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To cite this article: Imar de Vries & Isabella van Elferen (2010) The Musical *Madeleine*: Communication, Performance, and Identity in Musical Ringtones, *Popular Music and Society*, 33:1, 61-74, DOI: [10.1080/03007760903142756](https://doi.org/10.1080/03007760903142756)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03007760903142756>



Published online: 07 Jan 2010.



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The Musical *Madeleine*: Communication, Performance, and Identity in Musical Ringtones

Imar de Vries and Isabella van Elferen

In this paper, we consider musical cell-phone ringtones as virtual, communicative and cultural performances. They appear unpredictably, they are interpreted by variegated and dynamic audiences, and they establish stages upon which cultural meanings are portrayed. We will argue that the musical ringtone functions as a musical madeleine in Marcel Proust's sense, an involuntary mnemonic trigger of a complex web of individual and collective memories. Having this quality, the ringtone lends itself perfectly to the performative manifestation and display of (sub)cultural identities in the public sphere. We will illustrate these workings of the ringtone by way of a small case study taken from gangsta rap culture, the song and ringtone "Candy Shop" by 50 Cent.

Introduction

In the space of only three decades, mobile telephones have grown from bricklike and inconspicuous attempts to bring communication out in the open into immensely sophisticated small computer devices that have become as commonplace a personal accessory as, say, wallets and keys. Undoubtedly, this process of "mobilization," as George Myerson (6–7) calls it, has had and continues to have a considerable impact on how we, as social beings, experience the network of connections we share with other people. More than at any other time, digitally mediated communication can instantly connect singular and floating points in a communication network, making the mobile phone a unique designator of one's place among others. Moreover, as the cell phone does not only offer ultimate connectivity but can also be personalized through photos, films, and ringtones, it can be considered as a potentially omnipresent, high-profile locus of identity tokens. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin, unpacking one's phonebook, diary, picture library, or text messages will disclose reflections of one's constructed self, consisting of memories of lived experience: my phone is not only where I am, but also *who* I am.

It is no wonder, then, that the mobile phone is so often studied as a representation of one's economic, social, and cultural capital. It is a fashion statement, a means

to exchange gifts in the form of text jokes or photographs, a catalyst of doing business, a direct line to friends and family, a way to establish and confirm group norms and values. Outwardly displaying these various forms of capital has always been an important aspect of social behavior, and this has become even more apparent with the advent of the mobile phone and its pervasive use in public: the practice of temporarily laying the mobile phone on a table in a café or restaurant, for instance, has already been recognized by social anthropologists as showing off personal taste as well as claiming territory (Plant 33).

In this tension between public display and private use, the mobile phone is bound to capture attention, and arguably no more so than through its ringtone. Its sudden presence in almost every conceivable environment causes it to act as the inescapable announcer of the start of a mobile phone conversation. Even though it can be perceived as merely an irritating noise, we should not be tempted to discard the ringtone as an unimportant object of study. Returning to Benjamin, ringtones (and especially musical ringtones) can function as signifiers of various types of cultural libraries which the owner of a mobile phone carries with her. Moreover, more than clothes or perfume—which also project cultural values—the musical ringtone connects its audience to the vast and powerful world of music, and therefore provides ample room for shared and globally distributed experiences and values.

While the proliferation of mobile phones in the global mediascape has sparked a sizable amount of research into the various uses and impacts of that small apparatus everyone totes around, not so much scholarly attention has been paid to the announcer of its presence, the ringtone.¹ In this article we will describe how this often overlooked element of mobile telephony plays an important part in its use as a symbol of economic, social, and cultural capital. We will do so by studying the ringtone as a virtual communicative and cultural performance. It is virtual because it is always silently present and potentially activated; it is a communicative performance because it works as a sign projected by the callee and interpreted by an audience; it is a cultural performance because it employs the performative faculty of this communicative act in order to stage cultural meanings for its potential audience. By approaching the ringtone from these different but overlapping angles, a composite picture is drawn of its potential workings, functions, and meanings; in order to illustrate these various layers we will analyze the case of mobile dispersion of gangsta rap culture through the “Candy Shop” ringtone by 50 Cent. Our aim in this article is thus to conceptualize the ringtone and its cultural work rather than to make absolute claims regarding its meanings—it is *the ways in which possible meanings are generated* that we are interested in. The data provided by Heikki Uimonen’s research into ringtone distribution and use in Finnish youth culture constitute our empirical basis.

