Original Vinyl Only! Records, Touch, Auras, and Connection to the Past

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Touch has recently gained attention in aesthetics. Carolyn Korsmeyer argues that touchable artefacts offer valuable aesthetic encounters with genuineness, rarity, and connection to the past. She employs Walter Benjamin's argument that a unique work has an authenticity and aura that copies cannot have. Yet Benjamin undermines his own argument in another essay on the aesthetic value of collecting books, surely products of mechanical reproduction. This reintroduces questions concerning whether copies can have auras and if they involve a sense of touch relevant to aesthetic appreciation. I argue that vinyl records are copies that can have auras and better demonstrate the aesthetic value of touch because they require it, unlike Korsmeyer's examples. Records can have auras in three senses: collections can be unique, they can have cult value, and records in play have a 'surrounding glow'. The aesthetic value of touch, aura, and connection to the past is revealed by situating records within a practice of collecting and the material relationship between collector and collection. | *Keywords: Aesthetics, Touch, Aura, Vinyl Records*

Prologue

Reach into a vintage box of soul 45s, flip through the stack, select a rarity, and carefully remove it. Slide the record out from its sleeve, then hold the vinyl at its edge with the palms of both hands. Place the record on the turntable, lift the arm from under the stylus, then gently lower it onto the first groove. View the label; note the artist, song, year, and press: Gloria Jones, *Tainted Love*, 1965, Champion Records. Marvel at its age, rarity, and originality. Hit the 45rpm tab, tap the Start button, and gaze at the hypnotic rotations and the surrounding glow emitted. The song first evokes the mid-'60s American soul era, then Britain's '70s northern soul scene, and finally Soft Cell's equally good '80s new wave version. Observe that memory of the past lingers even after the song fades. Reset the arm, return the record to its sleeve, and refile it in the

collection. These embodied movements illustrate the tactile aesthetic experience records involve, the auras they manifest, and the crucial role touch plays in their connection to the past.

1. Introduction

Touch has recently garnered attention in aesthetics and other philosophical subfields (Fulkerson, 2014; Hopkins, 2011; Martin, 2011). Carolyn Korsmeyer argues in *Things: In Touch with the Past* (2019) that touch is a valuable aesthetic sense that has not been sufficiently discussed. It involves appreciation for objects of material culture that offer aesthetic encounters with genuineness, originality, rarity, and connection to the past. Touch depends on the materiality of artefacts as materiality allows a work to have certain nonaesthetic properties (colour, shape, texture) that allow certain aesthetic properties (beauty, sublimity, ugliness) to emerge. Touch offers a distinctive sense of aesthetic encounter and appreciation. Korsmeyer says unique, rare, or old artefacts are valued for their genuineness and connection to the past. The sense of touch links us to times, places, and people, a key reason artefacts are preserved in museums.

Yet touching artefacts in museums and other public venues is typically prohibited to protect their integrity for future generations. While museums sometimes display specific art pieces designed to be touched by visitors (Candlin, 2010), generally, a tension exists between being able to touch things from the past and protecting them from touch to preserve them and the connection to the past they embody. Korsmeyer attends to this by emphasizing the possibility of touch rather than the actuality. She says being able to touch an artefact is more important than actually touching it, and tactile qualities like shape and texture are not the focus in the aesthetic value of touch (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 24). Even when touch is prohibited, Korsmeyer argues, the sense of touch can still be at play because mere proximity to unique or rare artworks allows genuineness to be experienced (Korsmeyer, 2019, pp. 41–42).

In the appreciation of genuine or rare works, Korsmeyer says the sense of touch is employed non-sensuously, for the work's material presence and not merely its tactile feel. "[T]ouch seems to be invoked because it registers a singular thrill of contact of something old and rare" (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 25). She says *genuineness* consists in singularity, originality, or rarity, also captured by *authenticity*. Genuine or authentic works are not fakes, forgeries, or replicas; they are the real thing. Korsmeyer follows Benjamin, who argues in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1935, hereafter, *Work of Art*) that *authenticity* requires uniqueness and originality and is itself needed for works to have auras. *Aura* is an elusive concept that signifies a certain commanding presence that, for Benjamin, arises from the uniqueness of singular, original works. He says mechanical reproduction destroys aura as it replicates originals or renders them unnecessary (Benjamin, 1935).

Benjamin's claim that aura depends on uniqueness, which copies cannot have, and the support this claim lends to Korsmeyer's argument are called into question when read against his essay, *Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book*

Collecting (1931, hereafter, *Unpacking My Library*). Here, Benjamin highlights various aesthetic aspects of books along with the skills, knowledge, and savvy called for in collecting and the meaningful relationship that emerges between collector and collection. Benjamin was a collector, and his affection for book aesthetics and collecting not only undermines his aversion to products of mechanical reproduction, it also suggests the possibility of copies' having auras and allows an illustrative comparison to contemporary vinyl aesthetics and record collecting. Benjamin cherishes the materiality and tactility of books and attributes a commanding presence, like an aura, to rare ones and his collection as a whole. Yet books, records, and similar collectables like stamps and coins are mechanically reproduced copies, not unique singularities. Whether copies can have auras and aesthetic value arising from the sense of touch and connection to the past demands new inquiry.

