tapes and the technologies available to record on them also necessarily constrained the affordances one had in curating a mix. For instance, if one envisioned the first and last songs on a side being crucial to a mixtape's overall impact (the way songs from a movie's credits tend to have more salience than those played over scenes of less consequence in the middle), then the two sides to a cassette meant a mixtape had two openers and two closers: four opportunities for salience "built-in" to the media's very materiality. And because to make the mix at all required being present to the music in the process of its recording, the creation of the mix also entailed an experience of the music that the mix itself was designed to create for its eventual audience. In a way, that is, curating a mix on cassette entailed nostalgia not just after its creation, but at the very moment of its inscription: a kind of Nabokovian "future recollection" (2006: 160) as the slow gesture of the process made it easy to fill that time imagining how the mix will eventually have turned out.

Moreover, the cassette tape has what Gilbert Simondon, in an unsent but posthumously published letter to Derrida, describes as *techno-aesthetics*: a kind of "intercategorical fusion" between a material thing's technical and aesthetic aspects, which makes it "perfectly functional, successful, and beautiful" (2012: 2). That a workman's tools, for Simondon, are great exemplars of techno-aesthetics owes to the way their functionality and the beauty of their design converge in a tactile pleasure experienced at the level of aesthetic sensation for both the tool's creator and user. The painter feels her paints, as does the perceiver of her painting. So it is that Simondon celebrates "the bite of a saw with clean teeth" (2012: 3) the way Auden extols poems that "click like a closing box" (Wellesley, 1964: 22) or Nabokov, ever the synaesthete, performs a techno-aesthetics of his own by describing the "square echo" of a car door slamming (Nabokov, 1990: 59). The technicity of a thing cannot be separated from its sensorial and aesthetic affects, and techno-aesthetics are achieved when the intercategorical fusion of these elements is something we experience as the medium's entelechy. Alas, however fully realized its potential, not

even the tactile techno-aesthetics of the cassette could save it from being supplanted by newer means of home recording.

Compact Discs

The cassette tape's successor, the compact disc, offers different material affordances that grossly change the possibilities and means of musical curation—including how one experienced the temporal present in its process. The difference makes its way into our language. One used to *make* a mixtape; the act was creative. On CD, however, one *burns* a mix; the act is destructive. With the spread of “writable” blank CDs, the technology no longer required the meticulous care of planning ahead and timing the songs or their sequence so to maximize available space or affectability. In fact, it was possible to burn a CD without listening to a single note of music at all. No longer did one need to be ever at the ready to catch a song as it stopped. Most recording software did all that on its own: it indicated if the disc's available time had been exceeded (though, by collapsing music into bytes, time was really the disc's available *space*); it showed by how much that capacity had been exceeded; it automatically adjusted the intervals between songs to meet one's preference; and, because a song was mere data, neutral bytes occupying storage capacity, it knew each song's length without a user even needing to hear it. In other words, the process was still entangled with a way of manipulating and experiencing *time*, but time had now become something else.

As the laboriousness of recording from real-time audio became obsolete, not only did the experience of the music *while* recording it change, so did the ways the music would be experienced even after it had been curated onto a playable CD. Making mixes on a typical compact disc gave you 750 MB of space, which amounted to 80 consecutive minutes of playtime: only one side, and therefore only one opener and closer, with more prolonged attention required to carry the musical narrative from beginning to end. In short, the material-discursive constraints of the platform changed the rhetorical possibilities for the curatorial act, making curation's capacities to generate meaning fundamentally different from what they are on cassette. No experience of the music itself, of its unfolding in the temporal present, accompanies

making mixes on compact disc, no inherent nostalgia, not the same haptic pleasures or techno-aesthetic. All of that gets flattened on a shiny surface, “burned” away.

At the same time, however, the advent of the writable CD gave the vernacular curator a modicum of authority. Mixes on compact disc didn’t feel quite so homemade. Though the results of course differed from platform to platform in direct relation to the affordances of their hardware and software, including their compression technologies, audio quality generally didn’t suffer as much generation loss. The technology lent to more exactitude and precision. Time itself became compressed on CD: skipping between songs was an almost instantaneous act, not a Stop and Play process. Depending on the playback technology, at least, fast-forwarding and rewinding could also be instantaneous, making it possible to find, down to the second, the exact moment on a track that one wanted to hear. In this sense, if the mix was being made as a gift, and if the time invested in a gift’s creation is taken as measure of its meaningfulness, then CD mixes were inherently less meaningful. The cassette may have made amateurs into curators of a vernacular sort, but the compact disc began making vernacular curators less distinguishable from those presumed experts in the music industry who were doing more or less the same thing.