Ringtones in the Performative Space of Mobile Communication

A useful framework for analyzing human social behavior has long been provided by sociologist Erving Goffman, whose work has influenced many recent scholars

of mobile communication in their methodological approach (cf. Geser; Ling; Plant). In his seminal *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman proposed to capture the way people present themselves and their activities to others in terms of a theatrical performance, played on a stage. Although this metaphor has been criticized for being too broad to work as a verifiable analytical tool (cf. Drew and Wootton), the dramaturgical approach offers valuable ways of describing how people construct and present their identity within everyday life, an activity that has become especially manifest in the mobile age. We will shortly explore Goffman's theory in order to understand the ringtone's performative nature.

In every social encounter, Goffman argues, we realize that the impression we make on others depends on the signals we give them. Therefore, in order to keep this impression as close to our "real" selves as we want it to be, it is necessary to present the signals in ways that we think will lead to "correct" interpretations. Such a presentation of self Goffman calls a performance, one that continuously adapts itself either to changes in the social setting the performance is played in or to signals received from others as a result of the performance. At the same time, unconscious—mostly nonverbal—signals are projected onto and received by others, thereby creating a complex web of signs which the performer tries to gauge and control. This web is the *front*, "the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance" (Goffman 22). The impression that is made on others is thus comprised of and based on sending active and passive signals, which form a *facade* that is performed by one or more individuals—Goffman labels them *teams*—in front of an audience (of one or more individuals), in a certain social setting, using several performance techniques.

Telephonic communication in general and mobile communication in particular present us with a special performative situation. In unmediated forms of human interaction we can usually point out a singular performative space, as these kinds of interaction are mostly situated within a single geographical location or fixed locale. In a typical act of communication between people using mobile phones, however, we can distinguish *two* types of performance, which we would like to term *inner* and *outer performance*.² The inner performance is a result of a caller actively setting up a connection with another person,³ and is played out as a one-to-one conversation using the connection as a stage. Here, two callers each play their part as a one-person team, with the other acting as an audience. At the same time, however, an outer performance by both callers emerges within their respective geographical locations, in front of a chance audience that is physically present in their surroundings. Especially with mobile phones, which are unattached to physical locations, manifold chance audiences are readily in attendance.

By thus acting in a double performative setting, the signals a mobile phone user gives during a conversation are dispersed over multiple channels. Both performances obviously use speech as a way to control which signals are given and received, but the outer performance also uses, as we have seen in unmediated communication, mostly *unconsciously* projected non-verbal signs. What renders this outer performance

in mobile communication especially interesting, though, is that, at the callee's side, it starts with a non-verbal but often very much *consciously chosen* sign, namely the ringtone. This sign is part of what Sadie Plant calls *stage-phoning*, a "unique opportunity to put something of [the callee] on display" (49), and can present a multitude of facts regarding the owner of the mobile phone: a confirmation of her connectedness, her agility with digital artifacts, her knowledge of popular culture, or, especially in case of musical ringtones, her connection with certain songs. On all these functional levels, the ringtone's sudden disclosure initiates a culturally contextualized signal.

It is this property of facilitating culturally loaded outer performances that can be identified as one of the core characteristics of the mobile phone, and that can be held responsible for the increasing social awareness of cell-phone conversations in public. Much has been said about the disruptive nature of mobile phones, as they have the ability to invade almost every social setting and break common social patterns. The most disruptive characteristic of the mobile phone, however, is undoubtedly the ringtone, as it precedes any actual mobile conversation and pervades social settings uncalled for.