I argue that the antithetical elements in aura and reproduction can be reconciled by distinguishing different senses of *aura*. Benjamin discusses at least two in *Work of Art*. One, associated with uniqueness, is what Korsmeyer employs (despite claiming that *rareness* rather than singularity is sufficient for genuineness); another arises from a work's cult value. The latter was originally the value of a work whose meaning arose from its function within a religious cult and its ritual associations. According to Thomas Leddy (2012), a third sense of *aura* can be found in *Work of Art* that does not require uniqueness or rarity but is experienced through everyday aesthetics. This is a 'surrounding glow' or presence emanating from an artwork. Leddy says this *aura* may extend to create atmosphere.

Vinyl records are a provocative, timely, and enriching example as they reinforce some aspects of Korsmeyer's and Benjamin's assertions about copies, aura, touch, and connection to the past while challenging others. The example is timely because of the vinyl resurgence that began in 2006, with records now more popular to collect than books (Statista, 2024). A distinctive cultural practice, record collecting gains additional distinction when situated within a subculture; the one I discuss is widely likened to a cult (Cosgrove, 2016). Despite being copies, records are valued for their genuineness, originality, rarity, and surrounding glow. Moreover, the sense of touch involved in record collecting connects us to the past in ways that untouched artefacts do not.

In using records as my example, I defend four claims. (1) Even though they are copies, records can have epistemic, ethical, and aesthetic value parallel to the value Korsmeyer locates in genuine original works. (2) Such value, with other conditions, allows records to have auras in three senses. (a) Certain records can be unique, rare, and/or original. (b) Records can have cult value, as I illustrate below via a subculture of collecting rare soul 45s called *northern soul*. (c) Finally, records in play and entire collections have a 'surrounding glow' that creates atmosphere. (3) Because they retain their function and must be touched to be used, records are situated within a material relationship of ownership between collector and collection. (4) This touch-based material relationship connects collectors to the past in ways objects prohibited from being touched do not.

In Section 2, I discuss Korsmeyer's argument for the value of genuineness and the ways touch connects to the past. In Section 3, I examine Benjamin's concepts of authenticity and aura in relation to genuineness, distinguish between three types of auras, and contrast his claims about copies in *Work of Art* with those in *Unpacking My Library* to show that copies of such things as books and records can have epistemic, ethical, and aesthetic value. In Section 4, I show that records can have auras in three senses. In Section 5, I discuss the touch-based material relationship between collector and collection and ways it offers connection to the past. While records are distinctive, my argument about their potential auras may apply to other collectables that are copies.

2. Korsmeyer: Genuineness, Touch, and Connection to the Past

In *Things: In Touch with the Past*, Korsmeyer (2019, p. 3) argues that genuineness or "being the real thing [...] is a status that possesses a value that has several different aspects." Genuineness has epistemic value in disclosing aspects of past technology, art, and daily life. It has ethical value, for to damage or destroy an original artefact is a wrong not only against the people and culture who produced it but possibly also against the work itself. A genuine work has aesthetic value in being the real thing, unlike a replica, copy, or forgery. Although replicas might so resemble originals that viewers cannot perceptually distinguish them, originals provide encounters with genuineness, and replicas cannot.

Genuineness is related to touch despite the fact that it is not "directly perceptible, nor is it dependent upon perceptual properties such as shape, color, or design. As a consequence, in principle it is not reproducible" (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 8). Although not reducible to perceptual properties, Korsmeyer says the experience of genuineness is virtually always multisensory; she particularly highlights the value of touch. While many artefacts are prohibited from being touched, touch nevertheless plays a crucial role in appreciating genuineness. Korsmeyer uses 'authentic', 'original', and 'real' interchangeably with 'genuine' and says the connection to the past associated with genuine artefacts arises through touch. 'Real' "invokes the brute material presence of artefacts and the bodily, palpable encounters with them that bring the past alive" (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 12).

Korsmeyer argues that while touch provides aesthetic value, this value emerges from the sheer materiality of touchable things rather than from feeling their size, shape, and texture. "[I]t is simply the *realness* of an artefact that is the target of admiration [...] [not] any distinctive tactile qualities" (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 25). Age value can also be appreciated. Whereas historic value is the epistemic value mentioned above, age value "prompts a kind of wonder at the thing itself – marvel for its very being" (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 30). Experiencing genuineness is characterized by affective states that are "thrilling, shiver producing, awesome, [and] marvelous" (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 31). Yet, before emotional reaction can register, a work's genuineness must be cognitively understood. When works formerly considered genuine are

unmasked as replicas or forgeries, excitement often vanishes. For Korsmeyer, genuineness is distinctive in being appreciated for its own sake and for the emotional response it engenders.

