

“CHASE SOUND BOYS OUT OF EARTH”: THE AURA OF DUBPLATE SPECIALS IN FINNISH REGGAE SOUND SYSTEM CULTURE

— FEATURE ARTICLE —

KIM RAMSTEDT
ÅBO AKADEMI UNIVERSITY (FINLAND)

ABSTRACT

This study seeks to expand our understanding of how dubplate specials are produced, circulated, and culturally valued in the international reggae sound system culture of the dub diaspora by analysing the production and performance of “Chase the Devil” (2005), a dubplate special commissioned by the Finnish MPV sound system from Jamaican reggae singer Max Romeo. A dubplate special is a unique recording where, typically, a reggae artist re-records the vocals to one of his or her popular songs with new lyrics that praise the sound system that commissioned the recording. Scholars have previously theorized dubplates using Walter Benjamin’s concept of aura, thereby drawing attention to the exclusivity and uniqueness of these traditionally analog recordings. However, since the advent of digital technologies in both recording and sound system performance, what Benjamin calls the “cult value” of producing and performing dubplates has become increasingly complex and multi-layered, as digital dubplates now remediate prior aesthetic forms of the analog. By turning to ethnographic accounts from the sound system’s DJ selectors, I investigate how digital dubplates are still culturally valued for their aura, even as the very concept of aura falls into question when applied to the recording and performance of digital dubplates.

KEYWORDS: aura, dubplate special, DJ, performance, reggae, recording, authenticity

KIM RAMSTEDT is a PhD candidate in musicology at Åbo Akademi University in Finland. In his dissertation project, Ramstedt is studying DJs as cultural intermediaries and the localization of musical cultures through DJ practices. Ramstedt is a board member of the Finnish Society for Ethnomusicology and the Global Music Centre in Finland. He also works as a club and radio DJ. Ramstedt’s dissertation is financed through the Finnish Doctoral Programme for Music Research. Email: <kim.ramstedt@gmail.com>.

INTRODUCTION

Within the remixology of dub culture, which Sullivan (2014) traces from its origins in Kingston to early hip hop and disco in New York, through to electronic dance music culture in the UK, Germany and Canada, one form of dub-related remixing that is often overlooked in academic discourse is the recording of what has been called “dubplate specials” (Henriques 2011: 167), “dubplates” (Sterling 2010: 67) or simply “specials” (*Soul Shake Down Mix* 2008).¹ A dubplate special is a customized one-off recording where, typically, a reggae or dancehall artist is hired to re-record the vocals to one of his or her popular songs on the same instrumental backing track, but with new lyrics that praise (or “big up”) the sound system that commissioned the recording. The sound system, which in its essence consists of a crew of DJs and MCs playing recorded music as part of live performance, has since the 1950s been at the core of Jamaican dancehall culture, providing dance music to audiences instead of live bands. Today, customized dubplate specials are recorded and performed using both analog and digital technologies, and can be heard in performance and on exclusive sound system mixtapes. Mixtapes are often distributed in CD format, or as a digital file in online environments, further personalizing the dubplate repertoire amidst the otherwise fixed commercially available recordings.

Authors such as Eshun (1998) and Henriques (2011) have suggested that as unique cuts, and thereby unique works of art rather than mass-produced copies of recordings, dubplate specials invoke a Benjaminian sense of aura. According to Henriques dubplates and the practice of versioning in dub culture “goes against the traditional idea of originality in the work of art that Benjamin described as giving it its ‘aura’” (2011: 167). Citing Eshun, Henriques further suggests that through dubplates “the aura is reborn in the middle of industrial reproduction” (2011: 167). Their respective argument suggests that, as dubplates are not copies among copies, but single unique works that only exist as a singular item, it follows that dubplates too can be perceived as auratic. Considering the ambivalence of Benjamin’s concept of aura, only suggesting that dubplate specials possess an aura does not proffer a sufficient conceptualization of the complex process of *mediatization* (Auslander 2008) involved in the production and reception of the recordings, particularly with regards to the new digital environment they circulate in. By not further developing their argument, Henriques and Eshun fall into a tautology, following Benjamin’s description of aura as that “which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction” (1968: 221). By claiming that dubplates are unique and therefore auratic, Henriques and Eshun reduce Benjamin’s concept of aura to that which exists as a unique product.

Although Henriques within his own theoretical framework provides an elaborate conceptualization of sound system practice and notes that the “dub version is a deeply layered whole” (2011: 168), the theorization of dubplates through Benjamin’s notion of the aura demands further investigation. Not least because, as Hennion and Latour suggest, the aura, or “the nostalgia for the aura” is by Benjamin himself seen “as an illusion, as the residue of a cult value” (2003: 92). Even if we accept Henriques’ argument that aura can be found

in unique objects that are based on mass-produced copies, we do not know what exactly it would mean to experience aura in the production or performance of dubplate specials.

This study seeks to expand research on “outernational” (Partridge (2010: xi) reggae and sound system cultures by investigating a particular case of dubplate practice in Finland. I undertake a critical evaluation of the application of aura as an analytical tool to conceptualize dubplate recording and performance practices in the Finnish context of the dub diaspora. What, precisely, does it mean to suggest that dubplate specials encompass a Benjaminian aura? Does the concept of aura have a similar meaning for sound system culture in Jamaica as it does in other parts of the world, where an additional element of cultural brokerage, to use Sterling’s (2010: 97) vocabulary, is involved? Regardless if the concept of aura is, as such, applicable to dubplate practice, merely assessing its relevance provides us with new perspectives upon a practice that has partially been neglected as a subject of research, as well as new insights into the application of the concept of aura.

