

# Perfect Listening: Audiophilia, Ambiguity, and the Reduction of the Arbitrary

Eric Rawson

In the increasingly demanding sonic environment of contemporary urban life, consumers—now we are all consumers, of even our own experiences—have developed various strategies for maintaining at least an illusion of control over what they hear and how they hear it. What I am interested in is the particular activity of audiophilia, the ardent pursuit of high-fidelity sound reproduction, and its place within the larger field of the reception of music in contemporary American culture,<sup>1</sup> as a means of understanding something about the nature of commodity aesthetics and the way in which certain consumers re-empower themselves by full immersion in the conditions of their profoundly mediated acoustic worlds.

Audiophilia depends upon reducing sonic arbitrariness to the point where communication can take place in what Niklas Luhmann in his writings on art and social systems calls the medium of meaning [*Sinn*] (*Art* 2–52). All sound reproduction operates by reducing arbitrariness in the acoustic field, in which *noise* is exactly the arbitrary, and hence meaningless, state of vastly possible sound. A meaningful musical event is constituted by reproducing a relatively narrow range of sounds in predetermined ways. The audiophile, however, typically invests his faith in the idea that once noise has been excluded from the

listening experience, his high-fidelity playback equipment can, by transmitting an information-rich signal, most nearly ideally reproduce/recapture/recreate an originary event, providing the fullest sense of being, thus the greatest pleasure.

The audiophile, although he<sup>2</sup> claims to pursue the “absolute sound,” the perfect reproduction of an originary event using expensive and labor-intensive electronic equipment,<sup>3</sup> is, I argue, actually trying to over-reduce both a real and imagined initial chaos to a knowable state in which he can exercise domination and thereby reduce his existential anxiety. Audiophilia resembles many of our other relationships with modern technology—automobiles, computers, cell phones, or televisions are not merely tools for more easily accomplishing traditional human tasks but generators of uniquely modern experience—but it might be more instructive to think about how audiophilous experience illuminates the relationship between observers and art, pointing to the observer’s role in the creation of aesthetic quasi-objects.<sup>4</sup>

Luhmann sees art as the mediation between perception (the operation of the individual psychic system) and communication (the operation of the social system) (*Art* 2–52). When we discuss audiophilia, we are concerned with a system

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*The Journal of American Culture*, 29:2

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within the larger system of art. How audiophilia functions as a (sub)system and ideological quasi-object within the social system of art must address the relationship among the recording artists, the engineers, the producers, the composers, the marketers, the critics, the recording and playback technology, the conditions of composition, the site at which the recording was produced, the site(s) at which it is reproduced, and the audiophile listener's unique physical and psychic condition. This autological network of operations becomes what Luhmann, borrowing from biological research by Maturana and Varela, terms an autopoietic system, i.e., a system that is self-generating, self-perpetuating, and operatively closed but structurally coupled with the environment.<sup>5</sup> Autopoietic systems are marked by recursiveness and reflexivity. By this standard, audiophilia—indeed, all ideology—is autopoietic. One reason it is useful to look at connoisseur pursuits such as audiophilia as a system rather than simply a social phenomenon or a psychological disorder<sup>6</sup> is that doing so leads us to consider the reproduction of sound as a quasi-object of the audiophile's reactionary ideology of strong knowing through ultra-mimesis, which is called into question by the very activity of his specialized listening. By considering this paradox, we can begin to understand how the form of this experience determines and is determined by its place in American consumer culture.

The audiophile assumes that his listening experience is the highest form of the principles and practices of both recording and listening to music. His particular modality might be termed *attentive listening*, *purposeful listening*, or *observational listening*, but I prefer the term *invested listening*, both for its economic connotations and for the value it places on personal time and effort.<sup>7</sup> Invested listening demands the purposeful placing of attention. As we shall see, this activity does not require an a priori object on which to focus the attention. The very investment of attention is part of a much vaster process by which the object, or more properly, the quasi-object that is the musical event, is constituted.

Several means of reducing arbitrariness to the point of object-constitution exist in paratechnological relation to the high-end audio gear itself. One means is the language in which the listening experience is cast. Like the community of oenophiles, audiophile culture features a jargon that purports to precisely describe the subjective elements of the connoisseur's experience. Just as the wine expert might characterize a favorite Zinfandel as "young and tight, tantalizing, ready to blossom as it ages," the hi-fi buff uses almost poetic, even sexualized, terminology to convey what are essentially technical matters, describing, for example, a pair of loudspeakers as "tight, clean, and quick" (Harley 200) or an amplifier as having "thrust, rhythm [and] power" (*Hi-Fi News* 21). More pejoratively, the oenophile who describes a disagreeable vintage as "thin, acidic, tasting of bark" finds a counterpart in the audiophile who criticizes a piece of gear for producing "tizzy, bleached, and sterile" sound. In any case, this language, intended to accurately portray a well defined if not necessarily objective experience, offers the user a sense that he knows the object.