When touching genuine works is prohibited, Korsmeyer says proximity to them often suffices: aesthetic appreciation requires only nearness, not actual touch. She distinguishes three degrees of touch: *actual touch* is physical contact, *possible touch* occurs when one could make contact but does not, and *hypothetical touch* occurs when one could make contact under certain conditions, as if a display case is unlocked (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 41). She says hypothetical touch is at play with genuine works prohibited from being touched and notes that some tourists travel great distances to appreciate genuine artefacts. For instance, despite not being permitted to touch Lincoln's original *Gettysburg Address*, visitors value being in its vicinity and feeling its presence. Korsmeyer (2019, p. 42) says touch "carries a high degree of bodily awareness – specifically of position and location in relation to an object [...] [bestowing] a sense of presence." In touchable things, we recognize a commonality to our own embodiment and relative position. Proximity can "impart a sense of being in the presence of a thing that embodies that past" (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 43).

Korsmeyer says when we actually touch old and rare things, we make contact with those who touched them in the past. The 'transitivity of touch' reflects the history of artefacts, their function, the changes they endure, and relationships between them and various owners. It connects us to a work's creator, to the time and place of its making, and to a sociocultural context that renders it meaningful (Korsmeyer, 2019, p. 43). The transitivity of touch reflects the idea that works have lives of their own, the contents of which comprise their essences. Old, rare, or unique things have a genuineness that actual or hypothetical touch aesthetically registers.

I agree with Korsmeyer that genuine works carry a distinctive value unavailable to copies of originals, affecting their epistemic, ethical, and aesthetic value, and that proximity may suffice for aesthetic experiences of genuineness. But I take issue with two points. First, contrary to her claim that copies cannot have auras of their own, I argue that even as copies, certain records can have epistemic, ethical, and aesthetic value and auras without being unique or even rare. Second, the majority of her examples involve works that go untouched and unused. This risks undermining the importance of actual touch and the transitivity of touch. Examples involving actual touch of works in use better illustrate the range of value touch offers. Some content and connection to the past is disclosed only through actual touch and use. Many old objects that retain their function cannot be used without being touched. Using such objects connects us to old practices, experiences, times, and places. While tactility is not the focus of appreciation, actually touching and using things deepens and enriches aesthetic experiences of them and their connection to the past.

Records are illustrative because one can touch them – and must, to play them. Unlike stamp collectors, record collectors *use* what they collect. And unlike photographs, records must be touched for the full aesthetic experience. Yet one must touch with discernment, delicacy, and care to maintain integrity. Through a practice of collecting involving actual touch, collectors are connected to the past in ways unavailable through hypothetical touch. Korsmeyer (2019, pp. 16–17) recognizes some capacity of records to connect us to the past: "Old records preserve for us the voices of singers long dead, and the scratches and jumps of their recordings are not just technical flaws but also poignant signs of the gap of time between listener and singer." But this is only one of many ways records connect us to the past. I highlight several others. I next discuss Benjamin's concept of aura and the tension between his criticism of and his affection for mechanically reproduced works to show that not all works require singularity and uniqueness to have epistemic, ethical, and aesthetic value or auras and that in certain contexts, copies can have auras.

3. Benjamin, Auras, and Collections

3.1 *Work of Art*

In *Work of Art*, Benjamin discusses changes to art brought on by the advent of mechanical reproduction. This process allows mass production of copies to be sold as commodities. In the 20th century, emerging technologies displaced older ones, altering art and social activities in the process. Movies displaced plays, photographs displaced paintings, and records displaced musical performances (Benjamin, 1935, pp. 228–229). Being neither unique nor original, mechanically reproduced works lack the authority of singularity. Without it, Benjamin (1935, p. 220) says, they cannot have authenticity, for genuineness relies on originality if not uniqueness. "The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity." (*ibid*.) Reproductions lack the authenticity of an original's unique existence across time and space. Consequently, reproductions and copies cannot possess authenticity or auras.

For Benjamin (*ibid*.), aura is an aesthetic quality of a unique thing. Originals have unique histories, undergoing physical alterations and changes in ownership. They are often works presented in public, such as plays or paintings. Yet mechanical reproduction alters the locale of experience. It "enables the original to meet the beholder halfway, be it in the form of a photograph or a phonograph record" (Benjamin, 1935, pp. 220–221). Untethered to locations and traditions, reproductions "meet […] the listener in his own particular situation" (Benjamin, 1935, p. 221). To hear music, one need not attend a concert; one can listen to a record at home.

For Benjamin, things with auras are unique and exist at a distance. Describing aura as "a unique phenomenon of a distance," he explains that if "you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch" (Benjamin, 1935, pp. 222–223). He goes on to say we attempt to

conquer this distance and uniqueness through reproductions, which can be possessed, owned, and housed. But with the loss of uniqueness comes the loss of aura.

Benjamin (1935, pp. 223–224) also discusses a sense of *aura* related to cult and ritual. Originally, a work's aura arose from its meaning within a cult. This value was interlinked with its ritual associations within a tradition that gave it meaning. In practice, this sense of *aura* was associated with magic, especially religious magic. Within cults, objects have meaning and value they would not otherwise have – cult value. Over time, *aura* took on a secular meaning, and works became valued for their uniqueness or beauty, not their ritualistic function or religious meaning. As mechanical reproduction emerged, Benjamin says, values of originality and uniqueness were displaced by exhibition and economic value. Unique artworks were displaced by mass-produced products, which do not have auras but only 'the phony spell of commodity'.