Specific social settings are usually connected to specific facades, that is, they construct semi-fixed culturally determined performances carried out by easily identifiable teams. In order to expose appropriate behavior, each actor in a team will try to conform to social and cultural conventions belonging to the setting. When an actor does not know these norms or laws, or when team loyalty fails, the performance can be disrupted or be disruptive for the audience. Interestingly, the ringtone's socially disruptive nature is actually actively employed to help construct an outer performance. Moreover, the ringtone *needs* to be disruptive in order to have any impact on the initial structure of the outer performance. What may appear as "a situation of normlessness" (Geser 23–24) can actually be understood as a carefully orchestrated moment of self-presentation. With its continuous albeit hidden presence in the public sphere, the ringtone—when activated—thus engenders a performative process taking place between the callee and her surroundings. That is to say, a ringtone can be considered a cultural performance in Erika Fischer-Lichte's definition (*Ästhetische Erfahrung* 287f.), working through *mise-en-scène*, embodiment, perception, and appropriation.

Ringtones Are Real

Having established that the ringtone is both a communicative and a cultural performance, the questions are which possible meanings these performances entail and which messages they transmit to their audience. In order to answer these questions, we shall first determine the medium-specific characteristics of the ringtone—is it music broadcast by way of a wireless medium, a wireless message in the shape of music, or a wireless commercial?

Following Adorno and Horkheimer's line of argument, Gabriele Klein and Malte Friedrich (83ff.) argue that the convergence of digital media technology,

telecommunication, and entertainment in global cultural industries has resulted in a complete merger of technology and content. As an example of this development, Klein and Friedrich describe the music video, which is marketing device, image and branding medium, and artistic expression at the same time. This argument holds true even more for the ringtone. What started out as simple gadgetry has grown into one of the most promising branches of the current music industry.⁴ The enormous commercial as well as artistic success of the ringtone as a musical medium is not only the result of the capitalist laws feared by Adorno and Horkheimer. The new medium of mobile phoning has rather enabled the cultural industry of music to expand its artistic and communicative horizon. Whereas recording technologies liberated music from the stage, mobile technology overcomes even the physical limitations of broadcast media. A similar point is made by du Gay *et al.* in their assessment of the cultural meaning of the Sony Walkman. The ringtone's cultural implications are larger even than those of the Walkman or other mobile music devices because of its active presence in public and private communication.

This technological development has had two important consequences for music culture. First, the ringtone emulates the music video as a commercial strategy through the independence of location in mobile technology: whereas MTV was dependent on the static medium of TV for its proliferation, the marketing space of the ringtone has virtually no limits. Music broadcasting has thereby gained both spatial width and audience. Second, the ringtone has integrated music into mobile communication. It transmits cultural messages of variegated content to both intended and unintended listeners, enabling direct interaction between musical content, the cell-phone user and her changeable social environment. The content of mobile communication, in short, consists of music as well as words, text, images.

The ringtone thus epitomizes the convergence of technology, entertainment, telecommunication, and marketing strategies in current cultural industries. The highly technological and commercial form of this medium does not inhibit its artistic expression. Apart from offering an exciting platform for innovative composers of digital music,⁵ the ringtone has a musical authenticity similar to that of other mediated music, and therefore can still be considered "music." Even Adorno held the opinion that the LP could render a musical perfection unequalled by most live performances; mass reproduction and mediatization, therefore, do not necessarily diminish music's authenticity or meaning. Adorno's statement led Simon Frith (*Performing Rites* 229) to conclude that "'liveness', whether defined in social or in physiological terms, is not essential to musical meaning."