Although, the “sound clash”, as MacLeod and Chamberlain (2012) note, has declined in popularity in both Jamaica and Finland, dubplates still continue to be used in sound clash contests. In these competitions, sound systems seek through their customized recordings to “differentiate” (Stolzoff 2000: 211) themselves from their opponents. It is in the interest of sound systems to keep their arsenal of dubplates as secretive as possible, so that their rivals cannot use the audio “information” against them. The monetary amount sound systems pay for their dubplate specials are also mostly kept secret (Sterling 2010: 67). As dubplate specials are a sensitive area of enterprise for sound systems, I have chosen a case that is not too recent, so as not to jeopardize the activities of any particular sound system. The case I will be analysing addresses a dubplate special of Jamaican reggae singer Max Romeo’s song “Chase the Devil”, commissioned by the Finnish MPV (Metsäpalovaara) sound system in 2005. With regards to this material, this study reflects a particular materialization of the “dub diaspora” (Sullivan 2014), exemplifying the far-reaching influence and materialization of dub practices outside Jamaica, as well as addressing how the outernational practices of dubplate creation circulate through Jamaica.

My aim is to conceptualize dubplate specials as a transnational musical dialogue between their origin of production in Jamaica and consequent reception in Finland by furthering Benjamin’s concept of aura. Three distinct aspects prescribed to the concept of aura are discerned and investigated as separate, but not discrete, categories that structure the study and serve as my analytical tools. However, before I engage in the analysis, a brief background to the concept is in order.

DUBPLATE SPECIALS

Benjamin suggests that “the uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition” (2007: 223). In order to be able to analyse how dubplate specials are perceived as auratic, we need to first understand the cultural history of sound system culture in Jamaica, and second, the characteristics of its adaptation in Europe and

Finland in particular. A relevant starting point is the emergence of the sound system as a performing entity of popular music among the Jamaican lower class. According to dancehall anthropologist Norman Stolzoff (2000: 41), when, after World War II, the UK was in need of post-war rebuilding, it turned to its colonies as a source of labour. The open-door policy applied by the British government inspired a large number of Jamaicans to migrate—among them many trained musicians. Furthermore, most of the remaining musicians in the capital of Kingston went to work in the emerging tourist industry of the north coast, as an increasing demand by hotels for musicians who could play mento, performed as authentic folk music for tourists, resulted in a decrease of local entertainment in the urban areas of Kingston (Stolzoff 2000: 42). The shortage of live music resulted in a search for alternatives and, as reggae historian Lloyd Bradley (2001: 4) notes, open-air loudspeaker cabinets had become a popular way of attracting customers into bars and shops in the mid-1940s. As most lower class Jamaicans could not afford radios, people would gather in front of the speakers and soon music became the main reason to visit any establishment (Bradley 2001: 4–5). The entrepreneurial potential of a shop sound system was quickly realised, and the few individuals who owned a set of speakers would, for a small fee, offer to set up their sound system at events, providing an alternative to live music (Stolzoff 2000: 41).

This form of entertainment quickly escalated and by the early 1950s, lawns and yards across Kingston had been established as “dance halls”, where mobile sound systems provided entertainment to those who were barred from elite uptown venues (Stolzoff 2000: 42). Those who attended these events were inspired by the American rhythm-and-blues records that sound system operators imported from the United States and, as David Katz suggests, by the “witty live commentary from the deejays attached to a particular set” (2003: 4). During a performance, the DJ (also known locally as “the selector”) would encourage dancers by communicating with the audience in various ways (Manuel and Marshall 2006: 449). Sound system operators would carefully read the reactions of the crowd, who took part in creating the event by consuming, judging and influencing the music. An exceptionally popular record could for example be “pulled up”, rewound and played again from the top. According to Bradley, the sound system sessions had become:

a lively dating agency, a fashion show, an information exchange, a street status parade ground, a political forum, a centre for commerce, and, once the deejays began to chat on the mic about more than their sound systems, their records, their woman or their selves, it was the ghetto’s newspaper (Bradley 2001: 40).

The different sound systems, each with a loyal set of followers, competed with each other, not only for the most powerful speaker systems or the technical and verbal skill of the DJs, but for the exclusivity of their musical repertoire. This led to sound systems removing the labels from their most praised records, so as to prevent their competitors from locating a copy (Katz 2000: 4). In the latter half of the 1950s, as rock ‘n’ roll gained in popularity in the United States, the production of the rhythm ‘n’ blues records favoured by Jamaican sound systems consequently began to decline. According to Stolzoff (2000: 42), the audience in

Jamaica could enjoy a few Elvis or Chuck Berry tunes, but DJs still needed a fresh supply of potentially exclusive rhythm 'n' blues records. Confronted with this shortage of music, sound system operators started recording their own music with Jamaican singers and musicians (Stoltzoff 2000: 57–8). These first records produced in Jamaica in the 1950s did not enter mass production, but circulated as unique one-off recordings that provided sound systems with exclusive material in the growing competition of the dance halls (Manuel and Marshall 2006: 449).