Leddy (2012) argues for a third sense of *aura* in *Work of Art*. In the passage quoted above, he focuses on the example of aura arising from a tree branch casting a shadow. He says because a tree branch is unique only in a trivial sense, aura in this third sense arises not from the branch's singularity but rather from its somehow reaching beyond itself. He says this meaning is "often described as 'a surrounding glow' which can be extended figuratively to the atmosphere around a person, thing, or place. This notion of (metaphorical) breath or glow that emanates from, or at least surrounds, something fits the idea of that thing going beyond itself" (Leddy, 2012, pp. 133). This kind of aura, which Leddy says typifies everyday aesthetics, connects a thing to the atmosphere of its environment.

Three senses of *aura*, then, can be found in Benjamin. One depends on uniqueness and originality, another arises from a cult context that gives a thing special meaning, and a third emerges in everyday aesthetics as a surrounding glow making something greater than itself. In the next section, I show how records can have aura in each sense. I motivate rethinking uniqueness and originality as the sole conditions of aura by contrasting Benjamin's argument about copies from *Work of Art* with arguments in *Unpacking My Library*.

Benjamin says in a footnote in *Work of Art* that

> [the] concept of authenticity always transcends mere genuineness. (This is particularly apparent in the *collector* who always retains some traces of the fetishist and who, by owning the work of art, *shares in its ritual power*.) Nevertheless, the function of the concept of authenticity remains determinate in the evaluation of art; with the secularization of art, authenticity displaces the cult value of the work. (Benjamin, 1935, p. 244, italics mine)

Benjamin introduces the idea that a practice of collecting or a tradition changes a work's meaning. As the gatherer, owner, and curator of a collection, the collector experiences its ritual power through the practice of collecting. The tradition of a cult gives a work's aura specific meaning it would not otherwise have. Benjamin's linking collecting to cult and ritual power bridges

to the next section and provides resources to demonstrate that copies like books and records can have auras in multiple senses.

3.2 *Unpacking My Library*

In *Unpacking My Library*, Benjamin discusses the aesthetic value of books, the practice of collecting, and the meaning of being a collector as he reorganizes his collection of approximately 2,000 books (Manguel, 2018). While he prizes mostly original and rare books, Benjamin says that despite being copies, books have epistemic, ethical, and aesthetic value similar to that of unique works with auras or genuine works in Korsmeyer's sense. Moreover, Benjamin argues that not only objects but also collectors can be *genuine*. Because of the material similarity of books and records, Benjamin's thoughts on the value of collecting material culture, the special relationship between collector and collection, and the epistemic, ethical, and aesthetic value of books also apply to vinyl and record collecting.

For Benjamin (1931, p. 59), being a *genuine* collector is normative, consisting in skilful collecting rather than merely owning books. "For a collector – and I mean a real collector, a collector as he ought to be – ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects" (Benjamin, 1931, p. 67). Being a collector is an orientation to one's possessions, a framework for the material relationship between owner and objects that involves practice, not merely possession of products. Benjamin says objects get their due only in private collections because they are housed in relation to other items and the whole and are cherished more deeply within a relationship of ownership. Purchasing items as a collector is unlike buying products in general because collectables are not regarded merely as commodities.

In addition to the relationship between collector and collection, books have value in various senses. Benjamin highlights in copies of books the epistemic, ethical, and aesthetic values Korsmeyer locates in genuine works (Benjamin, 1931, p. 60). Epistemically, books include literary content, along with author, date, city of publication, press, and edition. Old books communicate Korsmeyer's *transitivity of touch*. Some bear previous owners' names or notes, and many communicate age in their design and condition. Appreciation for books includes a sense of history and appreciation of the past. Books offer hints that inform buying decisions. "Dates, places names, formats, previous owners, bindings [...] tell [the collector] [...] whether a book is for him or not" (Benjamin, 1931, pp. 63–64). Benjamin also recognizes the role of chance, luck, and coincidence in unearthing great treasures and the *thrill of acquisition* that characterizes an unexpected find. This parallels Korsmeyer's idea of the *thrill of presence*, but the thrill is perhaps more deeply felt when collectables are privately owned and housed within a collection. As books have epistemic value arising from their materiality, so too do records, which similarly offer content (music) and display their history in their condition or previous owners' names and notes.

The ethical value of books and records consists in their relation to people, places, times, memories, and the transitivity of touch. Books connect current

owners to previous owners, times, and places, operating as analogues of memory. Viewing a book or record, one may recall the time, city, store, and circumstances of procurement. Quoting the saying, *Habent sua fata libelli*, Benjamin says that for collectors, even *copies* of books have their own lives because they have unique histories of changes in ownership, time, place, and condition. Now consider the requirement in *Work of Art* that auras arise from originals with unique histories. While copies of books or records do not have an original's unique existence and history, they have their own.

