

Dominik Bartmanski

Elodie A. Roy, "Media, Materiality and Memory: Grounding the Groove." Abingdon: Ashgate, 2015, 234 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/85298)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-agosto 2016

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

**Licenza d'uso**

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

## Book Review

### **Elodie A. Roy, “Media, Materiality and Memory: Grounding the Groove.” Abingdon: Ashgate, 2015, 234 pp.**

doi: 10.2383/85298

The topics of media and memory have been extensively dealt with in social scientific literature. Materiality is arguably less explored. However, the recent advances in material culture studies made it virtually impossible to reflect on media and memory without systematically incorporating the concept of materiality and its specific derivatives. Elodie Roy illustrates this point and fleshes out a narrative about music formats that weaves these three categories together quite seamlessly. The book does it by presenting the stories of three contemporary independent labels and collecting the main take away messages about music industry and our late modern mediascape.

The book has a quite straightforward sociological message worth reflecting on. Material media and their cultivation matter for cultural transmission and meaning-making. It has now become clear to social scientists that materiality plays a crucial role in construction and understanding of the territory of recorded sound, and cultural practices of recording more generally. Today this message is hardly surprising for media specialists and music-related practitioners, although it may still seem to be an innovation in the traditional fields of sociology. Roy’s eloquent introductory statements about capacity of place and things to fix and organize temporality are perhaps even more commonplace. If such opening statements may strike the reader as rather obvious, it is due to the book’s fairly conventional academic treatment of the key themes. Perhaps most importantly, the intellectual resources summoned and reconstructed to serve the main argument include many usual suspects of cultural studies. There isn’t a lot of sociology or anthropology here. Instead, the narrative is dominated by such authors as Boym, Debord, Debray, Derrida, Sontag, and above all Walter Benjamin who seems to be universally quotable in cultural studies regardless of the topic. This isn’t a problem in itself. But who of the currently active authors could reasonably claim such a central position? The explanatory sociological capacity of some of those classic works is necessarily limited due to dynamic cultural conditions of our accelerated digital age and increasing specialization. The present analytic framework based on those works is familiar and might seem coherent but it obscures as much as it reveals. I will return to this issue below.

The originality of the study stems not so much from *how* the author interprets modern soundscapes but *where* she chooses to “ground the groove” of her story. The empirical narrative about the selected record labels unfolds in the first three chapters of the book. Each one is devoted to a different independent label, and it is this focus on the less known institutions of music industry that offers something curious and offbeat. Every record company represents a different kind of curatorial practice and cultural engagement. *Sarah Records*, active between 1987 and 1995, was a DIY imprint operating out of Bristol, engaged in playing space- and time-specific cultural roles, metaphorically and quite literally too. *Ghost Box Records* is a London-based independent label, paying homage to past mediascapes and sound-cultures, contributing to the preservation of “alternative heritage.” Both chapters document in detail how material culture of music and

sound more generally can be seen as indicative of how material culture mediates late modern collective memory. Finally, *Finders Keepers* is presented as an example of an independent reissue label. Tangible objects are shown to have been crucial in the shaping of all those labels and creating and recovering of underground scenes. Together they are neatly presented as a series of glimpses into the fragmented landscape of independent music production and publishing, whose cultural importance has not been fully appreciated in the mainstream of cultural scholarship on memory and materiality.

The fourth substantive chapter, which is also the last one, is where the key theoretical game is played and I will therefore focus on its main notions and ideas. The key arguments of the book find their ultimate forms here and – perhaps most importantly – the author aims at thematizing the timely and central issue of the Internet and its impact on the contemporary meanings and prospects of phonographic industry. One concept that efficiently helps connect the empirical case studies and this broader reflection about the status of the digital is *archive*. Record labels are cultural archivists of sorts, and so are *YouTube* and *eBay* in the author's view, the platforms extensively utilized by music lovers of all stripes.

It is also in this chapter, however, that readers may become somewhat confused as to where exactly the author stands and how we are to comprehend the development of complex technologies that profoundly shaped music production and archiving. Strongly influenced by the aforementioned classics of cultural philosophy and cultural studies, Roy seems torn between what their authority projects and what we are now discovering about the consequences of the virtual realities. She seems to be reproducing an optimism of the early digital era filtered through the romantic conceptions of Benjamin, especially when she spends quite some time presenting the Internet as an open-ended archive, “endless and self-generating” one, supposedly with no material limits, lending itself to “digital *flanerie*”, taken as a reified “total object” that incessantly “renews itself, as if mirroring its individual user,” erasing boundaries between contents and differences between forms [pp. 148-149]. Who, if anyone, would believe such pronouncements today? Roy then admits, however, that “the assumption that the internet is both “placeless” and permanent are inexact” [p. 151].

She also concedes that “youtube has very strict rules and terms of use,” and recalls Castells who cautioned that the Internet is not at all immaterial but shifts functionality and understanding of materiality. Why not starting a reflection of the internet-related themes with those keen observations and critical caveats?

It is likewise confusing to read about Boym's vague ideas about “uneasy” relation between media and memory without any direct critical commentary. What does “uneasy” mean? On the one hand, Roy cites Boym who claimed that “on the blue screen two scenarios of memory are possible: a total recall of undigested information bytes or an equally total amnesia that could occur in a heartbeat with a sudden technical failure” [p. 151].