These records were pressed directly onto what in Jamaica came to be called “dubplates”—acetate discs normally used as an intermediary step in the mass-production of vinyl records (Stoltzoff 2000: 58). For mass duplication, the acetate cut needs to be transferred onto a master plate, which is used to stamp the audio grooves onto vinyl. As the local productions gained in popularity, sound systems and studios gradually ventured into pressing larger quantities of their recordings (Stoltzoff 2000: 59). However, sound systems also continued to use the one-off dubplates, even though acetate discs wear out faster than pressed vinyl recordings. As dub scholar Michael E. Veal notes (2007: 51), acetate machines are normally only used in mastering plants, but in Jamaica these were standard equipment in recording studios. Without any real copyright law enforcement, this meant, as Paul Sullivan (2014) suggests, that the producers “owned the songs” and could essentially do what they wanted with them.

According to Veal (2007: 52), the increasingly sophisticated sound processing equipment enabled studios to experiment with the mixes and over time sound system operators discovered that audiences enjoyed versions of songs that were mixed differently from the commercially available singles. Each sound system that commissioned a dubplate was given a “different mix” and dubplates also came to be used in sound clashes, contests in which sound systems battled for audience approval by offering the most “unique and personalized versions of popular songs” (Veal 2007: 52). This culminated, as Veal details, in the “production of dub plate ‘specials’, on which popular singers would re-record their vocal melodies, modifying the lyrics in order to praise the sound system that commissioned the special” (2007: 53–4).

Outside of Jamaica, the UK has with its substantial Jamaican diaspora been the “principle country” where reggae and particularly dub culturally and musically developed (Partridge 2010: xi). The first sound system was established in London in 1956, but although nearly every major city by the 1970s had an established sound system culture, the phenomenon remained largely underground for the general public, with performances catering mostly for the Jamaican expatriate community (Partridge 2010: 108–10). Reggae and Jamaican cultural forms became for black Caribbeans in the UK an important source of identification, representing a creative channel against the racism and oppression they encountered (Jones 1988: 40–49). Black cultural forms, according to Jones, have been valued also by white audiences in Britain for their “rebellious edge” (1988: xxii–xxiv). Whereas American popular music was somewhat removed from the white British experience, reggae and dub came to mediate the African-Caribbean diaspora in the heart of urban Britain. As Paul

Gilroy notes, at a certain moment reggae “ceased, in Britain to signify an exclusively ethnic, Jamaican style and derived a different kind of cultural legitimacy both from a new global status and from its expression of what might be termed a pan-Caribbean culture” (1993: 82).

As such, without regards to the particularities of the cultural roots in Jamaica, many Finnish listeners first encountered reggae through the recordings of cover versions, such as Eric Clapton’s adaption of Bob Marley and the Wailers’ “I Shot the Sheriff” in 1974, which was also covered by a local artist in Finnish that same year (Ramstedt 2014). Due to the lack of live reggae music up until the 1990s, vinyl recordings have remained culturally significant in Finnish reggae (Järvenpää 2014: 292). However, a proper sound system culture did not emerge in Finland until after the turn of the millennium, when sound systems adapted a more localized style of performance that included Finnish language announcements (“toasts”) by MCs (Ramstedt 2014). Since then, a number of sound clashes have been organised. At the moment, reggae in Finland is in “a process of increasing diversification”, with events featuring live bands as well as dedicated sound system events with DJs who are exceedingly topical regarding contemporary Jamaican dance music (Järvenpää 2014: 273–4). At the same time, a “number of reggae aficionados” identify more with “the most influential British roots reggae sound systems” (Järvenpää 2014: 274, 291).

From an international perspective, despite a recent decline in the production of dubplate specials in Jamaica, dubplates remain an integral part of the reggae industry (Manuel and Marshall 2006: 469, fn. 9). Sound systems from different parts of the world have commissioned Jamaican artists to voice these customized recordings, and sound clash competitions have been organised on a global level, at times resulting in the victory of non-Jamaican sound systems, such as Mighty Crown from Japan (MacLeod and Chamberlain 2012). The production of dubplates has, as such, formed an important source of income for artist in Jamaica (Stolzoff 2000: 115–50). But more relevant for this study, dubplate specials are a way for sound systems globally to form a link to dub and reggae culture in Jamaica, as well as a culturally valued means to personalize and differentiate their performance.

“CHASE THE DEVIL” AND MPV SOUND SYSTEM

I will now turn to the dubplate special by Jamaican artist Max Romeo, commissioned in 2005 by Finland’s MPV sound system. The special is based on “Chase the Devil”, originally produced by Lee “Scratch” Perry in his Black Ark Studio, released both as a single in 1976 on Island Records and the same year on Max Romeo’s LP *War Ina Babylon*.