Books, records, and collections of either may be given to relatives, becoming family heirlooms with special meaning. Benjamin highlights the ethical responsibility of inheriting a collection. "Inheritance is the soundest way of acquiring a collection [...] for a collector's attitude toward his possessions stems from an owner's feeling of responsibility toward his property" (Benjamin, 1968, p. 66). While an inherited collection commands a deeper sense of responsibility, such a sense does not require inheritance or family connection. Responsibility arises when individual items or collections are obtained from partners, friends, or other collectors, but also simply in protecting a collection. Records, too, are given to relatives, friends, and lovers and may function as heirlooms and tokens of relationships.

Benjamin appreciates the material aesthetic qualities of books beyond their narrative content or writing style. Books have physicality, looks, feels, and even smells (Benjamin, 1931, p. 59). In his collection, Benjamin prizes coloured illustrations of fables and fairytales and owns a book that is the last of its press. Another book of his bears the texture of steel engravings "designed by the foremost French graphic artist and executed by the foremost engravers" (Benjamin, 1931, p. 64). Benjamin recognizes touch's integrality in collecting. "Property and possession belong to the tactile sphere. Collectors are people with tactile instinct; their experience teaches them [...] how to locate and discern, but also sources and cities of acquisition" (Benjamin, 1931, p. 63). The tactility of collecting begins with the materiality of objects and extends to homes, stores, and other sites of acquisition and collection. The aesthetics of records also include music, design, colour, and inserts, and records recall cities and record stores where they were found.

Benjamin can be read as allowing books to have auras in multiple senses; I argue that this extends to records. The first sense is located in individual books or records and collections as a whole. Certain rare books and records have auras of originality, singularity, or both. In addition, even a collection that includes new books or records is, as an entirety, unique to the collector and bears an aura of singularity. "The establishment of a real library, which is always somewhat impenetrable [...] [is] [...] at the same time uniquely itself" (Benjamin, 1931, p. 63). The second sense of 'aura', concerning cult value, arises from collecting. Collecting books or records in general or collecting a particular genre or subgenre gives the practice special meaning. As Benjamin describes it, collecting esoteric objects, like his obscure fables and fairytales, is a subcultural practice. Such a context lends books a meaning they would otherwise lack. "As he holds them in his hands, he seems to be seeing

through them into their distant past as though inspired. So much for the magical side of the collector – his old-age image, I might call it" (Benjamin, 1931, p. 61). I argue in the next section that records can have auras not only in these two senses, like books, but also in the third sense identified by Leddy.

4. Records, Collections, and Auras

4.1 Vinyl Aura: Unique, Original, and Rare Records

Records can have auras in all three senses outlined above. First, certain records can be unique, original, or rare. Uniqueness can take five forms. One is being intentionally made as one of a kind. In 2022, Bob Dylan recorded a new version of his 1962 classic *Blowin' in the Wind* with producer T-Bone Burnette, releasing only a single disc on the Ionic Originals format, Burnette's novel analogue technology. Because this original, unique recording is not digitally available, very few people have heard it. This demonstrates that a record can be totally unique and not a copy – and also what is lost when it is. A record can also be unique by being unintentionally one-of-a-kind. Sharon McMahon's *Where There Is Love* was recorded but never released, but one acetate test pressing was made, which DJ Richard Searling owned and played (Soulsource, 2014). The third form of uniqueness consists in being the only record left from a press, so that a record not originally unique becomes so. For example, before being re-pressed more than 50 years after its release, Frank Wilson's soul banger *Do I Love You (Indeed I Do)* survived in only two known copies (Cosgrove, 2016, p. 198). Even new records can be unique in a fourth sense: by including one-of-one artwork. For example, Atlanta's Selmanaires dipped a stamp in different colours and pressed it onto the outer sleeve of their single in unique placements. Consequently, each copy is unique in packaging. Fifth, record collections as wholes are unique. Records are collected into unique libraries and organized according to generic, chronological, alphabetical, or other criteria chosen by the collector. It is highly improbable that two collectors would have exactly the same records, let alone organize them in the same way.

Records can also be original and/or rare. An original record is of the first pressing. While additional pressings and reissues may follow, collectors prize the distinctive value of a record from the initial press. In northern soul, this is captured by the phrase *original vinyl only* as the aspirational standard for collectors and DJs (Nowell, 2011; Brewster & Broughton, 2000). Originals may have artwork not included on subsequent presses and so be aesthetically distinctive. Rare records are few in number, hard to find, or unusual in some way. They are distinct from originals, although many rare records are also originals. A record might belong to a second or later pressing but still be rare and itself aesthetically distinctive.

Threats to vinyl originality emerge because, like other items, records can seem original, rare, and authentic without being so. While only first presses are original, second and third presses may approximate the initial time of release. Reissues are recently repressed records that had been out of print for a significant time, usually many years. Sometimes they are also remastered and

so have sound differences in addition, potentially, to new artwork or packaging. Other times, they are made to look original. Despite not being original, represses can be valued for their accessibility and aesthetic differences. A record rereleased without permission is a bootleg. Bootlegs typically sound worse because they are not pressed from an original master recording but copied from either a record or another format, yet they sometimes still have value. For years, there were many bootlegs of *Smile*, The Beach Boys' abandoned follow-up to *Pet Sounds*. On bootleg versions, songs were incomplete and underproduced but still offered glimpses into the album that could have been. In 2011, Brian Wilson remixed and remastered the album, released as *The Smile Sessions*, with his original 1967 intention of making a *pocket symphony*. Although not actually original, this aimed to best approximate the original intention, still offering some value.

