"IS IT ART?": A SOCIAL GENEALOGY OF CINEMA, PHOTOGRAPHY, AND SOUND REPRODUCTION

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The cultural status today of art forms that utilize sound reproduction technologies is very different from those associated with visual media. Of the various devices for capturing sounds and images that appeared during the 19th century, cameras have been incorporated into familiar artistic cultures such as cinema and art photography. On the other hand, none of the many artistic practices that make use of sound reproduction devices—sound design, music production, field recording, and electroacoustic music to name only a few—have acquired a similarly dominant or representative stature. Perhaps speaking to this problem, Douglas Kahn once lamented: "Art photography is commonplace, but an art phonography? When compared to the photographic arts, the phonographic arts are retarded" (Kahn:301). While Kahn's dismissal of the many sound based arts that have appeared since the invention of the phonograph is questionable, certainly there is no unique, easily identifiable artistic culture of sound-based art equivalent to art photography or cinema; no "poster child" for the phonographic arts.

In light of this it is perhaps no surprise that historians, sound professionals, and sound artists often incorporate words like "cinema" and "photography" to describe sound-based artistic practices that lack their own distinctive monikers. Phrases like "sound photography" and "aural cinema" have been used to describe a range of phonographic arts from electroacoustic tape composition to classical music production.

These expressions are intuitive and useful because from a historical perspective sound reproduction has much in common with photography and cinema. Devices for capturing still or moving images and sound were invented within a few decades of each other, and the kinetograph (one of the first systems for producing moving images) and the phonograph even share an inventor, Thomas Edison. Innovators in each medium also faced similar types of skepticism from within the ranks of related, pre-existing artistic cultures: photographers struggled with painters and illustrators, filmmakers fought with scenarists and playwrights, and sound professionals entered into complex and delicate negotiations with musicians.

As the most pervasive phonographic art of the past century, the phenomenon of the music recording industry deserves special consideration since aesthetic or theoretical issues of sound reproduction specific to this industry, through sheer cultural loudness, have dominated all other discussions of sound reproduction. Indeed, the massive commercial sector devoted to producing and distributing musical recordings is usually referred to simply as "the recording industry."

Given the amount of financial and human resources dedicated to this industry over the past hundred years or more, it is surprising that there is no comprehensive aesthetic theory of studio-based popular or classical music production. Colin Symes summarizes this situation as follows:

... there is no coherent theory of recording, not even a universal term to describe the science of recording. Various neologisms proposed to typify this new science, such as "phonography" (Eisenberg 1988), "phonographology" and "gramophony," which appeared during the 1920s when an embryonic epistemology of recording emerged, have never caught on. Any theories that exist, unlike those of film—recording's nearest analogue among the performing arts—are dispersed throughout the history of recording. There is no equivalent of auteur theory, for example, and what pockets of coherent thinking there are relate only to recording's effects, detrimental or beneficial, on the appreciation of music. Unlike film, which liberated itself from the proscenium arch of the theatre and utilized the camera to produce new forms of narrative representation, the recording of classical music has, by and large, remained deferent to the concert... (Symes 2004).

Historians of recorded music and media theorists, as well as musicians and audiophiles, have danced around the question of whether the recording of music is more of an artistic or a technical process, but in many cases, perhaps because of the very lack of theoretical groundwork that Symes describes, many have tended towards the latter. Generally speaking, skeptics have proposed three explanations for what they see as an absence of artistry in various practices of sound reproduction: First, that in comparison with the camera, the mechanical workings of early phonographs were inherently better suited to realistic rather than artistic modes of representation (Kittler:118); second, that a "hegemony of vision" in the Western intellectual tradition provided a philosophical framework more appropriate to tackling aesthetic issues arising in the case of photography or cinema (Kahn *op. cit.*); third, that the function and perceptual process of hearing, as opposed to vision, is fundamentally different in ways that have proscribed the development of a unique phonographic art (Kittler *ibid*).

In this paper, however, I prefer to work from the assumption that the state of arrested development in the phonographic arts described by Douglas Kahn and others is an issue of cultural perception rather than an actual lack of phonographic artistry per se. There are many artistic practices involving sound reproduction technologies, among them the recording of music, and the problem of cultural recognizability often stems from the lack of corollary theories; the fact that people use the terms "sound photography" and "aural cinema" so frequently seems to support this.