Yet translating audile experience that has already been encoded in the recording process back into natural language provokes a schizophrenic rhetoric that attempts, through the use of figurative language on the one hand, and highly technical language on the other, to capture the subjective experience of invested listening by a single observer. Typical advertisements in high-end magazines feature headlines proclaiming the sonic/erotic virtues of the products: "Absorbed. With every beautiful note I'm where I want to be." "Simply stunning." "Purity for the purist." "For real music lovers." "Scientists say it takes 15 seconds to fall in love . . . they were exaggerating." (*Hi-Fi News* advert.).<sup>8</sup> Having thus instructed the reader in the affective value of the technology, the ad designer fills center-page with pictures of high-end components caressed by soft light. The metal casings are brushed to soften them and the wood burnished like fine furniture, so that attention is directed to the device's erotic aura. The bottom third of the page is often dedicated to pseudo-scientific product specifications, for example:

All our new 7,000 Series Super Towers feature:

- SuperCube Technology High-Power Subs.
  - Revolutionary Patented Bipolar Technology.
  - High-Def Crossovers with Zobel Networks.
  - Dual Pressure-Driven Infrasonic Radiators.
  - 300-W Digital High-Current Sub Amps.
  - Powerful High-Pressure Subwoofer Drivers with Finite-Element.
  - Optimized Magnet Structures.
  - DTARF-Optimized Driver Voicing
- (*The Absolute Sound* advert. 47).

Although this language seems to convey technical information, in fact, with the exception of the wattage of the sub-amps, truly technical specs such as frequency response, resistance, sound-pressure level ratings, etc., are omitted, suggesting that audio quality cannot be mathematically quantified, despite claims on the listener's faith in a technology based on precise electrical measurements. A deeply polarizing conflict over the degree to which the high-end listening experience can be objectively measured has raged for years within audiophile circles.<sup>9</sup> On one side line up the professionals and enthusiasts like the webmaster of <http://www.high-endaudio.com>, who declares that "audio is not like wine or food tasting. It is a scientific, technical, and (yes) artistic attempt to perfectly recreate a previous musical event . . . [T]here are existing objective and fundamental standards" by which one may judge the audiophilous experience (Salvatore). This camp distinguishes between a subjective *description* of music reproduction, which they reject, and a subjective *response* to music reproduction, which they partly accept. The objectivists believe that measurable, quantifiable standards can be applied to listening to recordings and testing equipment and that these numerical standards accurately portray/predict the listener's audile experience. No engaged listener should hear a difference in sound if the specs of two components are identical. On the other side the battle is joined by the subjectivists like *The Absolute Sound* editor-in-chief Robert Harley, and *Hi-Fi News* columnist John Crabbe,

who, although they acknowledge the importance of specs and electrical testing, argue that by far the most important component in the audio system is the listener. Harley writes, of the evaluation of audio products, that "the process is more an aesthetic endeavor than a purely technical one. Good technical performance can contribute to high-quality musical performance but it doesn't tell you what you really want to know: how well the product communicates the musical message. To find that out, you must listen" (33). Even so, one gets the impression that the subjectivists would rather not have to deal with the human in the system; as Crabbe writes,

the difficulty is that [judgment] so depends on taste, temperamental factors, personal musical history, *etc.*, that it can become an impediment . . . [A]rdent aesthetic absorption is far too volatile a commodity to be taken seriously as an overarching measure, especially as it's possible to be moved to tears by something heard by chance on a lo-fi car radio. (*The Absolute Sound* 65)

An affective response to music heard by chance, in the course of ordinary experience, undermines the value of the audiophile's investment. One must work to become an expert and, having attained expert status, must dedicate oneself to one's carefully cultivated listening. As with any other autopoietic system, high-end audio, in a self-reflexive move, decides what counts as high-end audio listening. What does not count are the accidental and the amateurish. Harley: "Observational listening, and the connoisseurship employed in its practice, are required to judge audio equipment quality because today's measurement techniques fail to describe how an audio component affects the music-listening experience" (555). A good listener is someone who knows this.