4.2 Vinyl Aura: Cult Value

Records can have cult aura if they have special significance within a collecting subculture (cult). Record collecting itself may be a subculture, but more specific subcultures exist within it centred on different types of esoteric music. These subcultures give records meaning and value they would not otherwise have. A subculture of collecting rare soul records illustrates this.

Northern soul is a subculture that centres on listening, collecting, and dancing to rare American soul music produced primarily between 1965 and 1972. Originating in England's north and midland cities, it continues today across the globe (Nowell, 2011). In 1969, DJs from northern cities including Manchester, Wigan, and Blackpool began collecting rare and overlooked up-tempo soul 45s typically based on the driving 4/4 beat at a time when soul music was beginning to slow down into funk (Brewster and Broughton, 2000). Vendors selling these records called it *northern soul* to describe the kind of music these DJs were after (Cosgrove, 2016, p. 25). At its inception, this was a past-looking pursuit, valuing records because they were *old*, although initially only by a couple of years (Brewster and Broughton, 2000). DJs who spun records at large parties called all-nighters or weekenders sought to unearth previously unheard tracks from familiar artists or singles on lesser-known labels from artists who may have cut only one number. Many songs sounded similar to Motown hits by groups like The Four Tops and The Temptations, but emphasis was on finding records equally good yet obscure and unheard. For example, most know Marvin Gaye's *I Heard It through the Grapevine* but not his northern rarity, *This Love Starved Heart (Is Killing Me)*. Most know labels like Motown and Stax, but not Ric-Tic, Brunswick, Mirwood, Shout, or Okeh. I lack space for a full account of the elusive essence constituting a northern soul song or the genre generally, but it embodies clear values, practices, and traditions.

In northern soul, *originality*, *rarity*, and *obscurity* are primary values (Cosgrove, 2016, p. 31). "Northern soul was all about OVO, original vinyl only. Breaking this cardinal rule remains a heinous crime to this day and is anathema on a scene that can be unforgiving about the standards of soul" (Cosgrove, 2016,

p. 37). Another value was of course the *quality* of the song itself and, for DJs, its capacity to get or keep dancers on the floor (Brewster and Broughton, 2000). In northern soul, several records have meaning and value they would not otherwise. For example, in the mid-'70s, DJs at Wigan Casino's all-nighters observed the '3 Before 8' tradition, playing three key songs at 8 am to signal the event's ending (Cosgrove, 2016, p. 77): Jimmy Radcliffe's *Long after Tonight Is All Over*, Tobi Legend's *Time Will Pass You By*, and Dean Parrish's *I'm on My Way*. Collectors may seek these records for their subculture significance.

Beyond northern soul's general status as a subculture, Stuart Cosgrove and others have found it to resemble a religious cult or 'weird sect'. "Soul had become a religion, one that the chosen few of the deep north would remain devoted to for decades yet to come" (Cosgrove, 2016, p. 25). Cosgrove likens meeting an older 'soulie' who gave him a mixtape of obscurities to 'an initiation rite into a secret cult" (Cosgrove, 2016, p. 11). He emphasizes that for many enthusiasts and collectors, northern soul really did function as a religion and was seen by sceptics as undermining traditional religion. "Not only did [a weekender] stay open to the small hours of Sunday, it crashed through the sabbath like a stomping back beat" (Cosgrove, 2016, p. 80). DJs were even referred to as 'priests of the night' (Cosgrove, 2016, p. 39). Cosgrove also compares northern soul to 'high art':

> Both are driven by collectors who are fixated by rarity, authenticity, and the provenance of their collections [...] Words like rare, original and limited edition exist in both communities [...] Art and soul share a culture where fakes, bootlegs, and shady attempts to replicate the look of original works are not uncommon. (Cosgrove, 2016, p. 199)

Within this subculture, certain records have cult value auras.

Being a copy does not automatically mean a record is easy to find or meets listeners in their particular situations, as Benjamin claimed. While some records may be easily bought online at sites like Discogs, collectors often find original, rare, and obscure vinyl in places beyond record stores: vintage shops, thrift stores, estate sales, record fairs, and soul weekenders. Collectors must meet records in *their* situations before records can meet collectors in theirs. The thrill of unearthing rare records parallels the thrill of presence Korsmeyer prized and the thrill of acquisition Benjamin treasured. For record collectors, the *thrill of the find* includes scoring a rare soul gem, often for cheap, at an unassuming place like a secondhand store. Finding a rarity that has gone unnoticed requires knowledge of music and subculture and the skills to know where to look. The score is felt physically. "For northern soul collectors, there is nothing more visceral than 'a find'" (Cosgrove, 2016, pp. 203–204).