Streaming

The CD, though, has gone the way of the cassette: it’s been supplanted by new technologies whose cultural techniques change the nature of curation in significant ways. The same digitization of music that made CDs successful also made them obsolete. Why burn a mix onto a portable disc, fixing that one mix to that one disc, an object that still requires a CD player to use, when the likes of an iPod or phone could accommodate nearly as many playlists as one wants and play them for you too? Mixes now survive largely through digitized music files distributed through digital downloads to a mobile device or computer, or increasingly over streaming services, which store music remotely but make songs available on demand. These services enable new curatorial processes in part because their users can create playlists from a more enormous inventory of available music. Such playlists are the successor of

mixes, a difference most fundamentally marked by the playlist's potentially endless length.

This difference has an important pragmatic basis. It used to be, if I came to your place and looked through your music collection, I could tell from what music you owned whether and to what extent we shared compatible tastes. And if you made me a mix, whether on cassette or CD, it would already have been subjected to a curatorial process because its songs would come from only those already in your inventory (or, if you were particularly committed, perhaps those you had acquired for the purpose of making the mix). In other words, mixes themselves were a secondary curatorial act following from the primary curatorial act of building your particular music collection: a sort of expression of your taste's taste. This extra-distillation, the refinement of selecting from an already selective selection, gave mixes inherently more rhetorical salience. Including hard-to-find or previously unknown songs only contributed to the power of a mix based on limited personal inventory of music. As a social act, that is, mixes shared interpersonally (in a different way than those shared with strangers) came from a curatorial horizon that already existed at a personal level, and the sharing of that mix with someone else condensed an already existing personal expression of taste for social dissemination.

Music streaming services have changed this phenomenon by eliminating the primary curatorial act of building a music collection. The capital you might personally have demonstrated by owning a copy, say, of Dylan's "Great White Hope" bootleg, diminishes when his entire "Bootleg Series" is part of anyone's available "collection" online. Indeed, the very idea of a music collection disappears. This development matters because it illustrates a fundamental change in the nature of cultural curation in an age when varieties of aesthetic mediation have become digitized and so abundant. Specifically, this change has meant that the dissemination of art—in this example, music—takes for granted that art can actuate certain experiences, and indeed that these experiences, not the expression of personal taste, are central to how the personal jurisdiction of aesthetic experience intervenes in public life. And yet, while curatorial media reify aesthetic texts into their *potential* for aesthetic experience made social, they also circumscribe that experience as highly customized and

personal—seeking to change the very ways the temporal present can be intensified into quasi-historical eventfulness as it’s mediated through the song.

The best example of this intensification may be Beats Music, a bygone service utilized at the outset of the enormous media epistemic (and cultural and industry-changing) shift toward the streaming music paradigm. Though Beats Music was eventually acquired by Apple to the end of helping Apple build its own on-demand streaming music platform, one of the innovative features of the defunct Beats Music platform remains exemplary of the ways shifts in media technologies can also govern expectations about how we encounter that which these technologies mediate. Beats accomplished this specifically by its emphasis on *curation*. The company employed a “music curation team” of songwriters, radio disc jockeys, industry specialists, and music experts to arrange the service’s library and sharpen the algorithms that ensure listeners have “the right music for right now” (Beats Music, 2015). The highlight of their service was a playful feature called “The Sentence,” which involved completing a fill-in-the-blank sentence to help the service’s algorithms determine which music best suits your mood (Fig. 1). I’m _____ & feel like _____ with _____ to _____. So, perhaps: I’m *on a rooftop* & feel like *making out* with *this cute guy* to *Brazilian Samba*. And voilà: Astrud Gilberto.

Despite its veneer of gimmickry, “The Sentence” did something interesting in that the basis for its curatorial choices foregrounds *personal feeling as a relational experience*. Not only did “The Sentence” begin with a statement of identity (I am...), and follow it by an expression of feeling or desire (and feel like...); it asked that this personal feeling be shared “with” others “to” some style of music. Here, to do something “to” a certain kind of music is not to act upon the music, but to let that music affectively saturate what one does. The music does something *to* the listener. “The Sentence,” in this sense, attempts to capture one’s presumed desire to have an intensive affective experience: to be emplaced somewhere, doing something, with someone, and to have music mark the time of your presence to that event. The tacit promise is that the right music fulfills the experiences that one desires. But can it?

