



2014

american  
institute for  
conservation

Preserving Cultural  
Heritage



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## TOWARD AN ONTOLOGY OF AUDIO PRESERVATION

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*This study examines a selection of philosophical frameworks that influence decision-making in audio preservation. Issues of reproduction and digitization, materiality, and the acceptance of change are considered and contextualized among other conservation specialties. Comparisons are drawn between audio recordings, fine art, and library materials, with attention to general and special collections concepts. A spectrum of authenticity is proposed and applied to three real-world case studies to demonstrate the utility of philosophical constructs as applied to audio preservation programs and techniques.*

KEYWORDS: *Digitizing audio, Audio preservation*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Since Thomas Edison invented the phonograph in 1877, the field of audio recording has been subject to rapid change. Format obsolescence has been a regular occurrence, as media ranging from proprietary transcription formats to MiniDiscs have passed from popular use in a matter of years or decades. Physical and chemical degradation have also impacted recording media, as audio carriers have employed unstable modern materials like cellulose acetate tape and polyester polyurethane binder. Preservation responses to this volatile environment rely heavily on reformatting, which in recent years has taken the form of digitization. Like other preservation reformatting strategies, such as newspaper microfilming and nitrate film duplication, digitization separates recorded content from its historical carrier, placing that content in a more easily accessible technological environment. Unlike other reformatting strategies, digitization transfers content away from physical media entirely, transforming it into digital information that may be expressed in myriad current and future computer-based formats.

While reformatting is a primary strategy in preserving time-based and electronic media, it is less common within other conservation specialties, such as paintings, objects, wooden artifacts, and even books and paper. Practice within these specialties focuses more frequently on preserving original media, which are often judged to embody some part of an item's value. Though original media are also saved in audio preservation, they infrequently receive the primary, artifactual consideration typically afforded them in other specialties.

Given such differences in preservation practice, it may be useful to examine the philosophical

underpinnings and implications of audio preservation strategies, specifically reformatting and preserving original media. What philosophical frameworks may underlie preservation decision making, particularly as significant audio content is moved away from original media and toward future digital manifestations?

### 2. WALTER BENJAMIN AND THE MEANING OF REPRODUCTION

A starting point for discussing audio media, with their inherently reproducible qualities, is Walter Benjamin's influential 1936 essay, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Benjamin's analysis begins with the concept of aura, roughly defined as the uniqueness that lends a piece of art its authority. Reproduction challenges the aura of the original, and reproduced copies cannot reproduce aura. As Benjamin explains, even a perfect copy lacks the distinctive physical condition and ownership history of the original (Benjamin 1936/1969, 220).

One can relatively easily imagine how Benjamin's logic might apply in the fine art world. Consider, for example, a Renaissance painting and a photograph of that painting. A casual museum visitor would likely feel that viewing the original painting was in some way a more meaningful experience than viewing its photograph. But does Benjamin's reasoning apply to an audio recording as neatly? Consider a master tape and its many duplicated, commercially released cassettes. Assuming roughly equivalent audio quality, would a casual listener perceive a substantial difference between original recording and commercially duplicated copy?

The example of the duplicated cassette highlights a subtle dissonance in Benjamin's argument. Benjamin's