I believe that if the issue is cultural, then so might be the explanation. In order to address why the status of sound-based arts is so different from cinema or art photography, then, I leave aside any consideration of the mechanical means of various media or the philosophical or perceptual qualities of audition versus vision. I turn instead to the social and professional interests of the inventors and practitioners involved in the formative years of cinema, photography, and sound reproduction—their "social genealogy"—and investigate how this may have influenced the ultimate recognition of various practices as "art," or not.

Specifically, I focus on periods of intense debate that occurred in the decades immediately following the appearance of the daguerreotype, the kinetograph, and the phonograph, in which photographers, filmmakers, painters, playwrights,

musicians, sound professionals, and various critics and theorists argued over whether or not these media offered the possibility of unique artistic forms. I refer to these periods of debate as "is it art?" moments.

THE "IS IT ART?" MOMENTS IN CINEMA AND ART PHOTOGRAPHY

At key moments critics and practitioners engaged in early photography and moving pictures debated the question of whether each medium could sustain modes of production that might be categorized or understood in a very traditional sense as "art". In the case of cinema and art photography, critics and practitioners worked together with surprising cohesion and clarity of purpose. There was a clear question at stake—"can photography / cinema be art"—followed by a heated and often polemical debate, and finally a consensus, which in the case of art photography and cinema, after several decades of arguing, was: "Yes." Practices and theories that incorporated a series of inventions beginning with Edison's kinetograph or the cinematographer of the Lumière brothers cohered over several decades into an artistic culture commonly recognized as "Cinema," while the group of devices pioneered by Nicéphore Niépce, Louis Daguerre and several others were, over a slightly longer time frame, absorbed into the practice of "Art Photography."

An important feature of each of these debates was the interaction with a prior artistic culture. Skeptics and partisans both compared photography to painting, and moving pictures to theatre. The first filmmakers and photographers themselves may have been partly responsible for initiating and sustaining these comparisons, and certainly acknowledged and responded to them with specific creative strategies or techniques in their photographs and movies.

Public discussions about the relative merits of photography and painting began more or less as soon as the first photographs were taken, and intensified during the 1850s when public figures like the French poet Charles Baudelaire attacked photographer's aspirations to be artists (Van Gelder and Westgeest:14-16), around the same time that the first art photographers were producing their earliest works (Sandler:58).

In response, photographers of this era freely appropriated subjects, themes, and techniques from existing schools of painting. Early innovators like Oscar Rejlander and Henry Peach Robinson created a painterly visual aesthetic, mimicking chiaroscuro and the textures of various materials used by painters (Sandler:57). They also adopted painting's distinction between landscape and portrait frame dimensions, and by the turn of the century, photographs were framed and hung on walls like paintings (Giblett:15; Sandler:59-60). During the *pictorialism* movement of the 1880s-1920s photographers used selective focus and soft mid-tones to highlight the expressive capabilities of the photographer (Marien:171-172), and to "...promote expressive feeling in their pictures by application of the principles, styles, and subject matter of the high art tradition" (Peres:103). Although it is difficult to define a moment when photography was accepted as one of the fine arts, by the end of the 19th century exhibitions of art photography were commonplace in European galleries (Sandler:64).

Cinema's "is it art" debate took place during the first couple of decades of the 20th century. Early histories of cinema describe a process of clear and seemingly inevitable progress towards artistic status (Bordwell:12-45). Early filmmakers

encountered comparisons with theatre just as photographers had with painting, but the relationship of moving pictures to theatre was slightly different. The first narrative films were viewed as photographed theatre (Bordwell:26; Carroll:10; Abel 1988:19), so unlike photographers, who had attempted to demonstrate that photography was "as good as" painting, early filmmakers had to show that cinema was different from theatre (Abel 1988:20). Rollin Summers argued that the absence of spoken dialogue in silent film had forced cinema to develop a new language of visual representation (Bordwell:29-30), while other critics and directors emphasized technical possibilities they considered uniquely filmic, such as editing and cinematography (Carroll:42).

The closest thing to a phonographic "is it art" moment was a debate over the artistic possibilities of sound reproduction that took place between various parties involved or interested in the recording and reproduction of classical music during the years between the two World Wars. Several factors aligned sound reproduction with music during this time. The Bell Laboratories engaged in large research projects with the aim of developing electrical reproduction of music (McGinn), and the invention of first-generation electronic instruments like the Theremin, Ondes Martenot, and the Trautonium contributed to a thirst for experimentation, as composers and artists sought novel uses for the phonograph and incorporated mechanical themes in their creative output (Randel:289; Symes:50-52). These factors helped to establish a relationship between the cultures of sound reproduction and music not unlike that of photography to painting and cinema to theatre.