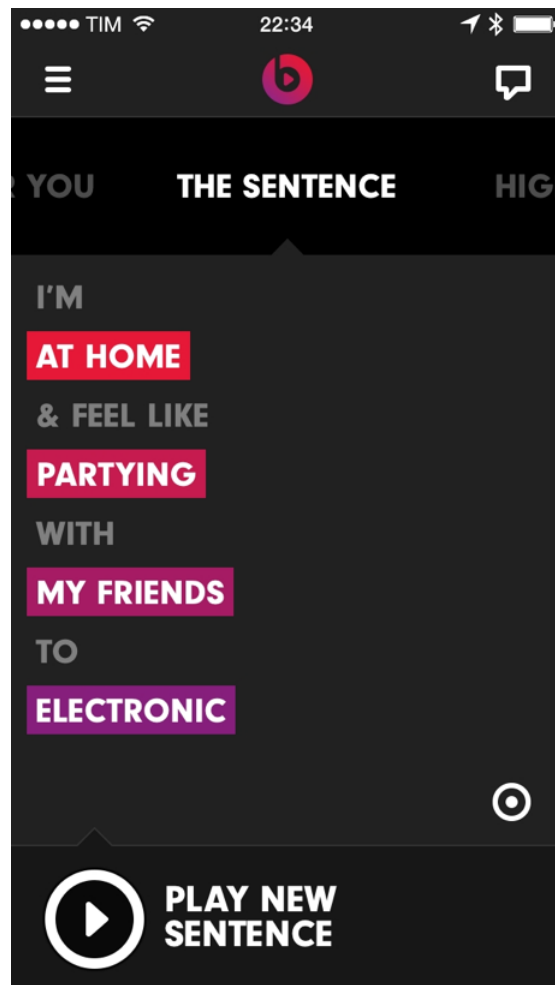


Figure 1: Screenshot of Beats Music's "The Sentence"

In a time when media platforms have become so integral to nearly all aspects of social and cultural life, one challenge of media theory has become the difficulty of identifying what's a platform and what's not, or, from a different angle, where one medium ends and another begins. Indeed, the "key phenomenological characteristic of media," as Patrick Eisenlohr has put it, "is their propensity to erase themselves in the act of mediation" (2009: 44). The great fantasy of the "The Sentence" was that the perceived *im-mediacy* of phenomenal experience could be enhanced with musical mediation so perfect for an occasion as to seem *already* an indistinguishable part of it. The mediation strove to be so aptly customized, in other words, that it would seem elemental to the experience itself, hence not mediated at all. Thinking about "The Sentence" accordingly suggests the benefit of understanding it less as a bounded medium than as a process of mediation—a process that strives to be phenomenologically constitutive of the unfolding present itself.³

The critical claim I'm making is that "The Sentence" circumscribes the experience it seeks to accentuate. The proffered song itself is that experience's condensed iteration: not a supplement *to* it but an expression *of* it. Being lost within or fully "present to" the experience one desires is a possibility already dead on arrival. The music arrives already saturated with the feeling we have not yet had a chance to experience as something other than a deliverable. The present becomes historical, becomes momentous, in advance. This music, we could say, is what the experience *will have been*. We are, all too literally, sentenced to it. The algorithm tacitly tells us that just by executing its procedure it has already fulfilled our desires, whether we feel that way or not. Like the most photographed barn in the world in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*, in which "nobody sees the barn" (1989: 12) because they can only see it as a thing being seen, "The Sentence" delivers an event we don't actually experience; we can only experience it as what Brian Massumi (2011) would call the "semblance" of that event, a sort of virtual reality.

To see the mediation of streaming music in the lineage of mixtapes is to acknowledge a radical change in techniques for curating recorded music, particularly when it comes to modulating time. Moving well beyond Kittler's observation of the point when storage media such as the gramophone began manipulating the ephemerality of time, "The Sentence" offers a mediation that accentuates the momentousness of a human subject's phenomenal being-in-time itself. It is important to know, however, that clever packaging aside, "The Sentence's" delivery of virtual experience is not a feature unique to the Beats Music service. It has since been adopted, in different forms, across music streaming platforms to such a degree as to be nearly constitutive of their proprietary distinctiveness. As a curatorial technology, music streaming is intrinsically disposed toward promising listeners the semblance of experience because its algorithmic infrastructure not only analyzes components of songs automatically to know as much about the music as possible; it also learns over time the context-specific dispositions and preferences of the listeners.