So how does one become a good listener? To a large extent, invested listening is a skill that must be acquired within specific historical conditions of aurality. As Jonathan Sterne demonstrates, users of sound playback equipment in the late nineteenth century initially had to be educated to hear the sounds emanating from the phonograph

as having meaning. The listener of early recordings, with their limited frequency response and excessive noise, had to be persuaded to invest his faith in both the authenticity of the recorded event and the communicative value of the listening event. Both descriptive and prescriptive aims have always informed the rhetoric of sound-reproduction technology:

The discourse of fidelity and the philosophy of mediation that it upholds were, in fact, central to the ways in which sound-reproduction technologies were developed, marketed, organized, and used. At the same time, this discourse repeatedly presented something *outside* the history of sound reproduction, as something that was a relatively accurate description of what was happening. (Sterne 283)

Sterne goes on to argue that “the possibility that a reproduced sound could be faithful required that listeners and performers have faith in a network: a set of social relations, technologies, and techniques” (293). Although in the early history of the relationship between listener and machine there remained, for both social and technological reasons, a great deal of ambiguity, sound was effectively reduced to the realm of the intelligible, eventually making it something that could be produced, packaged, and marketed as an object that seemed to need no further explanation.

Contemporary high-end listening likewise requires a great deal of training in the form of advertising, articles, editorials, salespeople, conventions, exhibitions, testimonials, and graphic representations, not to mention the more general educational contexts in which one acquires cultural capital, before the listener accepts his experience as a natural and meaningful one. The aim is to demonstrate order, displacing arbitrariness into unmarked space through the audiophile system’s self-description. In a very real sense, audiophilia, distinguishing itself from its social environment by making evident the forms of its own discourse, comes into existence as a quasi-meta-object, as does the audiophile subject, which is constituted as a result of the operation of the system.<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Crary discusses the remaking

of subjectivity and the normative practices of attentiveness arising in the nineteenth century with the development of modern technologies of communication and reproduction and in response to the understanding that the subject that perceives the external world is a provisionally constructed one (44). This understanding goes to the heart of the crisis of consciousness that the audiophile, having been defined (produced) by the audiophilous system as an invested subject-listener, experiences. He mitigates the crisis by adopting a naive epistemology built on the belief that the ultra-mimetic activity of his sound-reproducing equipment provides a perfectly transparent window onto a slice of reality. The audiophile positions himself as a classical subject understood in terms of the essential nature of his perceptive faculties, although in the operation of the autopoietic system his perception is inconsequential; what counts is his participation in communication distinct from an essential perceptiveness. His attention having been generated by the system it seems to objectify, the audiophile’s perception itself becomes an ideological quasi-object.<sup>11</sup> He rejects the possibility that this perception might be multiple, adopting a fixed position both in his relationship with the source material and in his listening environment.

This environment is usually a space separated, like a bedroom, from the rest of living quarters to ensure privacy.<sup>12</sup> Custom-built or modified from the existing structure, the listening room is designed to correct acoustic anomalies and permit clear transmission of the musical signal. Typically, the walls and ceilings have been altered to prevent parallel planes, the reflections from which cause standing sound waves and a loss of sonic information. In addition, bass-frequency traps have been installed in corners, stretches of wall have been treated with absorbing or diffusing material to reduce unwanted room resonant-modes, and damped, steel-braced racks and pneumatic equipment platforms have been erected to isolate vibrations and magnetic interference which might pollute the signal. Of course, the room has no windows to reflect the source signal or to permit the intrusion of sound from the environment. To

give the purest sonics and widest soundstaging, stereo loudspeakers are placed at a distance from the rear wall that is approximately one-third the length of the room, turned a few degrees “toe-in” toward the center of the room, and elevated to a tweeter height of 30”–42”. Like the other components of the hi-fi system, the listening room should provide transparency and fidelity, adding as little of its own character, or sonic signature, to the audio signal as possible.

The most important design consideration is the placement of the listener himself. Ideally, he should be seated two-thirds of the way into the room at the odd vertex of an isosceles triangle formed by the two loudspeakers and the listener. By positioning himself at the exact coordinates in the room at which the signal sounds best (i.e., most “real”), he is implying, if not acknowledging, the role of his physical presence in the creation of the sonic event. If the room itself acts as both a frame for the listening experience, marked as distinct from the mundane world, and a part of the high-end reproduction system, then it is the observer who combines his presence in the room with the audio source material to create an imaginal space in which the musical event transpires. The term for the acoustic space that is created by the interaction of the room, the electronic equipment, and the listener’s perception is the *soundstage*. Since perfect reproduction involves encoding/decoding the dimensions of the space in which the musical recording was made, it is crucial that the hi-fi gear produce a credible version of that original space—or a credible version of a technologically generated space that stands in for a “real” space, since, with the exception of classical and live jazz recordings, the performance space is artificially created through multitrack recording and signal-processing technology. Even “live recording” space is a product of the recording technology, since no microphone or multitrack machine can fully capture the sonic information in the performance space. In most cases, the illusory space of the soundstage extends beyond the physical boundaries of the listening room. Roger Shepard offers a summary explanation of this psychoacoustic phenomenon:

The ears can hear the direction of the source by comparing the differences between the arrival times and intensities at the two ears. The ears can similarly process differences in times and amplitudes of reflected sounds, and infer the source locations implied by those reflected sounds. In this way, we auditorially identify a sound source in virtual locations that lie *outside* the space actually enclosed by the walls . . . The same sense of space can be experienced visually in a room (such as a barbershop or restaurant) with large mirrors on opposite walls. (“Cognitive Psychology” 28)

In other words, the stereophonic or multiphonic system recreates within the listening room a vaster performance space. Although this illusion is based in the material reality of the equipment, the listener’s anatomy, and the recording and duplicating media, it is also dependent on the listener’s imaginal capacities. It almost goes without saying that the listener must bring to the experience his memories of prior recreations of sonic territories; more interesting is the notion that the listener’s fantasy renders the soundstage more fully knowable. The acoustic *image* is generated, in conjunction with the physical presence of the musical signal, by the concatenated resonances of the listener’s personal singular memories, desires, values, hopes, and beliefs. As Bachelard puts it, the “imagination augments the values of reality” (3). A step further: the imaginal allows a different position from which to determine ordinary reality; otherwise, the world would just be as it is, never in the uncertain state of potentiality we intuitively recognize in the experience of living.

In the philosophy of mediation which informs the audiophile’s experience, the mere awareness of the playback technology’s functioning indicates a loss of information and thus of being. The transparency of the technology, according to the audiophile, depends on high-quality electronic components and careful design to ensure a minimal electrical path between source and loudspeaker. As Robert Harley puts it, “The high-end credo holds that the less the musical signal is processed the better. Any electronic circuit, wire, tone control, or switch degrades the signal—and

thus the musical experience.” When the equipment “disappears . . . we know that we have reached the highest state of communication between musician and listener” (2). Implicit in Harley’s comments is the faith that the unmediated experience is not only, paradoxically, technically possible but also the source of greatest pleasure.

When the audiophile has so invested his attention in the recorded sound that he can forget his own act of listening, as well as the mediating technologies, full immersion in musical experience supposedly occurs. The irony is that the more he attends to making the equipment disappear, the more he is aware of the reproduction technology. Although we might agree with Harley that when first listening to a high-end system any observer can hear an immediate improvement in the quality of sound (2), we must still acknowledge that the subtle sonic differences resulting from an imperfectly soldered connector or a particular brand of high-fidelity cable are perceptible mainly to those golden ears that have had long experience with sophisticated sound gear and have accepted that these are not only appropriate concerns but also necessary ones for the fullest musical experience. In any case, the sonic information should not be tainted by the listener’s unintentional awareness of the phenomenon of reproduction.

Choosing what to play on the equipment has something to do with making the equipment disappear. Audiophiles tend toward the same musical genres that have been featured in nearly every phase of audio evolution, from the experiments of the 1880s, through the first stereo recording, the first multitrack recording, and the first digital recording. Classical instrumental and opera lead the way, followed more recently by jazz, art-music, singer-songwriter, adult-contemporary, Americana, and high-brow rock.<sup>13</sup> The values that the listener attributes to these genres—harmonic purity, balance, intellectual exploration, individual genius—mirror the values that he invests in the sound-reproduction equipment. While the reggae dub rig overemphasizes the warm and vibratory bass tones and the boom box or street-auto

system boosts both lower and upper frequencies, heightening brittleness and “edge,” the high-fidelity system aims for balance and transparency, in keeping with the user’s desiderative belief that these qualities allow for the fullest witness of the actual, the knowable, the real. This situated listening, in its elitist manifestation, excludes the music one might hear in a supermarket or on the lo-fi “ghetto blaster”: hip-hop, punk, lite pop, country, Muzak™. The system of audiophilia determines what counts as music worthy of attention, just as lo-fi and mid-fi, in their alignment with and generation of certain ideologies, make aesthetic distinctions.<sup>14</sup>

These distinctions extend to the act of recording, as well. As the process of capturing an originary musical event via recording technology reduces the sonic information of the live (or live-in-studio) performance and introduces sonic artifacts, including harmonic distortion, signal compression, digital clipping, jitter, and hiss, the hi-fi enthusiast must develop strategies for containing deviance. One way is to rely on the ears of music reviewers. Audiophile periodicals rank recordings on the quality of the sound, as well as the music per se. Concern with the fidelity of the recording equipment informs many of the reviews. A few examples: “Recorded with classic analog equipment, vocal timbres are clear and warm, free of any artificial close miking” (*The Absolute Sound* 145); “the sound is full-bodied and reasonably three-dimensional, the instruments clearly placed, the dynamic range better than on most rock records” (*Stereophile* 147); “recording [is] warm, finely balanced” (*Hi-Fi News* 75). As long as the recording falls within certain predetermined sonic parameters, its extra-technological qualities (the ones we usually talk about when we talk about art) can be critiqued. Those artists who willfully use lo-fi recording techniques as part of the creative process (think: thrash, grunge, hip-hop) are generally excluded from consideration.