On the other hand, Roy herself seems to be coming to a cogent conclusion that “the omnipresence of computers and other memory machines does not automatically trigger general amnesia” [p. 178].

A “total recall” utopia is out of question. Working in a similarly hesitant fashion on the concept of archival memory, Roy first speculates that “perhaps the internet today

embodies the ideal of archival memory” [p. 148], and then notes that many virtual archives “are likely to disappear or to remain nearly inaccessible” [p. 151].

There’s just too much time and space spent on such inconclusive intellectual ruminations.

The author does a better job when she speaks from her position as researcher. For example, she develops a convincing discussion of why nostalgia is not sufficient to explain devotion to analog labels, tangible media, “second-hand music” based on sampling, etc. One of the most interesting findings of the book is a confirmation that analogue revivals are about reclaiming the meaning, not just or even primarily the medium. As Roy writes, “the distinction is important: to reclaim the meaning of the medium is to reclaim not a simple technological form but a more complex and more immaterial ideology and praxis. This is to say that the (past) technique can be used as a critical tool against the present technological paradigm” [p. 158].

At the same time, citing Gitelman, she rightly concludes that “immateriality is indisputably constructed in relationship with materiality – meaning lies in the tension between the two” [p. 169].

The old binary structure is still very much with us. Reflecting on the meaning of digital revolution, Roy eventually observes that “the main problem would therefore lie with the way computers are used rather than with any inbuilt default.”

Nevertheless, she does not seem to possess a strong theory that would explain how her observations hang together and why these phenomena seem to be the case in the first place. She does not revise the classic works accordingly either. There’s no sustained discussion of analogue and digital *affordances* that would systematically link different materialities to the “ways they are used.” Are these uses completely random, or rather partly patterned and responsive to phenomenological regularities and social habits? There’s also no exploration of binary codes that still appear to inform realignments of the concrete and the immaterial in the digital era. Medium clearly is a message, and new media transform reality as we speak, and yet McLuhan is mentioned only twice (without being featured in the index), and *YouTube* and *eBay* are treated as privileged sites of virtual archiving, while *Discogs* – a massive systematic music archive with over 7 million unique entries – appears in the book mostly as a super-record store.

In short, in the absence of systematic theory of meaning-making, the book comes across as overly loyal to past pronouncements and insufficiently attuned to relevant current discourses and practices. Some of the latter are misrepresented, and several of the former seem ill-fitted. For instance, Roy claims that in Benjamin’s time analog record was “merely another mass produced object, another symbol and symptom of capitalist industry” [p. 159]. At that time, however, it was a new wonder of technology. In time, it was a genuine cultural revolution that subsequently profoundly changed culture and society. A degree of ennui and jadedness arrived only much later, in the mid-1970s [see Marclay and Tone 2004]. Benjamin had missed the enchanting and transformative power of records because it didn’t fit his main ideological commitment to critique capitalism. He may have been a committed critic but not analyst. Roy reproduces Benjamin’s analytic weaknesses on at least two other occasions. It is the case when she sees digitization as just “another degree of copying” [p. 165], while it’s rather a different *kind* of multiplication, cloning rather than copying. We have tried to delineate this series of issues and distinc-

tions in the paper on recent vinyl revival [Bartmanski and Woodward 2015], showing where Benjamin may be helpful and where he is misleading. It is also the case when she claims that “as the personal collection loses its meaning when it loses its owner, second hand music object fail to speak of their previous life [...] What survives of them is their everydayness and banality” [pp. 189-190]. This observation might ring true regarding some “personal collections,” but certainly not for all. A theory-driven differentiation is lacking. We know that such personal archives are meticulously preserved and passed on to next generations, and that the collections and catalogues of important DJs become celebrated historical documents and cultural artefacts of great affectual and social value, for example Frankie Knuckles’ or John Peel’s collections, to name just two well known examples. To miss this fact is to miss a vital source of aura and archival value of tangible media.

In sum, the book has some solid material but surprisingly shaky framing of it. It contains valuable insights but it relies too heavily on interpretations of texts from the enshrined traditions instead of on its own acumen. Our material culture is claimed to be “unstable” but also to “ensure durability.” Permanence and loss are seen as interwoven but they are not fully unravelled. Temporal scales are not fully reflected on. At least to this reader, Roy seems to vacillate whether internet is a chance or threat, a future archive or a present noise, secure efficient tool or unstable network full of liabilities... To be sure, there are no easy “solutions.” But Benjamin or Boym can’t help us with getting closer to a plausible cultural explanation. Perhaps deciding on those issues is not even the key objective. Establishing variability of conditions of meaning-making may be a better goal for a sociologist. For that, however, we need to dig deeper and wider in our search for adequate conceptual apparatus.

Dominik Bartmanski  
Technical University of Berlin

## References

- Bartmanski, D. and Woodward, I.  
2015 “The Vinyl: the Analogue Medium in the Age of Digital Reproduction.” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 15(1): 3–27 [First Published May 31, 2013].
- Marclay, C. and Tone, Y.  
2004 “Record, CD, Analog, Digital.” Pp. 341-347 in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, edited by C. Cox, and D. Warner. New York: Continuum.