4.3 Vinyl Aura: Surrounding Glow

While a rare record has aura in itself, proper equipment can give any record an aura in the sense of a surrounding glow that extends to create atmosphere. Aura in this third sense concerns how records are played. A genuine record collector – 'a collector as he ought to be' – has a stereo: a stationary turntable, amplifier, and speakers, often hi-fi or vintage, rather than poor, cheap, portable

alternatives with built-in speakers. Picture a record on a turntable spinning around: as the stylus touches the rotating record, sound is channelled to the receiver, which amplifies sound sent to the speakers. The analogue nature of records means that the sound heard is the sound of touch (Katz, 2004). On many high-end turntables, a small lamp designed to illuminate grooves casts a luminous, candlelike glow over the record as it spins. Atmosphere arises from this glow as well as from the sound that extends to fill a room or house.

A collection has a commanding presence that gives it, too, the kind of aura that arises from extending beyond itself. More than the sum of its parts, a collection bespeaks the practice of collecting – discovering, locating, assessing, and procuring records. Just as each record has a life of its own, so too does a collection. It undergoes development, additions, subtractions, reorganization, and sometimes changes in ownership. It is an analogue of collected memories of times, places, and people. A collection announces its presence of *brute materiality* through proximity to it. Many collectors have record shelving units replete with vinyl that tower over other furniture and command attention.

Although collections are typically housed within homes, collectors cannot listen to all their records in a day, a week, a month – or even, perhaps, a year. Furthermore, organizing and reorganizing collections is a weighty labour of love. This makes collections *impenetrable* and *unique [phenomena] of a distance*, meeting Benjamin's specifications. Yet collectors can daily listen to any record in their collections, rendering them penetrable in everyday aesthetics. Records offer everyday aesthetic encounters with music whose aura can extend to create atmosphere.

4.4 Vinyl Atmosphere

Böhme (2017) links aura and atmosphere but says that whereas aura emanates from an object, atmosphere is produced holistically from multiple constituent parts. Atmospheres are totalities as they "unify a diversity of impressions in a single emotive state" (Böhme, 2017, p. 29). The spatial or environmental nature of atmosphere distinguishes it from aura. Böhme describes atmosphere as

> something between the subject and the object […] [which] mediate[s] between the aesthetics of reception and the aesthetics of the product or production. [Atmospheres] fill spaces; they emanate from things, constellations of things, and persons […] as something quasi-objective [whose] character must always be felt […] [as] manifestations of the co-presence of subject and object. (Böhme, 2017, pp. 25–26)

Atmosphere mediates between agent and product and consists in a totality from which a *mood* or aesthetic character emanates that must be felt to be grasped. Atmosphere "is the felt presence of something or someone in space" (Böhme, 2017, p. 33).

While the content of music on individual records contributes to atmosphere, so does the form of playing records on a turntable adjacent to a collection. The totality consists in the collection, which is itself a whole, together with

the record spinning on a turntable with its lamp casting a glow above it, played by the analogue touch of the stylus on the record and channelled through a stereo system that amplifies the sound and fills the space with an enriching warmth and depth that, when experienced, is undeniably palpable. Vinyl atmosphere is shaped by the technology that mediates it (Chackal, 2025). While the genuine objects Korsmeyer cites offer atmospheres from the aesthetics of rarity, an owned collection offers atmosphere in the aesthetics of the everyday. In everyday aesthetics, the experience of vinyl atmosphere is enabled by the sense of touch involved in using records and because collections are owned and housed in the intimate setting of homes. The atmosphere of vinyl includes connection to the past.

5. Records, Collections, Touch, and Connections to the Past

Records connect to the past in myriad ways through their materiality and the sense of touch integral to them. I highlight five.

5.1 Old Records Connect to the Past Through Their Look, Design, and Music

Like other records, 45s from the ’60s and ’70s connect collectors to music and genres of the past. In form, vintage 45s represent the past in the sound quality of the record and the mix of the song itself. In content, old records connect to the past by reflecting social issues of past times. Many soul lyrics focused on civil rights and black liberation. Consider Edwin Starr’s *Time*: “Time, that’s what they tell me, it takes time, ever since I was a little bitty boy […] but how much time will it really take before this world of ours is in a better shape?” Old records also connect the past to the present when song subjects are timeless, like love and loss.

Records show their age in artwork and design, and collectors familiarize themselves with the aesthetics of certain genres, labels, and years. While some old 45s did not originally have outer sleeves displaying artwork, inner sleeves were also used to display art. For example, Tamala, a Motown sublabel, had an interesting linear logo across black, rather than standard white, paper sleeves. Additionally, labels on records at their centre bear the record’s name and release date. When the date is unlisted, font and design style may indicate the year of release; recognizing the year from these is a skill collectors strive to cultivate. This skill assists in reviewing hefty stacks of records under time constraints. Discerning whether a record was made before or after 1965 is particularly helpful for finding the best rare soul. Old records bear the mark of time and undergo physical changes. However, condition is also an indication of how well stored and safeguarded records have been. Properly preserved, records from the ’60s and ’70s may remain in mint condition and sound spectacular.