“Chase the Devil” represents the typical “swirling, aquatic sound” of Perry’s “classic Black Ark productions” (Veal 2007: 154). Perry’s production was also one of the reasons for MPV sound system to “cut a dub” of the song.² In an email interview with the author, MPV sound system MC and vocalist Nestori described how he obtained the “Chase the Devil” dubplate special in 2005. Nestori and MPV’s selector Antsa, residing in the Finnish city of Turku at the time, received a list of artists who would be available for a dubplate recording session in Jamaica.³ Among the list of artists was Max Romeo, which made the choice easy. The group

immediately knew that they wanted a dubplate of the song “Chase the Devil”, which is one of Max Romeo’s most popular songs. “Chase the Devil” has sustained its popularity over the years, reaching a level of cross-over success when British rave outfit The Prodigy sampled the phrase “I’m gonna send him to outer space to find another race” on their track “Out of Space” in 1992—although Nestori claims not to have been familiar with this recording. After wiring the agreed payment for the recording to Jamaica, which Nestori recalls to have been somewhere around 150–200 Euro, they proceeded to write the customized lyrics they wanted Max Romeo to voice for their dubplate special.⁴ They received the recording in split audio format, with the familiar instrumental track of the record on one channel and the new vocals on the other. Using the received material, Antsa mixed and re-engineered the song to a suitable sound. As MPV was playing mostly vinyl at this time, the next phase was to cut the record onto an acetate disc. Nestori completed the last phase of the process while visiting Berlin, where he personally delivered the recording and collected the acetate—the traditional medium of the “dubplate special”.

“Chase the Devil” is one of the many dubplate specials MPV has commissioned (see fig. 1). It is worth noting that, since 2005, MPV has been performing less as a sound system. Nestori, who does not not work full time in the music industry, has more recently been performing with the “roots reggae” oriented Intergalaktik Sound (Järvenpää 2014). The



FIGURE 1. 10-INCH ACETATE DISC FEATURING THE DUBPLATE SPECIAL OF MAX ROMEO’S “CHASE THE DEVIL”, COMMISSIONED BY MPV SOUND. PHOTO CREDIT: TITTA HOLMBERG (2015).

selectors, Antsa and especially Andor (who works full time as reggae and dancehall DJ), have increasingly focused on contemporary Jamaican dancehall music. A few of their specials, including “Chase the Devil”, can be heard on Andor’s *MPV Soul Shake Down Mix* (2007), a mixtape CD-R of around 400 copies. At the time of its release, the mix was available for purchase at specialist record shops in Finland and at MPV performances. Later in 2008 a digital MP3 version of the mix was distributed online. According to my research, the mix is the only available source where listeners can hear the dubplate special outside of MPV’s live performances. During the live sets and sound clashes, the recording has, as Nestori recounts, been mostly played on CD.⁵ The recording exists as such in several formats, both digital and analog: as an MP3 file, CD-R, and acetate vinyl recording, which are used differently depending on the performance setting.

DISTANCE

Audio: *Soul Shake Down Mix* (2007). This private link has been provided for reference only—please do not distribute or otherwise share:

<<https://soundcloud.com/kim-ramstedt/mpv-sound-soul-shake-down-mix/s-ZPQkv>>

The concept of “aura” has become part of the lingua franca of cultural theory, yet, or perhaps because of this, it is often used as if we all know and can agree on what the concept entails. However, Benjamin does not describe the concept of aura; rather, as Aleida and Jan Assmann suggest, Benjamin constructs it “in the moment of its supposed vanishing” (2003: 153). Hence, in order to understand what it means to suggest that within reggae sound system culture, dubplate specials are perceived to have an “aura”, we need to acknowledge that aura is not an inherent or fixed attribute of the dubplate, but a re-emerging quality that users prescribe to the medium. As such, I am interested in how aura is understood to reappear in dubplate specials, digital or analog, as compared foremost to the mass-produced recordings they are based on. Following both Benjamin’s essay and various scholars’ interpretations and applications (Assman and Assman 2003; Auslander 2008; Baecker 2003; Bolter and Grusin 2000; Hennion and Latour 2003), I have discerned three distinct aspects prescribed to aura. These categories—*distance*, *cult value* and *originality*—will serve here as analytical tools to help conceptualize how dubplate specials articulate values of cultural authenticity in international reggae sound system culture.

Let us begin by investigating the notion of distance as it relates to Benjamin’s concept of aura. According to Benjamin, aura can be defined as “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” (2007: 222). Notwithstanding that Benjamin reserves this feature of auratic distance only to cult value, to which I will later turn, we can proceed to investigate the concept of *distance* by looking at how the *closeness* of art (in this case the recording of Jamaican singer Max Romeo) has resulted in the disappearance of aura (Benjamin 2007: 223).

According to Benjamin the decay of aura rests partly on the desire of the “contemporary masses” to “bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly” (2007: 223). Regarding dubplate specials, and our case study at hand, an element of “closeness” can be identified. As Sterling