Regardless of genre or the expertise of reviewers, the audiophile cannot really know that the artists and engineers involved in a performance were dedicated to the highest fidelity in capturing the musical event—indeed, in the majority of

cases audio engineers purposely introduce signal processing as a way of creating a particular sonic effect. The audiophile's focus, despite his frequent reference to original performances, shifts to the sonic fidelity of the playback equipment. The goal becomes perfect attunement to an "artificial" studio event, in which every technological mediation is revealed, from the degree of compression on a singer's voice, to the panning of the piano, to the artificial reverberation on a saxophone. By implicitly accepting that the experience is a fully mediated one, the audiophile adopts a position which includes the technology, his person, and his social milieu in the creation of a perfect knowable sonic event, although he cannot yet abandoned his faith in the ideal of a single perfect technological recreation of the originary event, however it may have come to pass.

Full immersion is the goal in many live listening experiences, as well. Consider a rave or a psychedelic trance collectivity, where the combination of powerfully amplified, rhythmically simple music, lights, and psychotropic drugs temporarily dissolves the ego boundaries of the participants. This experience has more in common with ecstatic religious experience than audiophilous experience, in which the community is a virtual one and the actual relationship is with the gear. Furthermore, the rave requires active, even frenetic, participation; the audiophile's listening room is designed for physically passive, though emotionally and intellectually engaged, participation, more akin to attending a classical music concert.<sup>15</sup> In any event, the listener aims to be enveloped in the musical event, his awareness focused solely on the performance and his own affective response to it.<sup>16</sup>

The obvious difference between the live-concert experience and the audiophilous experience is that the first is a communal activity in which the individual's affective state is influenced by the sense of immediate shared experience, whereas the second is a solitary activity in which isolation and privacy are fundamental to the experience. If there is a prime location within the listening room for the audiophile to occupy, then by definition, the listening experience becomes as private and

personal as a romantic tryst. Of course, almost all sound recordings imply a community of listeners. Rare is the recording made for a single individual's enjoyment. A sense of the implied community is crucial for a fulfilling audiophilous experience, as an implied community of listeners also implies that the recording artist and her technicians and backup musicians were aware of the listening community that would come into existence after the completion and publication of the recording. Without the listener's awareness of the artist's awareness of his future listening activity, the listener would experience an ontological crisis: the *attention* one invests in attempting to reproduce an originary event requires *intention* on the part of the recording artist and crew. The faithful reproduction of an accidental or incidental event does not interest the audiophile because the accidental and incidental do not sufficiently reduce arbitrariness—nor carry sufficient information—and so rob the observer of a necessary role in the social and aesthetic system of the recording. In 1966, Glenn Gould, in *High Fidelity* magazine, commented that contemporary playback technology was constituting "a new kind of listener—a listener more participant in the musical experience . . . . [T]his listener is no longer passively analytical; he is an associate whose tastes, preferences, and inclinations even now alter peripherally the experiences to which he gives his attention, and upon whose fuller participation the future of the art of music awaits" (347). Despite Gould's insight into the construction of a listener as a quasi-object of the audiophilous system,<sup>17</sup> audiophile dogma rejects the notion that the observer at least partially determines the observed, preferring to posit a transcendent listener of a sound event reproduced with ideal fidelity.

This is a utopian dream. For the audiophile, invested listening is not merely the production of a vanishing mediator, a structure that has become so fully incorporated into experience that it is no longer perceptible as a constraining feature of the experience; it is also the position between actuality and potentiality. Adorno observes of music-listening in general that it "takes the place of the utopia it promises."