In terms of communication, furthermore, recorded music conveys strong messages. Whether this message is related to "liveness" (for instance, in the case of a DVD registration of an "unplugged" music session), to purely musical aspects (for instance, in the case of a digitally edited video to a sampled pop song), or to extramusical aspects (for instance, in the case of a film soundtrack), the recording underlines and strengthens musical expression rather than diminishing its Benjaminian aura. Philip Auslander (61–111) even argues that live music and

mediatized music have become inseparably intertwined both in their production and in their reception. “Rock authenticity” is called forth by a combination of live performance of a song, its auditory or visual reproduction, and its technologically enhanced reiteration, for instance in the shape of a ringtone. Just as seeing Clapton on DVD calls forth not only the memory but indeed the re-experience of seeing him live—and endorses a certain “thereness” even if one has not actually witnessed a live performance (cf. Frith *Performing Rites* 235f.)—hearing a ringtone calls forth the experience of hearing the song that it plays. The qualitative inferiority of mono- and polyphonic ringtones has only a little influence on the remembrance, re-experience, and re-enactment of former hearings of the same song: as Proust’s famous *petit madeleine* (57–59) demonstrates, the power of memory hardly fades through time or mediation:⁶ the synesthetic workings of memory induce the calling forth of a multi-sensual complex of remembrances at the encounter of even the smallest, mono-sensual mnemonic trigger. Tia DeNora (46–74) has demonstrated how this mnemonic power of music, furthermore, can make it function as a Foucauldian “technology of the self,” linking musically induced memories to notions of self and identity.

The empirical user research conducted by Heikki Uimonen confirms these theoretical contemplations. Ringtone marketing revolves around aspects of the music that is on display, not of the phone, indicating the primary importance of music over mediation (Uimonen 51). Ringtone users, too, are concerned with the connotations and memories of the song that is played, not with the device that mediates it. Uimonen’s interviewees (55) are very eager to point out that they made sure *not* to select, for instance, Britney Spears ringing tones, for fear of being associated with the connotations of Spears’s music. Such concerns demonstrate that a ringtone’s connotations have primary importance in its cultural functioning and appropriation. It is the subjective and collective meanings attached to a song, rather than to its ringtone mediation, that constitute the possible meanings of a ringtone. The ringtone is therefore not more and not less than the *mémoire involontaire* of a song, just like any other music recording.⁷ It embodies the same meanings and transmits the same messages as the song that it is molded upon.

If we consider ringtones as cultural performances on the one hand and as musical communications on the other, it follows that what are being performed are the cultural meanings of the music being played. In other words, ringtones enable users to appropriate and display the meanings attached to their ringtone in the outer circle of mobile communication. A Goth girl, for instance, whose phone plays a Bauhaus song publicly confirms her belonging to the Goth community. It is important to note that the performative dimension of the ringing tone is always at work, whether or not intended: the disruptive sound of the ringtone *must* be heard by what Hillel Schwartz has termed “the indefensible ear” (487), and it *will* stimulate the listener’s cultural memory. However non-analytical and fuzzy inattentive listening is, it still is *listening*, and it will still generate memories, thoughts, meanings—the Muzak company thrives on this principle.

Unlike the static musical media of television and radio, the ringtone, like the iPod and the car radio, is mobile and therefore interacts differently with its environment. The constant re-contextualization of a song through the mobility of the cell-phone user may cause variations on its original connotations, messages, or meanings.⁸ If the above-mentioned Goth girl had the latest Justin Timberlake ringtone, the cultural meanings attached to that artist would acquire a different reading. Moreover, it would matter greatly whether Timberlake's "Gothic" performance would sound in the neutral environment of a bus or train or in the circle of the girl's Goth friends. Whereas attentive bus passengers around the girl might at most be somewhat puzzled by the apparent subcultural conflict being enacted, fellow Goths might be genuinely appalled by it, to the extent even of doubting the girl's "Gothic authenticity" and her loyalty to the subculture.⁹ A ringtone will be heard by undefended ears and its cultural memory will be called forward by in/attentive listeners, but the manner of its appropriation and the meanings that emerge in the process may vary. Even in the globalized cultural industry, therefore, local appropriations of musical products still exist and can cause unpredictable differences (cf. Klein and Friedrich 92).