notes regarding Japanese sound systems, dubplate specials afford them the “power to bridge” the “gap between the culture’s Jamaican stars and the Japanese casual fan” (2010: 97). Similarly, for the Finnish listener, Jamaica and the culture of Jamaican dancehall reggae is brought “closer” by a work that has explicitly been recorded for performance by a Finnish sound system. In MPV’s “Chase the Devil” dubplate special, the “Jamaican star” Max Romeo’s references to the MPV sound system make explicit a verbal and conceptual connection between Jamaica, as the origin of reggae culture, and Finland. In a spoken introduction, before the song starts, Max Romeo states that MPV is “the musical voice of Jah people”, explicitly suggesting that the sound system in question sympathizes with the causes of the Rastafari movement that Romeo is seen to represent. Later in the chorus, instead of the original lyrics (“I’m gonna put on an iron shirt and chase satan out of earth”), Max Romeo sings “I’m gonna put on a MPV shirt and chase sound boys out of earth”. These references to the sound system signals not only that Max Romeo acknowledges the existence of MPV, but also that they are authentically part of global reggae culture. MPV is not mentioned in isolation in the lyrics, but they are boasted as chasing other sound systems “out of earth”—out of their sphere of competition—in accordance with the competitive nature of sound system culture. Thereby, the dubplate links on a broader level the Finnish reggae community to the “field of international dancehall culture” (Sterling 2010: 97). Jamaica is no longer an unattainable distant location, but appears “closer” to the Finnish listener participating in the activities of the local reggae community. As Järvenpää suggests, “roots reggae sound systems” in Finland have sought to establish a link with a “reggae tradition” considered “lost in the Caribbean” since the advent of contemporary forms of dancehall (2014: 291). As such, the sought after proximity with the Jamaican origins of reggae does not automatically imply a connection with the current state of the culture.

Following Benjamin’s reasoning, this closeness would, however, suggest that aura is disappearing from the work. As Assmann and Assmann suggest, *cult value* implies for Benjamin a “transcendent experience”, something that has a “distance from everyday reality” (2003: 155). When the gap between the Jamaican star and Finnish fan is bridged through the recording, does not the work become more familiar and more intimately part of the everyday? Taking a different perspective, distance can be experienced in the work because, while the listener in Finland is brought closer to the Jamaican setting of the dubplate special, the distance between MPV sound system and their fans increases due to the recording’s exclusivity. While an average listener can easily obtain any commercially available version of Max Romeo’s song, it is unlikely that they will be able to acquire a customized dubplate version. The time, labour and finances spent on the recording makes the MPV sound system, despite the dubplate recording’s closeness, more distant and, as such, it could be argued that the local listener can experience the sound system itself as “auratic”. Furthermore, it should be noted that whereas the commercial versions of the song exist as discrete copies—as distinct recordings on vinyl, CD or as digital files—acquiring MPV’s dubplate version of the song as a separate recording remains exceedingly difficult. One would need to digitally sample the recording from the *Soul Shake Down Mix* (2007),

as the recording is not, at least to my knowledge, publicly available anywhere else. Thus, as Benjamin notes, “the essentially distant object is the unapproachable one” (2007: 243, fn. 5). As MPV’s dubplate special is not available for purchase nor easily available digitally as an isolated recording, it remains all the more unapproachable as an object to the listener than the commercial version. MPV’s “Chase the Devil” dubplate special will in most situations only be approached by listeners as part of the sound system performance—or on a mixtape like the *Soul Shake Down Mix*—and is, as such, mostly experienced as part of the context that the sound system provides.

Consequently, distance can also be understood as a particular element of *liveness*, as it has been explored by performance theorist Philip Auslander (2008). According to Auslander, liveness should not be reduced to an “ontological quality of live performance” (2008: 50). Live theatre can be as mass-produced as a mediatized performance can be unique:

Both live performance and the performance of mediatization are predicated on disappearance: the televisual image is produced by an ongoing process in which scan lines replace one another, and it is always as absent as it is present; the use of recordings causes them to degenerate (Auslander 2008: 50).

Although all sound as temporal phenomena could be argued to exist in a state of disappearance, the dubplate special has an evanescence beyond the commercially available versions. The presence of the work disappears even sooner after it has been experienced and becomes distant once more. While a fan can easily listen to the commercial version of “Chase the Devil” for the full duration of the song, the experience of listening to the dubplate special depends on the programming of MPV sound system and, as Stolzoff notes, dubplates “are rarely played for more than a minute, or only a few seconds” (2000: 207). Depending on the record, the commercially available version of “Chase the Devil” is between three and seven minutes long. On the *Soul Shake Down Mix*, the dubplate special is heard for one minute and fourteen seconds, of which a few seconds is a crossfade with the previous song. In sound clashes, where dubplate specials are most often heard, there is a convention, especially towards the end of the clash, where records are played just long enough to identify the voice of the artist and the song. Dubplates, as such, could be argued to exist in a greater state of “disappearance” (Auslander 2008: 50) than the commercially available versions.

Another revealing aspect regarding the evanescence of the dubplate is that MPV have chosen to press their Max Romeo dubplate as an acetate vinyl recording. Acetate vinyl recordings exist as such in a state of increasing disappearance due to the format’s physical degradation. With each play or performance, the grooves of an acetate disc substantially wear out, and unlike a mass-produced vinyl disc, last only a total of some fifty plays. Although MPV’s “Chase the Devil” special exists primarily as an infinitely reproducible digital recording, the dubplate is in all of its various media adaptations treated essentially as a “remediation” (Bolter and Grusin 2000) of the acetate disc, as the traditional analog medium

of the dubplate special. As Bolter and Grusin suggest, “new technologies of representation proceed by reforming or remediating earlier ones” (2000: 61). This remediation—“the representation of one medium in another” (2000: 45)—is according to Bolter and Grusin a defining characteristic of digital media. Although digital files can circulate without limit in a digital environment, sound systems in Finland have sought to restrict the wide dissemination of digital dubplates. In an interview in 2009, Andor maintained that if the recorded audio from a sound clash is disseminated online, it renders the dubplates less useful for the sound system later, because listeners have the opportunity to hear and familiarize themselves with what had been unique recordings.⁶ As such, dubplates are used scarcely and not widely disseminated outside live sound system performances. Regardless of their contemporary digital format, dubplates are thus treated *as if* each performance degrades the aesthetic value of the recording, as it would the material existence of an acetate disc.