By circling people, by enveloping them—as inherent in the acoustical phenomenon—and turning them as listeners into participants, it contributes ideologically to the integration which modern society never tires of achieving in reality. (46)

More specific to audiophilia, Adorno's comments suggest the doubleness of the high-end listener's experience: While he believes that a totally mediated experience can lead to knowing a fullness of being, he is put in a position of "blind faith". The listener must willfully ignore his conscious role in the process; he can *know* the music only by denying that this knowledge is fictitious. Of course, the equipment does not "disappear," the mediator does not vanish, leaving the invested listener with even the illusion of unmediated perception of an originary musical event. Instead, the gear must become part of a process of being-generation, in which the materials (sound recording, equipment, physical listening room, and the observer's position and psychic processes) are combined, by the listener, through an active awareness of his own perception into a wholly new experience distinct from the original recording event and separated from "ordinary" existence. The audiophile must acknowledge his place in the process. Rather than the totalitarian inevitability implied in Adorno's assessment, in which audiophilia is deaf to its own generativity, the invested listener, by introducing the ambiguity of individual perception, leads to the embrace of the richly ambiguous in general, in turn undermining the utopianism of his own project.

Researchers have demonstrated that ambiguity, even outright illusion, is inherent in the listening experience (Shepard "Stream Segregation," Moore). Even the most sophisticated electronics cannot eliminate the ambiguity introduced by the observer's biological/cognitive processes or the actions of the recording artist and her supporting staff of producers and engineers to which the listener will never be privy. The human voice in song, a bent guitar string, the flautist's D-flat moving to C—these are ambiguous events, ephemerally on pitch (itself an ambiguous state), indicating a less-than-determinate future. Aside from the purposeful am-

biguity introduced into a composition in its harmonic structure, signal distortion resulting from the use of particular recording technologies (such as tube microphones which, when overdriven by a vocalist's or instrumentalist's performance, can introduce a complexity of the signal interpreted by the listener as "warmth") is a desirable element of the audiophilous experience. The playback gear ideally should reproduce this ambiguous, informationally rich signal.

Ambiguity rescues the audiophile from Adorno's total acoustic envelopment, which seems a more apt description of ambient or background music, of which the captive listener is often only partly conscious. In fact, many nonaudiophiles prefer background music because they do not have to invest attention in it. Although ambient music in its unruptured totality can be considered an object in the discourse of materiality, it cannot be considered a (quasi-)object of the social system of art, because it neither maintains existence as a result of the discourse it generates nor mediates between individual perception and societal communication. For example, Muzak™, whether it has been evacuated of significance by its methods of production or by the absence of a listener's attention, is something which *is as it is*, thus excluding the imaginal and totalizing the sonic experience by reducing its arbitrariness to near zero. The mid-fi and lo-fi listener has evolved methods of evading ambient music's ontological vacuity by seizing control of the listening experience from the usual channels of music marketing and consumption. The sudden emergence of MP3 file-sharing and CD-ripping software has allowed individual consumers unprecedented control over their listening. Desktop-computer mixing software—not to mention more traditional D.J. console hardware—now permits consumers to create new musical arrangements from existing works, introducing the listener's active imagination into another's musical performance. However, the audiophile rejects such blatant involvement of himself and his equipment in the reproduction of music; his rebellion is effected by incorporating ambiguity into his project of reducing sonic arbitrariness to the point that music can operate more fluidly in the



medium of meaning. It is through this embrace of the ambiguous—not through the choice of music, as “choice” is often ideologically enmeshed with the listening media, nor through seizure of the means of production—that the fully mediated high-end listener of the twenty-first century can exercise the greatest degree of agency.

One of the matters that audiophiles have rebelled against most actively since the early 1980s is the use of digital recording and playback technologies, on the grounds that too much sonic information is lost when a music performance is digitally quantized at any stage of the recording/playback process. In the translation of an analog electrical signal into binary code, performance is robbed of a part of its being, as digital sampling of a signal can only occur at a rate less than infinite—in the case of compact-disk technology, 44.1 thousand times per second. Additionally, if a performance exists as code, then its informational arbitrariness has been over-reduced to exactly *what it is*. The audiophile asserts that *what it is* does not allow, paradoxically, for the fullest reproduction of the originary event, or, if one abandons this fiction, the fullest production of a richly meaningful aesthetic quasi-object. The listener must rely too heavily on tricks of perception to fill in the information missing from the digital signal. This is one of the reasons audiophiles are often also vinylphiles; as a medium of analog duplication, vinyl reproduces signals as continuous frequency curves. Furthermore, analog recording methods, duplication media, and playback technologies allow, even introduce, signal distortions which are vastly variable. When a digital signal crosses a certain amplitude threshold, there is only one response: noise. Analog distortion, on the other hand, is unpredictable along an upward curve. Its limit is also noise, but there is no definite threshold beyond which the signal disintegrates. As listeners, we perceive mild signal distortion as “warmth,” personality, character—we are allowed imaginal entry into the performance—perhaps because signal distortion represents the distortion inherent in perception, the ambiguity surrounding *being* itself.<sup>18</sup> It is hardly surprising that artists and audio engineers,

in attempting to capture as much performance information as possible, prefer recording with analog transducers and tape, thereby introducing a field of unpredictable potential states into the process.