Spotify, for instance, is working to use the data trail of its members to learn other aspects of their digital profiles in real time, in order then to customize music that anticipates the experiences its algorithms indicate listeners will want specific songs to

have helped them have. So, if a Spotify member posts photos or comments on Facebook indicating she's going out dancing with friends tonight (or has just split with her girlfriend, or just got a new job), Spotify might with kairotic timeliness recommend music in line with that listener's other known musical preferences to deliver anticipatory experiences befitting the mood Spotify suspects its members are likely to want at that moment: maybe club music for the dance party, maudlin weepers for returning home alone to face the break-up. More longitudinally, by tracking the listening habits and social media activity of its members over time, Spotify can deduce what kinds of activities its members are doing at certain times of day (exercising, studying, commuting, meditating, etc.) and deliver music that suits these experiences as well. As Daniel Ek, the company's CEO has said, "We're not in the music space—we're in the moment space" (Seabrook, 2014).

On the one hand, shifting attention overtly from music to moments merely illustrates the extent to which capital rules digital processes of mediation. As Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylinska have observed of digital media in general, "the supposed social and emotional enhancement of the self through technology . . . encloses and reorders the self as a marketable (data) object" (2012: 120). On the other hand, Kittler's observation about technological media's ability to manipulate the time axis continuum here becomes inverted: streaming platforms aren't just capturing real-time sound and subjecting it to manipulation; that very manipulation is what in turn feeds back through a recommended song or playlist to make the actually lived, affective experience of an unfolding present itself something customizable and subject to manipulation. To be "in the moment space" while really being in the big business of a musical streaming platform, of course, is to suggest that the diverse, ordinary moments of lived experience are best made sensible musically. In other words, the capacities of streaming platforms are such that time—but more specifically than that, *any given present moment*, or what Wendy Chun calls "the enduring ephemeral" (2008)—is always something subject to affective manipulation through music that, by anticipating a moment's predictable characteristics and accompanying them with an appropriate song, exerts social control by raising the phenomenal experience of that moment into an intensified event.

The Event of Feeling Pre-Historical

What happens in the affective appropriation of a “moment space” attuned as eventful through song? Theories of “the event” in continental philosophy and social theory end up being integrally connected with what Lauren Berlant (2008) calls “feeling historical.” Though that connection is seldom made explicit, I’d like to end this inquiry by trying to make it more so. An event, for Isabelle Stengers, “establishes a difference between before and after” (2000: 66). This means that if there is an event there is “therefore a ‘pre-’ and ‘post-’” event (Stengers, 2010: 115). One way to think about history (and not just historiography) is as the coming to pass of before and afters, identifiable markers of change that, whether perceptible in the duration of their manifesting or not, at least retrospectively index a difference. Sometimes that difference is orchestrated, sometimes arbitrary. Deleuze’s thinking about events is particularly helpful in this regard because in his thought events have a singular quality that enriches or intensifies encounters even as it emerges from them.

In Deleuze’s theory of the event, an ideal event “is a singularity—or rather a set of singularities” that have some affective consequence, but not one reducible to an elicited emotion or reaction that conveys meaning according to agreed-upon social codes (Deleuze, 1990: 52). “The singularity,” Deleuze writes, “belongs to another dimension than that of denotation, manifestation, or signification. It is essentially pre-individual, non-personal, and a-conceptual” (Deleuze, 1990: 52). While these features make singularity “*neutral*,” the crucial idea is that a singularity “is not ‘ordinary’: the singular point is opposed to the ordinary” (Deleuze, 1990: 52). As always with Deleuze, the work of understanding what he’s up to can be a slog through artful yet arcane assertions, but I think what he’s describing is some “singular” quality of events that distinguishes them from the banality of everyday experience. Their singular quality, however, does not derive from some identifiable who-what-when-where state of affairs and its signifying properties. Rather, he emphasizes, “the splendor and magnificence of the event is sense” (Deleuze, 1990: 149). In this way, events have a “double-structure”: on one hand, there’s “the moment in which the event is embodied in a state of affairs, an individual, or a person,” and on the other, there’s “the future and the past of the event considered in itself, sidestepping each present, being free of the limitations of a state of affairs, impersonal and pre-individual, neutral” (Deleuze, 1990: 151). Deleuze’s theory of the

event suggests that what matters about events is not their signifying *meaning*, but their asignifying *sense*.