During this period, a group of sound professionals, musicians, and phonograph enthusiasts considered whether or not phonograph recordings could have artistic qualities. The most articulate exchanges were conducted through the pages of *Gramophone* magazine, which was created in 1923 by British author Compton Mackenzie to provide a forum for an emergent audiophile culture. One group of columnists and correspondents, describing themselves as phonograph "romantics," maintained that absolute accuracy in recording could be sacrificed for aesthetic appeal, possibly leading the way to a wholly "autonomic 'gramophone' art" (Cramwinckel). Another group of opposing "realists" argued forcefully that the phonograph should capture musical performances as accurately as possible, and that to do otherwise would be, in the words of *Gramophone* editor Compton Mackenzie, "worshiping a falsification of music" (Mackenzie:4).

The matter was never really settled conclusively, and echoes of this debate have periodically reappeared and polarized recording discourse since the 1920s. Colin Symes describes this polarization as "idealism versus realism," citing various recording controversies throughout the past century such as Glenn Gould's experimental editing practices in the early 1960s or John Culshaw's controversial productions of the operas of Wagner and Richard Strauss (Symes:84-87).

This lack of closure in the debate over sound reproduction's artistic status is odd, considering many striking similarities between discourses of media-as-art between photography, cinema, and sound reproduction. For example, photography and phonography both struggled with issues of representation and skill. Skeptics argued that the camera and phonograph were autographic, in other words that they automatically produced a trace of perceptual "reality" without the need of any intervention on the part of the photographer or sound recordist. It followed then

that there could be no skill involved in photography or sound recording because the camera/phonograph recorded the images/sounds itself; media were at first thought of as neutral, objective modes of seeing and hearing, rather than tools with representational possibilities in the artistic sense (Marien:23). Early defenders of photography responded by showing that taking good pictures required professional training, just as illustration did (Goldberg:218). French directors faced a similar standoff with scenarists in the early 1900s, and had to fight for recognition (Abel 1988:19).

In contrast, the idea of skill in sound reproduction merits only occasional mentions in scientific articles, for example, the difficulty of microphone positioning and live mixing of broadcast music (Hanson:86). More often, subjective, aesthetic, or pragmatic interventions in the recording process were hidden under a guise of scientific detachment. Indeed, the ones who seemed most interested in arguing in favor of a "gramophonic art" were neither sound professionals, musicians, nor anyone else involved in producing actual recordings, but the non-professional editors and readership of *Gramophone*.

The reluctance of sound professionals to engage in aesthetic debates at this time is significant for the discursive fate of sound-based art generally because the recording and reproduction of music became the predominant use of sound technologies. The professional relationships of those involved in that industry—classical musicians and sound engineers—dominated theoretical discussions of sound recording and thus had a profound impact on the development or recognition of any kind of phonographic art. How did classical musicians and sound professionals relate to one another during the 1920s and 1930s, how did their relations frame issues of artistry in phonographic thinking and practice in the decades that followed, and what distinguishes this from the professional structures of cinema and art photography?

A SOCIAL GENEALOGY OF EARLY FILMMAKERS, PHOTOGRAPHERS, AND SOUND PROFESSIONALS

On closer examination of the early pioneers of electrical recording in the 1920s and 1930s, and comparison with those involved in the "is it art" debates in photography and cinema, several key differences emerge: The involvement of the inventor in forming early theoretical and practical conventions; Diversity in the professional and social backgrounds of early innovators and theorists; The degree of specialization that emerged in professional structures and job designations; and perhaps most importantly, the degree to which theory and criticism existed as a separate professional occupation.

Edison dominated the scientific, commercial, and artistic spheres of his phonograph business, maintaining strict control over everything from exhibition and marketing to artist and repertoire selections, musical arrangements, performance style, and the choice of instruments for bands and orchestras (Harvith and Harvith:3-6). Photography, on the other hand, had as many as twenty-four different inventors (Marien:15); and when it came to moving pictures, Edison was artistically uninvolved, allowing employees like Edwin S. Porter and George S. Fleming freedom to innovate in terms of script, scenario, scenery, lighting, and camerawork (Collins and Gitelman:22). In France, the other inventors of moving pictures, Auguste and

Louis Lumière, soon lost interest in the cinema business and instead devoted their attention to color photography (Abel 2005:571).

