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Nicolai Jørgensgaard Graakjær
Professor MSO
Department of Communication and Psychology
Aalborg University
nicolaig@hum.aau.dk

Book review

Taylor, T. (2012). *The sounds of capitalism. Advertising, music, and the conquest of culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

With this book the author wishes to narrate an ‘almost entirely unknown history’, namely the ‘uses of music in advertising from the beginning of broadcasting to the present’ (p. 2). The history is American, it is narrated by an American – at one point presenting himself as an ‘interpretive social scientist’ (p. 120) – and it is proposed to enlighten the understanding of (the development of) American consumption culture as regards, most notably, historical studies of the music industry and the advertising industry. The book is primarily concerned with discourses and ideologies from the perspective of production. It is based on ‘archival research of the trade press’ as well as 37 interviews – 24 of which have been conducted by the author – with occupants ‘in the advertising industry, past and present’ (p. 9). Accordingly, issues of, for example, reception in the form of ‘consumption as social practice’ and text analysis in the form of “‘reading” these commercials’ have been explicitly opted out (p. 3).

In the main, the story unfolds in a chronological order, driven by advances of radio and television broadcast. It begins with descriptions of some of the most significant music of commercial radio broadcasts in the 1920s and it continues with spectacular cases from the era of television from the 1950s onwards. The story is captivating. Written in a concise and largely unsentimental style, the author presents an impressive number of fascinating cases, anecdotes and informants ranging from anonymous ‘observers’ and ‘commentators’ – the typical status of informants referred to in the trade press from the era of radio broadcast – to highly distinguished musicians and performers such as the ‘King’ and ‘Queen of the jingle’ – i.e. Steve Karmen and Linda November, respectively – both interviewed for the book by the author.

As it turns out, the story line is multifaceted, and a wealth of subplots emerges. Even though the subplots are not clearly organised – generally, systematisations and conclusions across periods of time and sections of the book are underexposed for the benefit of continuous chronological storytelling – some subplots seem to gain prominence as the book progresses. Subplots include developments in audience measurements, changes in the demographics and attitudes of occupants responsible for the deployment of music, political strife, changing fashions and genres of

popular music, the birth and death of jingles defined as ‘snappy, catchy tunes’ (p. 68), praising a product, the arrival of ‘youth’ and the advent of new technology for the (re)production of music. What binds this heterogeneous assortment of subplots together is the fact that they all contribute to what appears to be the main plot: the ‘increasingly close relationships between the advertising industry and other cultural industries’ and, specifically, the ‘decrease – to negligibility – of the difference between “advertising music” and “music”’ (p. 1).

Close relationships between the advertising industry and the music industry are not new, and the book offers ample evidence. For example, it is illustrated how, in the 1920s, a musical band could play a pivotal part for a company sponsoring a radio programme (*Clicquot Club Eskimos*, 1923–1926), and in the 1960s rock bands could be introduced to the public as jingle musicians, so as to ‘get them accustomed to studio work before ... making a record as a band’ (p. 133), while established performers – Aretha Franklin, Ray Charles, Diana Ross, Johnny Cash and B.B. King, just to name a few – would do each their version of a jingle for soft drinks. However, until the 1980s, music in commercials was generally conceived as ‘pale watered-down derivations of hit records’, as one informant puts it (p. 172). From the 1980s onwards licensing of ‘real songs’ became ‘increasingly common’ (p. 144), and as the ‘sell out stigma’ disappeared from the discourses of audiences and musicians during the 2000s, musicians even began to try to ‘attach themselves to brands for qualities that they desire instead of the other way round’ (p. 228). In conclusion, the advertising industry has succeeded in associating itself with cutting-edge, trendsetting ‘coolness’ and music has proved a powerful instrument during this process.

Whereas the story is both compelling and fascinating, it is in fact not ‘almost entirely unknown’ (cf. the above statement). Perhaps, as a result of having been ‘over a decade in the making’ (p. xvii), the book has been preceded by publications encompassing many of the book’s perspectives from at least the 1960s onwards (cf. e.g. Steve Karmen’s *Who Killed the Jingle* from 2005 and Bethany Klein’s *As Heard on TV* from 2009). Of course, this does not make the book superfluous in any way, and there is much new to the description of practices and discourses, especially prior to the 1960s. Also, the accompanying website presents a true treasure trove of auditory and audiovisual material, which makes the reading of the book – including helpful references to the exact audio(visual) material – a very rich, amusing and educating experience. Consequently, most readers would probably be able to accept – even from a declared ‘interpretive social scientist’ – the lack of criteria for the casting (and cast out) of informants, for the selection of the particular trade presses as well as for the presented audio(visual) material. Also, the monocultural perspective should be widely accepted as relevant even to the understanding of also non-American contexts, where musical practices might have developed differently (e.g. in a Japanese context).

From the perspective of musicology, the book may appear somewhat unsatisfactory, though. While it seems reasonable to suggest from the outset of the book that this ‘massive body of music has been remarkably neglected by scholars’ (p. 6), there is no reason to suggest otherwise after having read the book. The above production perspective thus entails that the musical structures and their possible relations to the moving pictures are not systematically examined. For example, observations of musical signification as well as tendencies concerning the distribution of music and various formats – e.g. the above increased commonness of using real songs and ‘more and more music being used in commercials in the 1970es and 1980es’ (p. 167) – are symptomatically distilled from discourses of various informants. Hence, the observations usually appear empirically unwarranted as regards existing musical structures and their actual distribution. In other words, ‘sounds of capitalism’ often seem to refer to the ‘voices of informants’ rather than to the actual ‘music in advertising’.

Surely, relevant informants should be able to have their say, and on this premise the book is highly welcomed. Moreover, as the book provides extensive and easily accessible audio and video material on the accompanying website, there is no excuse for a musicologist not to supplement the book’s perspective by, for example, performing text analysis of the musical material. In fact, it is hard not to be inspired to do so when reading the book and listening to the alluring music.