The critical point is not whether a timely recommended song from “The Sentence” (or similar algorithmic procedures attentive to real-time listening situations) hits its mark enough to become “an event,” but rather to notice that algorithmic recommendations of music ideally seek to upgrade *all* experience into eventfulness. They strive to make the feeling of some great historical occasion, if only great *personal* historical occasion, deliverable in advance of its arrival. Their functional telos, in other words, is to proffer fully bespoke phenomenal experience: exactly what you want when you want it without having realized as much beforehand. In this way, the “event” of a timely recommended song operates at the level of sense perception more urgently than the level of representational meaning. That is to say, the music recommended serves to orient one to an experience of the “now” within a sensory framework that disposes a listener to ascribe it with meaning, to “enter” a moment “looking” for the affective intensities already presupposed to be condensed “within” it.

In perhaps his most revealing passage on the subject of events, Deleuze writes, “the event is not what occurs (an accident), it is rather inside what occurs, the purely expressed. It signals and awaits us” (Deleuze, 1990: 149). Though he doesn’t say so, I read Deleuze here to be using “accident” in the Aristotelean way whereby accidents are properties of a thing that aren’t essential to its nature. A table could be made of wood or plastic or metal, for instance, but those are just its “accidental” properties, not its essential substance. Events are more substantive than accidental; they are of the essence. Accidents traffic in subjectivation, deliverability, signification. They can be personal, synchronic, meaningful. Events traffic in response-ability, intensification, affectability. They are the essential if provisional condensation of relationality, process, sensation. The trouble is, to instrumentalize the present, effectively to manufacture would-be events algorithmically as if as a judge delivering a sentence—the gavel booms: *here is your event!*—inevitably forecloses the messy dynamism of its becoming singular. In such cases, though at risk of sounding clever, the present is no longer a *present*, a gift whose surprise becomes the unknowability of what it will have been; the present is rather then a sentence, a dictated conscription

and constriction of the possible. I have tried to suggest that this is a problem, but let me conclude with some final thoughts as to why.

Certainly, a custom delivered “soundtrack to your life” has its allures. Who hasn’t been moved on occasion by the uncanny perfection of a song so timely and appropriate that it serves to accompany and accentuate a phenomenal passage through an experience as it becomes one? Maybe it’s the upbeat playlist that keeps you going through exercise, or the sudden spark in unexpectedly hearing a long-loved song you’d not heard in some time, as if at *just* the right moment. Music carries feeling, and the incessance of feeling accompanies all experience, which is to say, the constancy of thinking-feeling is a perpetual condition of our being-in-the-world, from which it follows that sometimes the feeling of music will match the constellation of thinking-feeling that orbits a given moment, and when that happens it brings forth an affective synchronicity that’s special and singular. But the intentional and algorithmic delivery of that synchronicity, according to a predetermined calculus of value and salience, is a method of capture and closure, not of freedom and opening. To circumscribe the present by its supposedly appropriate aesthetic ornaments is to make great occasion of even non-events. Events are not eventful if they happen over and over again. Even Freud acknowledged, “We are so made that we can derive intense enjoyment only from a contrast and very little from a state of things” (1962: 23). If the moment space being appropriated by recommendation algorithms and mixtapes on streaming platforms teaches us anything, maybe it’s that sometimes it’s important for the ordinary to go on being ordinary, to sit with it—and to listen.

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Notes

¹ Kittler's interest in discourse analysis is heavily influenced by Foucault's efforts to trace "discourse" from a place outside discourse, through the various apparatuses of power that condition actual communication. Foucault's project, in his own words, was "to determine the principle according to which only the 'signifying' groups that were enunciated could appear . . . based on the principle that *everything* is never said" (1982: 118).

² For more on my sense of public spheres, see Hauser, 1999; Warner, 2002; and Rice, 2012. Those interested in the appropriative nature of "not needing to ask for permission" might see Jared Sterling Colton's (2016) work on the ethics of care in music sampling.

³ See Kember and Zylińska (2012) for more on the benefits of a shift from media to mediation: that is, of attending to processes of mediation, as distinct from media, and how doing so can help provide insight into the vitality of the latter.

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