For the most part, audiophilia does not acknowledge that the “absolute sound” is necessarily ambiguous. There is a nostalgic naïveté in the faith that as a precontingent passive observer the audiophile can perfectly (re)experience an originary musical event. While the recording and duplication processes necessarily reduce a musical event and produce another very similar event, the process of sound playback can create a realm vaster than the recorded experience, offering through the imaginative involvement of the invested listener a kind of freedom, if only he is willing to claim it. To know perfectly is to know what can and cannot be known, to know the ambiguity of particular experience.

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## Notes

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1. Although audiophilia is a part of various listening communities around the world, it is primarily manifested in the United States and England. The major audiophile periodicals are produced in these two countries, and nearly every high-end audio manufacturer is American. The labor-intensive creation of handcrafted electronics is antithetical to the kind of mass-produced gear that has been perfected by Pacific Rim companies and marketed by the major US chain stores. The examples of audiophile experience I offer here refer specifically to an American listening culture.

2. The audiophile world is populated almost exclusively by males. This situation, like other recognizably masculine pursuits, such as high-stakes poker, stock-car racing, big-game hunting, and rocket science, is determined by a host of factors which I will not speculate about here.

3. In addition to being a masculine activity, the pursuit of perfect audile knowing has much to do with social class. The field of play, like that of most connoisseur activities, is taken by those who can afford the game. Equipment prices for a high-end system run from several thousand dollars to as much as \$125,000 for a pair of Nola Exotica Grand speakers, \$39,000 for an Audio Research Reference 600MKIII amplifier, \$30,000 for a Walker Proscenium Gold turntable, and \$10,000 for a single cable or speaker wire. Much of the cost is attributable to not only the high-quality components but also the labor-intensive design and manufacture of the equipment. Audiophile gear is hand-crafted and individually tested; the buyer often knows the history of an individual component's creation. Following the distinction made by Jim Blythe, I here exclude from discussion those conspicuous consumers whose main interest in high-end gear is the status or sense of fulfillment mere ownership confers (12).

4. See Bruno Latour for his formulation of the term *quasi-object*. See also Paul Mann's discussion of "synthetic objects" and "discourse objects." Here I mean, roughly, an object the existence of which is predicated on the operation of the system in which it is situated. Or, the quasi-object becomes constituted, hence observable, because of the discourse that accumulates around a social nexus (e.g., an emergent technology).

5. For a history and expanded definition of the term *autopoiesis*, see Luhmann's *Theories of Distinction*, "The Autopoiesis of Social Systems" in *Essays on Self-Reference*, and other works.

6. Many studies of perfectionism, particularly in males, since the mid-1980s (Flett and Hewitt; Habke and Flynn) point to the link between perfectionist behavior, life stress, and difficulties forming and maintaining intimate relationships. While I do not wish to cast the audiophilous experience as a species of neurosis, it seems useful to ask how the desire for the "perfect" or "absolute" sound arises from certain dimensions of the perfectionist personality, often described as judgmental, rigid, intense, and demanding of self and others (Habke and Flynn 152). As Flett and Hewitt define the term, perfectionism "can be seen as an ill-advised coping response to an already imperfect situation" (8). Whether the audiophile's quest for the grail of perfect sound is "ill-advised," it is certainly a response to an imperfect situation—the aural chaos that evades the realm of meaning. Rescue from this intolerable situation comes in the form of Zizekan ideology by which an illusion structures our real experience. In audiophilia, we see how the formless desire for the perfect, the utopian, condenses into a technological fetish.

7. I should note that with the rise of high-end home-entertainment systems built around DVD and plasma-screen technologies, audiophilia is no longer an exclusively audile experience. Harley, for example, edits not only *The Absolute Sound* but also *Perfect Vision* magazine, and as of this writing, a controversy over the value of multi-channel playback equipment is in full swing in the audiophile community. While I do not mean to derogate devotees' claims that high-fidelity music playback technology can be successfully integrated with visual media in a way that does more than simply intensify the spectacular, my position is that the visual will nearly always trump the audile. For this reason, I leave a discussion of the aims and experience of home entertainment for another time.