Returning once more to the notion of distance, what the Finnish audience is fundamentally brought closer to through the dubplate is the artist heard on the recording. As MacLeod and Chamberlain imply, dubplates can be understood to have developed as a substitution for a live artist performing alongside the recorded music in a sound system: “They [dubplates] simply travel a lot cheaper than artists, first on platters and later CDs and USB drives” (2012). Drawing further on Bolter and Grusin, “digital media function in a constant dialectic with earlier media, precisely as each earlier medium functioned when it was introduced” (2000: 50). As such, the digital dubplate, whether on USB drives or CDs, remediates the cultural authenticity of the acetate disc, which in turn remediates the presence of a live performer affiliated with the sound system.

CULT VALUE

This brings me to the second theme of this analysis: cult value. According to Benjamin, an “authentic work of art has its basis in the ritual” (2007: 224); it is from the ritual function that a work derives its aura. And like aura, we can discuss cult value in terms of its disappearance or emergence. What is the “ritual” function that the work is associated with? For Benjamin, works accorded ritual functions are “ceremonial objects”, insofar as what matters is their “existence, not their being in view” (2007: 224). The cult object’s existence serves a ritual function; it is not valued or appreciated for its aesthetic properties.

Before turning to the dubplate special, there is a ritual aspect to the commercial version that we need to acknowledge first, namely the cultural and religious values of Rastafari associated with the style of reggae music that Max Romeo is seen to represent. As I have discussed elsewhere (Ramstedt 2014: 51), in terms of genre, the ideological value of reggae represented largely by the Rastafari movement is important for many listeners, including those in Finland. Max Romeo is a well-known adherent of the Rastafari religion, and although “Chase the Devil” does not include any explicit or exclusive Rastafari references, the religious theme of the song is already present in its title. As such, it would be easy to suggest that the song has, by its association with a religious movement, a *sine qua non* “cult”

significance, in the sense of its ritual value. However, this would be to prescribe all songs within this particular genre a ritual function, which does not correspond with Benjamin's idea of the uniqueness of the aura (2007: 223–4).

In MPV's dubplate version of the song, most of the religious references in the lyrics are replaced by vernacular phrases from sound clash culture. Instead of "the devil", Max Romeo's lyrics chase MPV's competitors "out of earth" by using a familiar vocabulary from sound clashing that "marvels at the foolhardiness" (Sterling 2010: 67) of rival sound systems. Max Romeo uses terms such as "tin pan" and "drum pan" to describe rival sound systems, a derogatory term that references their poor audio quality. "Tin pan" audio is thin (having a narrow EQ range) and low in volume, which is an insult to sound systems that strive towards a rich and loud sound range. The MPV dubplate special, as such, departs from the spiritual realm of Rastafari into a context where dubplate specials have the unique ritual function of "killing" other sound systems in a sound clash (Stolzoff 2000: 211). To expand on this ritual function, German sociologist Dirk Baecker's interpretation of Benjamin is useful here. According to Baecker, when a work of art moves away from its traditional role within cult practice:

it not only loses cult value but it also gains new windows opening toward several sides. It now demands to be viewed as something that once had cult value, and the beholder who is interested only in cult value must now "cover" the side windows, close the doors, and make an effort to imagine the work of art as a black box looking only upward (Baecker 2003: 13).

For Baecker, a work with "cult value" exclusively serves its ritual function and cannot have "windows" open to any other function or meaning. Even if Max Romeo's commercial recording of "Chase the Devil" can hypothetically have solely a ritual dimension with reference to its "ideological value" (Ramstedt 2014: 51), one would have to make an effort not to be influenced by other meanings and functions the work may have. MPV's dubplate special, on the other hand, is designed to be performed by a particular sound system and although it can be digitally copied and played as an isolated recording by individual listeners, it is in practice exclusively performed by MPV and serves the special function of being "ammunition" (Sterling 2010: 155) for sound clashes. According to Nestori, the "Chase the Devil" dubplate contributed to the "killing" of a rival Finnish sound system, meaning that this particular dubplate played a role in securing the victory of the sound clash for MPV.⁷ The dubplate thus carried out its ritual function in the culture of sound clashing.

Another important aspect of cult value that Baecker raises is the fact that "cult value essentially depends upon repetition" (2003: 12). The cult value of the "Chase the Devil" dubplate special in a sound clash setting does not arise solely from its uniqueness. The reason why a dubplate special can only be played for a short duration, as explained earlier, is because listeners are already familiar with the mass-produced version of the recording. What enables the dubplate special's cult value in a sound clash setting is its prior existence in commercially available copies. However, Baecker also maintains that "to the degree" that

an object's "attraction remains framed by the cult they do not count as works of art" (2003: 12). In the sound clash setting, a dubplate special's ritual function to "kill" a rival sound system is also dependant on its *aesthetic* functionality. Thus Baecker's reading of Benjamin's binary distinction between art and cult value is not entirely applicable to dubplates. At the same time, the audience does not attend a sound clash to admire individual works of music—there are multiple layers of art making taking place, where dubplate specials only provide one piece of a larger web of meaning creation.