The first filmmakers had unusual and decidedly unscientific roots. Cinema pioneers Georges Méliès and George Albert Smith, who became known for their innovations in trick photography, shared an interest in magic. Méliès' experiments in theatre before his involvement with cinema led him to purchase a theatre troupe specializing in magic tricks in 1888 (Lanzoni:32), and Smith had enjoyed a successful career as a mesmerist (Shail:196). Méliès subsequently developed a filmic style based on a repertoire of techniques of trick photography that deliberately played on the viewer's expectations of reality (Ezra:24-49).

Specific job descriptions in film production started to clarify around the same time as the "is it art" debate gathered momentum, with the roles of director, cinematographer, and editor all clearly distinguished by the time of D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* in 1908; furthermore this professional specialization seems to have been crucial to the commercial and artistic success of the early Hollywood years (Monaco:6-17).

At the same time, a professional class of specialist critics devoted to discussing theoretical and aesthetic issues in photography and cinema emerged. These theorists, like the early filmmakers, also had diverse professional and social backgrounds. They included Sadakichi Hartmann, a writer, poet and critic; photographer and promoter Alfred Stieglitz; the playwright George Bernhard Shaw; photographer, novelist, and journalist Nadar (real name Gaspard-Félix Tournachon); and art critic Charles H. Caffin. In addition to devoted theorists like Ricciotto Canudo, Rudolf Arnheim, and Rollin S. Sturgeon, cinema also found advocates in psychologist Hugo Münsterberg, poet Vachel Lindsay, and literary critic and film educator Victor Freeburg. These critics were able to draw on their own areas of professional or academic training, as in the case of Münsterberg and Rudolf Arnheim, who both grounded their studies in their knowledge of psychology (Abel 2005:65; Arnheim:2). The existence of specialized, full time critics enabled a kind of intellectual division of labor in both disciplines, and allowed critics to mount substantial defenses of cinema and art photography.

The situation in the field of sound reproduction was rather different. During the 1920s, along with the adoption of electrical recording methods, a new professional expert exclusively devoted to the craft of electrical recording emerged: the "sound engineer." The first sound engineers came from research institutions sponsored by corporations like Bell, the American Telephone and Telegraph Company, and General Electric. While it is unclear who first coined the term "sound engineer," it probably arose as a combination of the research interests of the two groups who were responsible for the bulk of phonographic research in the 1920s and 1930s: acousticians and electrical engineers.

The professional designation "sound engineer" proved to be problematic as it made no distinction between the specialized skill sets required for music recording, mixing, acoustics, and sound for film. This led to some awkward misunderstandings, as in 1928 when film director Roland West of United Artists summoned acoustical scientist and recording engineer Joseph P. Maxfield of the Bell Laboratories to Hollywood to advise on the difficult transition to sound film. West had been impressed by Maxfield's knowledge and skill in orchestral recording, and figured

that the methods with which Maxfield achieved his outstanding results in orchestral recording would apply equally well to the radically different demands of dialogue recording, an assumption that was proved emphatically wrong on the first day of testing, resulting in Maxfield's swift return home (Bernds:68-75).

Along with sound engineers, classical musicians were the only other professional group directly involved in developing techniques and theories of sound reproduction, and thus had a significant impact on recording discourse in the post-Edison era. Historian David Morton notes that by the time electrical methods were being adopted into the recording process in the 1920s the social status of classical musicians had improved markedly from that of the previous century (Morton:24-26). This improved cultural status, along with other factors like the loyal buying habits of classical music listeners in the face of a radio-inflicted slump in the recording industry during the 1920s, gave classical music an unusually powerful and economically disproportionate influence on the development of the phonograph (Morton:33-47).

The first encounters between the newly empowered musicians and the new generation of sound engineers did not go altogether smoothly. Musicians expressed a range of fears and doubts about the phonograph, arguing that records would undermine concert culture and lead to a decline in musical standards (Symes:60). Musicians were suspicious of sound engineers as well as studios and the phonograph (Harvith and Harvith:xii), and those with enough status could even fire engineers for what they viewed as excessive interference, for example unwanted tampering with volume levels (Day:34). As Colin Symes puts it, during these early years "recording faced enmity from musicians" (Symes:86).