8. Advertising is not the only way by which the high-end consumer is positioned in the system as a techno-lover. Audiophile writing overflows with the language of the ideal romantic relationship: pure, faithful, true, responsive, warm, enveloping, perfect, sensual, virtuous, intense, captivating. Harley rhapsodizes that the perfect sonic midrange is "liquid, smooth, sweet, velvety" (49). He writes that the audiophile, a true lover, "combines technical skill with . . . sensitivity" in his selection of and relationship to his gear, positioning himself in the listening room at the "sweet spot," i.e., the place where the music sounds fullest. "High-end audio is about passion" (1). Given the techno-erotic aura of the audiophilous experience, it is not surprising that many high-end listeners are obsessed with female vocalists as standards of acoustic perfection. Indeed, Robert Harley specifies Jennifer Warnes's *Famous Blue Raincoat* and Diana Krall's *Love Scenes* as ideal reference recordings for judging the quality of audio-reproduction systems (68). Cassandra Wilson and Eve Cassidy have recently joined a pantheon that includes Laura Nyro, Dianne Reeves, Renee Fleming, and other diva performers. Female vocalists are only the obvious manifestation of the gendering of the listening experience. The owner's erotic relationship to his feminized reproductive (sound) equipment is bound up in the romantic faith that the full knowing of another body lends a fullness of being to the knower. Both an impulse to domination of the feminine and a desire for merger with an idealized other in the form of a "body" of sound govern the audiophile's engagement with the whole of the high-end system.

9. For more on the objectivist/subjectivist "Great Debate" see R. Harley's 1991 address to the Audio Engineering Society's annual

conference, republished in *The Complete Guide to High-End Audio* (551–75).

10. As a part of the discourse of sound reproduction, as well as the broader discourse of materiality, this essay itself effects the very object it studies.

11. Crary shows how in the latter part of the nineteenth century, "attention becomes a fundamentally new object within the modernization of subjectivity" (17). I contend that, given the increasing autonomy of various social (sub)systems, attention is not an object but a quasi-object of second-order observation, correlative with post-modernity.

12. Audiophile print forums are replete with references to "the wife factor," meaning spousal opposition to the audiophile's setting up his electronic mistress in the living room. Timothy Taylor theorizes that, as part of a more general technostalgia which includes a revival of 1950s space-age music, the demarcation of hi-fi listening space is a way of reasserting a lost masculine authority in the domestic sphere (97–114).

13. For a history of hi-fi listening in the mid-twentieth century, see Taylor's *Strange Sounds: Music, Technology, and Culture* (78+). The author's examination of how the anxieties and values of the Atomic Age helped shape the response to sound-reproduction technology is especially illuminating.

14. For a discussion of what counts as music at all in the era of sound recording, see Douglas Kahn's *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts*. Kahn shows how the autonomous system of music has responded to the irritations of its social environment with a tradition of avant gardism which "recuperates significant sound into musical materiality" and challenges the ways that Music demarcates itself from everything else. Here, I am more concerned with how a conservative modality, though not totally immune to novation, decides what music counts. The case of lo-fi listening is a subject that warrants more investigation. Relevant questions include: What is the relationship between low-fidelity reproduction and the "popular"? What exactly is a low-fidelity listening environment? Who controls the environment? The equipment? In what sense is a low-fidelity listening experience a political statement? What aesthetic, political, and economic gestures does a recording artist make by deliberately—and often ironically—choosing low-fidelity reproduction? How does the loss of information richness in the lo-fi signal chain affect the listener? Is meaning diminished?

15. One might ask why, if he is intent on fully participating in an originary musical event, the audiophile does not simply dedicate his listening time to the concert hall. One answer is that live musical performances are not replicable, and that re-experiencing the work is a key to fully knowing it. Another answer is that audiophilia is a solitary pursuit; listening to music in a crowd shifts the attention too much from the self and the musicians to the actual listening community.

16. This double focus generates a perceptual paradox. As many researchers have demonstrated, a subject must divide his attention alternately between the qualities of the recording and his affective state. He cannot be conscious of both states simultaneously (Shepard 117+, Moore). This figure-and-ground experience introduces an ambiguity that disrupts the audiophile's pursuit of perfect knowing.

17. John Elmer reads in Luhmann's systems-theoretical sociology a coherent theory of the constructed observer. By incorporating concepts from second-order cybernetics, he suggests that observing the primary or first-order observer, e.g., the audiophile, defines him as an object of the system, so that the "self" is stripped of "all connotations of an identity of self-consciousness" and resituated as an observer who is observed by the system of which he is a function (232–44).

18. Luhmann argues, from the calculus of Spencer-Brown, against the distinction being/nonbeing, as this "ontology arouses

the impression that something distinguishable is given on the other side" and offers the observer only the position of the excluded middle. For "nonbeing" he would substitute "unmarked space," the realm of infinite potentiality (*Theories of Distinction* 122–23).

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