ORIGINALITY

The third and last aspect of aura that I wish to investigate is the "originality" of the work. If cult value and the experience of aura is not dependent on the existence of a unique object, what is the function of originality and the uniqueness of the dubplate special? Baecker suggests that "cult practice neutralizes a comparison with similar kinds of artifacts not associated with the cult" (2003: 12). Accordingly, to evaluate its originality, a comparison should not be made between a dubplate special and its commercial version, but rather between dubplates. If a dubplate special can be identified as "original" in comparison with other dubplates, that is, other similar works identified with the same ritual practice, only then can we arguably experience a sense of its aura.

A Google search for "chase the devil dubplate"⁸ displays two audio clips of similar dubplate specials on the first page of results, and several more appear on the following pages. The results of this search demonstrate that the cultural values of "originality" and "authenticity" have arguably been redefined with the proliferation of dubplate specials in the internet era, with their dissemination reflecting the widespread adoption of digitization in dubplate recording and performance practices. This search also shows that a significant number of similar dubplates have been commissioned by other acts. Acknowledging the popularity of Max Romeo's song, it is safe to assume that there is an abundance of "Chase the Devil" dubplate specials. Indeed, having a dubplate special of the song is not particularly exceptional for a sound system. Nestori (2015a) recounts a sound clash where a rival Finnish sound system "countered" MPV's "Chase the Devil" dubplate with a similar dubplate special that referred to, and commented upon their particular dubplate. Such a counter special suggests that a rival sound system was aware of MPV's special and had a retaliation dubplate cut for the occasion. The "Chase the Devil" dubplate is, as such, not even unique to Finland. Therefore, MPV sound system's dubplate special of "Chase the Devil" is in itself by no means completely original, even if it is a one-off object in comparison to the commercial copies of the song.

As Baecker suggests, "only by being compared to something similar does the uniqueness of a thing become evident" (2003: 12). There has to be something "original" that makes a dubplate stand out among other other similar recordings. In accordance with Benjamin, originality can be equated with something that is experienced as "authentic" (2007: 220). Although authenticity for Benjamin means the presence of a single original object,

following Auslander (2008) we can expand this premise further. As Auslander suggests, in rock culture listeners experience “mass-produced objects as auratic through the process of authentication”, which requires that the object is “positioned within historical discourses” (2008: 95–6). In other words, an object derives its authenticity from a multifaceted and historically contingent process, based on the context of a particular genre that accounts for the “story of the musicians who produced it” (Auslander 2008: 96). Auslander highlights “live performance” as a “unique object” (2008: 96) that authenticates the mass-produced object within rock ideology. If we consider MPV’s dubplate special of “Chase the Devil” as a mass-produced object—in the sense that similar objects exist in their exclusivity with other sound systems—what authenticates *this* object is its association with a particular performance setting and its historical discourse. As such, we find ourselves, in Auslander’s words, in a “dialectical tension” (2008: 97), where the performances are perceived as auratic through the dubplate special while, at the same time, the dubplate special derives its originality from its exclusive association with MPV and the performance setting they facilitate.

In the dialectical tension between the performer and the object that is being performed, what becomes valued by audience and performer alike is a sense of *closeness*. If listeners perceive the performer to have a close relation with the performed material, the performers are thus perceived as authentic. However, as we have already established, the experience of *distance* in dubplates, and in their performances, is multilayered and somewhat contradictory. The dubplate can in itself be perceived as a distant auratic object to the listener with regards to its remediated evanescence and unapproachability. Yet the analog tradition of authenticity and unique aura that the digital dubplate remediates is nonetheless brought *closer* to the listeners’ experience insofar as the dubplate links the local audience, separated by distance from Jamaican culture, with the “routes not roots” (Gilroy 1993) of the dub diaspora and its international reggae culture.

There are several parallels to draw from this case study in regards to ongoing debates about the concept of authenticity in popular music studies, for example as articulated by Weisethaunet and Lindberg (2010). The experience of distance can be understood both as a proximity between the “work and the author”, as well an “unmediated” communication between the performer and his or her audience (Weisethaunet and Lindberg 2010: 467–68). What is culturally valued in this context, however, is not an “auratic distance” but a proximity, or closeness, that renders the work authentic. Similarly, we are reminded of Benjamin’s distinction between aesthetic functionality (or art as such) and cult value, as discussed earlier. This latter distinction can perhaps be better understood by comparison to “folkloric authenticity”, where an individual artistic expression is balanced against a representation of the “cultural values” and “collective memory” of a community (Weisethaunet and Lindberg 2010: 469–70). Dubplates are still culturally valued in Finland because they are understood to be part of the “genuine” tradition of sound system culture that values the historic medium of the acetate disc, even though the latter are no longer technically necessary in the digital age. The “illusion [and] residue of cult value” (Benjamin 2003: 92) lives on in the dubplate acetate via association to a perceived tradition, even as that tradition reconstructs its cultural values of authenticity to remediate the aura of the analog in the digital.