As the ringtone adds the dimension of mobility to the cultural performance of music, the appropriation and attached meaning of one and the same piece of music may vary according to its location (cf. Carter and Liu). Like the Walkman and the iPod, the ringtone is an explicitly spatial medium, intricately linking together time, space, and communication (cf. Thibaud). Unlike those media, moreover, the ringtone—and therefore its performative effect—is public. The ringtone, in short, proves to be a powerful communicative medium: the combination of the mobility and public character of the cell phone with musical messages and their strong cultural connotations has created a medium generating very effective cultural performances.

Ringtones and the Performance of (Sub)Cultural Identity

In his paper "Self and Community in the New Floating Worlds," Kenneth J. Gergen argues that where many of the 20th-century's major technologies have "functioned corrosively with respect to the traditional, face-to-face community," the mobile phone "offers the possibility for continuous and instantaneous reconnection of participants within face-to-face groups" (104–05). This restoration of community does not take a traditional form, however, but one Gergen terms a "floating world" (*ibid.*). Here, he refers to a description from nineteenth-century Japan of free and informal social interchange that takes place in small and loosely connected communities, free from government or other authority control. The new floating worlds of mobile phone users, Gergen argues, replicate the uninhibitedness and unbound nature of communication within those communities. Yet, while nineteenth-century floating worlds were "literally 'grounded' . . . the floating world of the mobile phone user is approaching the point of geographic irrelevance" (106).

The floating worlds of mobile technology have thus changed the conditions for the understanding of self and community from boundedness and centeredness

to relational connectedness through mobile phones. Following cyber-network theories, Joshua Meyrowitz (99) adds that this new sense of identity can be identified as “glocalized,” the term stressing both global connectivity and local attachment. These characteristics of mobile phone communities extend also to their cultural identities. Individual and collective cultural identities are no longer constituted or definable solely via physical location, but reach over the borders of time, space, and mediation.

Musical subcultures, in line with these developments, have globalized both in scope and in reach. Various theorists have stressed that locally confined subcultural scenes now operate translocally through mediation and commercialization (cf. Coulombe). The feeling of belonging that is so crucial for the self-definition of subcultures has thus come to apply to glocal networks as well as to locally bound communities (Klein and Friedrich 94–99).¹⁰ The ringtone can function as an active marker of the new floating (sub)cultural communities and their outward appearance, attaching the cultural memory of a certain song to both caller and callee. The disruptive social quality of this medium, moreover, makes sure that the audience, voluntarily or involuntarily, witnesses this cultural performance. Because of its necessarily public character, the ringtone establishes the auditory boundaries of floating subcultures to their participants as well as to outsiders.

Milena Droumeva asserts that the ringtone subjects audiences to the mobile phone owner’s personal soundscape design, leading to a polluted public soundscape and to a “lack of real community” (2–4). This negative evaluation of the ringtone’s communicative potentialities is based on Schafer’s (273) notion of the schizophrenic separation of a sound and its original context and meanings. According to this theory, the detachment of sound from source equals loss of meaning. However, although a constant re-contextualization is one of the main features of mobile music, the variable times, places, and social contexts of the performed music will engender subtle variations in its embodied cultural meanings rather than completely alter or even eliminate them. As has been argued above, we consider the ringtone as the *mémoire involontaire* of a song; like the *madeleine* dipped in lime-blossom tea, this seemingly minute medium inevitably stirs strong memories to which new contexts make additions rather than radical alterations. A strong cultural marker such as the ringtone confirms rather than endangers subcultural belonging through this instantaneous invocation of listeners’ musical history, since the sharing of (musical) experiences and meanings is the stuff that communities are made of.

One reason why the mnemonic working of the ringtone is so strong can be found in the great performative power of music. Simon Frith (“Music and Identity”) has argued that the performative working of music can be explained in large part by the strong connection between the subjective and the collective in musical experiences. Because music induces both individual and shared emotions and memories, the listener can identify both with the musical performers in question and with their audience. Hearing a ringtone and experiencing the cultural memory it embodies can thus induce identification processes in inner—as the callee attaches musically derived

meanings to the caller—as well as outer communication—as the callee’s surrounding attaches similarly constructed meanings to her. These listener groups can recognize and identify with subcultural conventions in any aspect of the cultural performance of a ringtone; the example of the Goth girl’s ringtone described above illustrates the various possible types of recognition and identification, all stirred by the connection between personal and collective cultural memories in musical experience.