5.2 Old Records Connect to Previous Owners and Reflect the Transitivity of Touch

Collectors from the ’50s–’70s often wrote their names on records before lending them to others, a rare practice today. Some also inscribed addresses,

and when previous locations are far from the current owner's residence, collectors appreciate the distance a record travelled over the course of its life. Records may have several owners over their lifespans and be either played regularly or shelved in a box for years. Collectors anticipate that they might not be the final owner of a record and so preserve its integrity for the sake of gifting, bequeathing, or reselling, or for more intrinsic reasons, to respect its beauty and integrity. This reflects the integrality of touch in items that must touched to be used and must be used to be fully appreciated.

5.3 New Records Connect to the Past by Being Played, which Requires Touch and Proximity

Records can connect to the past without being old or used. Compared to more modern, portable, and convenient options like digital files, streaming platforms, and CDs, playing records is an older, less convenient, more demanding practice, but it offers enriching and rewarding experiences for precisely these reasons (Chackal, 2019). Recall the prologue's description of selecting, playing, and refiling a record. Touch is required to locate a record in a collection, remove its packaging, and play, flip, and refile it. Furthermore, the practice of collecting records demands knowing how to find, handle, and play them, how to operate and troubleshoot stereos, and other tactile know-how. Precisely these additional demands can render older practices more meaningful and rewarding. Although non-collectors might argue that records are relics of the past, this assertion is belied by the vinyl resurgence beginning in 2006 and continuing through 2020 – when records outsold CDs for the first time since 1986 – and 2023, with over 46 million vinyl albums sold in the US (Statista, 2024; Caulfield, 2022, 2024). Despite modern alternatives, the distinctive aesthetic and social experiences records offer have proven enduring and timelessly relevant (Chackal, 2025).

5.4 Collecting Connects to the Past Through Memories of Times, Places, and People

The physicality of records links them to the material context of their acquisition, including countries, cities, and – crucially – record stores. Many stores affix stickers bearing their name to records. Great records acquired when travelling become memorial tokens of trips, and as Benjamin (1931, p. 63) notes, record store locations might determine areas to explore: "How many cities revealed themselves to me in the marches I undertook in the pursuit of books." Records procured from or with particular people may trigger memories of them. Collections may also connect to others, by being co-owned e.g. by spouses. They also connect collectors to their own past. Over a lifetime of collecting records, collectors come to see their own histories in their collections: when and where they collected certain genres, who they were at the time, and the life changes reflected in their evolving music preferences. In the film *High Fidelity*, collector and record store owner Rob says he is reorganizing his collection *autobiographically*:

> I'm trying to put them in the order in which I bought them. That way I can write my own autobiography without picking up a pen. Pull them all off the

> shelves, look for *Revolver*, and go from there. I'll be able to see how I got from *Deep Purple* to *Howlin Wolf* in 25 moves [...] If you wanna find *Rumors* by Fleetwood Mac, you have to know that I bought it for someone in the fall of 1983 and then didn't give it to them for personal reasons. (High Fidelity, 2000)

5.5 Records Connect to the Past Through Touch and Private Ownership

Touch is inherent in listening to and collecting vinyl, and tactile value is connected to the private ownership and housing of collections. Although the sound of music is the focal point of the aesthetic experience of vinyl, touch and vision are also essential and enriching parts of it, including the tactility of vinyl, the textures of record grooves, the sharpness at their edges, their thickness and weight. For example, The Duritti Column's debut album was packaged in a sandpapered outer sleeve, Sonic Boom's *Spectrum* album bears a colour wheel that spins around, and Talking Heads' *Fear of Music* cover was embossed with a textured pattern that recalled tread plate metal flooring.

Touch is a necessary part of collecting as well as appreciating records; preservation requires delicate handling. The practice of finding, playing, and safeguarding records allows an intimate, meaningful, touch-based relationship to emerge between collector and collection. In records, collectors see times, places, people, events, and themselves; in a collection, they see the analogue of good taste and critical judgement. It is privately owning and housing a collection that fosters this kind of relationship along with personal care, investment, and sense of personal responsibility. Public collections or rarely-encountered artworks that go untouched in museums are unlikely to inspire such an intimate relationship. Rather, it occurs in the context of everyday aesthetics.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that vinyl records as copies can have auras and share epistemic, ethical, and aesthetic value similar to those of originals, found by Korsmeyer in genuine works and by Benjamin in books. I have argued that the tension between Korsmeyer's views, with their roots in Benjamin's *Work of Art*, and Benjamin's contrasting perspective in *Unpacking My Library* can be resolved by distinguishing three senses of 'aura' and showing, first, that individual records and collections can have all three kinds of auras, and second, how touch is integral to the aesthetic experience of records and collections and the ways they connect to the past. Individual records can be original and rare, and collections can be unique. Certain records can have the kind of aura associated with cult value if they have special meaning within a collecting subculture. Records and collections have an aura or surrounding glow that permeates a space with a distinctive atmosphere that is palpably felt as records play. Not only is touch integral to aura in all three senses, but it also allows a connection to the past in ways not offered by objects that are prohibited from being touched. Collectors are connected to the past by the older format of listening to records and by practices of collecting and DJing records that go back decades, to previous owners, times, and places; further, they are connected to their own past through their collections. An intimate and

meaningful relationship between collector and collection develops through a practice of collecting records despite their being copies, a relationship available only because collections are privately owned and safeguarded.

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