By deconstructing the concept of aura through the remediation of the analog in the digital, as drawn from the particular dubplate case study here, we have arrived at the need to engage in an increasingly complex dialogue around the notion of authenticity in popular music studies. It can be established that simply using the term *aura* to describe features that are perceived as culturally valuable as projected onto an object is somewhat problematic. Yet, whereas the concept of authenticity within popular music studies has been theorized beyond a univocal usage of the term, the concept of aura is still widely used without sufficient rigor.

CONCLUDING DISCUSSION

In this study, I have sought to conceptualize dubplate specials within an international reggae sound system culture using Benjamin's concept of aura. This concept has previously been used by scholars to draw attention to the exclusivity and uniqueness of these traditionally analog recordings in contrast to the mass-produced copies they are based on. Since the advent of digital technologies in both recording and sound system performance, how dubplates are produced, circulated, and culturally valued in the international reggae sound system culture of the dub diaspora has grown increasingly complex and multi-layered, as digital dubplates now remediate prior aesthetic forms of the analog. By considering the MPV dubplate special of Max Romeo's "Chase the Devil", I have shown that digital dubplates are still valued for different auratic aspects, even as the limits of Benjamin's concept aura become evident when applied to the recording and performance of digital dubplates. Following contemporary discussions around Benjamin's essay, I have evaluated three distinct features prescribed to the concept of aura: distance, cult value and authenticity. Each of these categories highlights various aspects of dubplate specials and therefore provides different interpretations of the concept of aura.

Understanding the aura of dubplate specials as a feature of distance remains multi-layered and contradictory. While we could establish that this case study provides for the "closeness" felt by Finnish audiences towards reggae culture in Jamaica, as a medium, dubplate specials have a distant material feature—they are temporally and spatially more absent than their mass-produced versions, partly due to the digital remediation of the traditional analog medium of the acetate disc. At the same time, as the "Jamaican star" in our case example is brought closer to the Finnish reggae community, the MPV sound system become more distant as performers, as they alone have the exclusive ability to play the dubplate special. Indeed, for private listening of "Chase the Devil", listeners would most likely turn to the commercially available version of the recording, rather than the dubplate recording associated with the sound system. Experiencing the performance of the dubplate as auratic in this sense accords with Benjamin's argument that "the cult value" and aura of an object retires "into an ultimate retrenchment: the human countenance" (2007: 225–6). It is no longer the work of art which maintains an auratic quality, but the performers—in this case, the MPV sound system collective themselves.

Regarding cult value, the contradiction that Baecker identifies in Benjamin's theory applies also to this case study. The perception of a dubplate's cult value as ammunition in a sound clash setting does not derive solely from its "originality". Cult value depends upon

repetition, which is why dubplates can be played in short segments and simultaneously remain ephemeral, precisely because audiences are already familiar with the music due to the repeated listening of the numerous copies available of the commercial version. Dubplates have a more important ritual value for sound systems themselves, as listeners are not fixated on individual works in a sound clash but upon supporting their favourite sound system. At the same time, Baecker's and Benjamin's binary between art and cult value can be questioned in the case of dubplates, where aesthetic features of the recording affect its cult value. In the context of Finnish sound system culture, Benjamin's focus on a discrete work as the condition for experiencing aura is likewise brought into question through the plurality of the digital object itself.

In dubplate specials, the feature of originality prescribed to the concept of aura can be equated with a process of authentication that a listener experiences in performance. What is original in MPV's dubplate special, compared to other sound system's similar specials, is that it has been commissioned by the particular sound system. The special is a part of their performance and the musical context of the sound system clash. Whereas MPV can be experienced as auratic through the dubplate they have commissioned, the process also works in the other direction—a dubplate special is original by its exclusive association with that particular sound system. Parallels can also be drawn to the concept of authenticity, as it has been debated within popular music studies, emphasizing the complexity of unequivocally describing dubplate specials as auratic. Curiously, whereas authenticity has been diversely theorized, the concept of aura often lacks sufficient analytic engagement.

The concept of aura as such is perhaps not the most adaptable tool, at least not in understanding dubplates, due to the layered meaning-creation at play in sound system culture. However, with additional material and tools from the body of research around Benjamin's concept of aura, the concept nonetheless provides valuable insights into the diverse attitudes to recording and performance among different cultures of the dub diaspora.

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NOTES

- 1 These terms should not be confused with the medium of the acetate disc, originally called a "dub plate" (Veal 2007: 51–55) in Jamaica. In this study, I am concerned with the concept of dubplates as specially commissioned works and will refer to the particular medium of the recordings separately.

- 2 Nestori, email to the author, 23 February 2015.
- 3 Nestori, email to the author, 23 February 2015.
- 4 Nestori, email to the author, 13 May 2015.
- 5 Nestori, email to the author, 25 February 2015
- 6 Andor, interview with author, 15 February 2009
- 7 Nestori, email to the author, 23 February 2015.
- 8 Google search, "chase the devil dubplate": <<https://www.google.fi/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espv=2&ie=UTF-8#q=chase+the+devil+dubplate&tbm=vid>> (accessed 27 February 2015).

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