Sound professionals responded by simply deferring to musicians in all creative matters in the early years of the music industry. The more artistically powerful role of music producer, analogous in many ways to that of the film director (Ashby:4660), did not exist as such in the 1920s. Record producers did not achieve professional recognition until it was forcefully claimed by Walter Legge (Day:40), decades after the foundations of sound theory had already been cemented.

The primary concern of the first sound engineers was rather to bring scientific rigor and standardization to the previously empirical, rule-of-thumb practice of mechanical sound recording. Historian Russell Burns summarized their ambitions as follows: "The time was ripe for the art to be replaced by science" (Burns:92). The reluctance of sound engineers, being scientists, to engage in aesthetic or artistic matters (Morton:26) goes a long way to explaining why, in terms of discourse at least, the phonographic arts are "retarded," to borrow Douglas Kahn's colorful expression.

CONCLUSION

David Bordwell identified a "standard version" of film history that told the story of technical innovations in France and the first masterworks in the United States in the years before the first world war, which then led to a flowering of national schools and styles of films in the 1920s (Bordwell:12-45). By around 1930 there was a "remarkable consensus" about the trajectory of cinema up to that point and its triumphant fulfillment of its potential as a uniquely modern art form (ibid:21). "Emergence of art" narratives like this are appealing because the histories of art

they borrow from are also histories of civilizations (Janson and Janson 2003); the "is it art" debates thus allowed cinema and art photography to be seen as "developing" along with familiar and reassuring patterns of (usually high-culture) production, criticism, spectatorship, and exhibition.

As Bordwell notes, the "standard version" of film history frequently oversimplifies, exaggerates, or ignores certain aspects of early cinema. The same may be true of the debate over art photography: Mary Warner Marien has shown that the "photography versus painting" debate has been exaggerated, and in reality "...few painters saw photography as a threat" (Marien:28). But while problematic in many respects, artistic progress narratives like the "standard version" or "photography versus painting" nevertheless forced a kind of aesthetic consolidation on the fields of cinema and art photography; in hindsight they seem more like clever discursive strategies or debating tactics than histories. Would early filmmakers or art photographers have attained the cultural recognition that they enjoyed so quickly without such discursive tricks?

Theories of photography, sound reproduction, and cinema all began with the assumption that each medium could do no more than accurately reproduce perceptual reality; in the case of cinema and art photography, sustained and powerful comparative arguments like "photography versus painting" or "movies versus theatre" overcame these initial assumptions. It seems possible therefore that the professional aspirations of early photographers, critics, and filmmakers had as much to do with establishing cinema and photography as art forms as anything else. The desire of photographers and filmmakers to be artists, and the philosophical heavy lifting done by theorists in support of their efforts, stand in contradistinction to the artistic shyness of sound engineers and the lack of a group of specialized phonograph theorists and critics to debate many of the same issues that dogged the ambitions of early filmmakers and photographers.

Perhaps the most compelling reason for a more thorough investigation of the "social genealogy" of the first sound professionals and sound theorists is the disproportionate emphasis on technology in both academic studies and vernacular discourses of sound reproduction. Because sound reproduction's "is it art" moment coincided with the transition to electrical technologies, audiophiles conflated the aesthetic concepts of phonographic "romanticism" and "realism" with different but contemporaneous arguments about the merits of mechanical versus electrical phonograph apparatus. By the 1930s, "romanticism versus realism," had become synonymous with "acoustical versus electrical," a protracted polemical exchange that Greg Milner described as the "original recording dialectic" (Milner:250).

Henceforth subjective qualities like realism and romanticism became synonymous with technological processes, pushing technology to the center of phonograph aesthetics, where it has remained ever since. The idea that phonographic technologies have inherently "romantic" or "realistic" traits, or other built-in subjective qualities, has informed discussions between engineers, musicians, and audiophiles over the relative merits of analog versus digital technologies and other similar debates. This is problematic because technical debates have become proxies for expressing cultural preferences; for example audiophiles and phonograph historians have often criticized jazz and popular music for their use of unrealistic recording techniques or effects, rather than simply acknowledging

their own personal tastes (Read and Welch:253). For this reason alone, phonograph historians and media theorists might consider re-examining their explanations for the current cultural status of the phonographic arts.

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