As has been argued from both a cultural and a musicological viewpoint, performance and performativity are important factors in the construction of social identities (Butler ch.4; Frith *Performing Rites* 271–77). Cultural identity can be considered a cultural performance acquiring meaning in interaction with an audience (Fischer-Lichte *Ästhetik des Performativen* 284–317). Musical ringtones are attributed meaning in an interactive way as well: the social environment of the callee recognizes the subcultural conventions embedded in the ringtone and establishes the callee’s attachment to them. Simultaneously, this audience will, however subconsciously, establish their own viewpoint of this subcultural field as well (“Oh, it is that song by that artist whom I do/don’t like” or “Don’t know that song, but it sounds like Snoop Dogg” or “Never heard that song in my life and I do/don’t care”). The ringtone can therefore be considered as a cultural performance of subcultural identity operating both within floating communities and, because of its disruptively auditory quality, in their immediate surroundings.

Subcultural Ringtones: “Candy Shop” and Floating Fabulousness

As we have argued in the previous section, the ringtone, understood as a cultural and communicative performance, co-shapes the floating worlds of musical subcultures. Because of their mobility, mobile phones enable their users to carry with them a multitude of identity tokens and to present these in public, making them “float” out in the open. Just as with the Walkman and the iPod these identity tokens can take the powerful shape of music, but, unlike the sound coming through a headphone or earpieces, the ringtone is heard by an audience. This makes the ringtone an extremely prominent means to establish, confirm, or even question an alliance with specific musical subcultures.

Carrying and almost flaunting a specific ringtone and its cultural connotations can, because of the performative nature of such an act, thus be seen as a way to (re)negotiate how this alliance with musical subcultures can be perceived. Through this process, a callee can temporarily become a virtual member of all musical subcultures that, through the possible domain of interpretations, can be connected to her ringtone. The examples shown in the section “Ringtones Are Real” have already illustrated this; we would briefly like to discuss another example in which the ringtone and its disruptive, flaunting character works to confirm group allegiance, namely the gangsta rap scene.

Street credibility is a key phrase in gangsta subculture. Hip-hop artists who cannot convincingly demonstrate having lived a hard life in the ghetto will be dismissed

by their peers and fail in the music industry (Armstrong). Identity is indeed constructed performatively in gangsta culture: it is the surroundings of a hip-hop artist that confirm and indeed determine the credibility of her/his performance as a gangsta or a pimp (cf. Snyder 189ff.). Surely certain aspects of “ghetto fabulousness” have been commoditized—but obtaining a big car, shiny jewelry, fur coats, and the latest phone does not make one a gangsta. Ghetto fabulousness can be acquired only performatively, in interactive relation to one’s surroundings.

Hip-hop performer 50 Cent (Curtis Jackson) carries the visual tokens of street life with him. He was allegedly shot nine times in a street fight, and explicitly markets his scars as a sign of his genuine gangsta identity: according to his official website www.50cent.com, 50 is

the real deal, the genuine article. He’s a man of the streets, intimately familiar with its codes and its violence, but still, 50, an incredibly intelligent and deliberate man, holds himself with a regal air as if above the pettiness which surrounds him 50 is real, so he does real things.

Since 50 Cent apparently has what it takes to belong to the gangsta subculture, it is interesting to analyze one of his songs and its ringtone according to the theoretical framework laid out in this paper in order to study their performative effects.

The song “Candy Shop” appeared on 50’s album *The Massacre* from 2005. The song was a big hit throughout the United States and Europe, not in the least because of its video, which closely tied together the auditory and visual representation of a pimp fantasy. The text is a typical hip-hop boast celebrating the singer’s bedside manners, referring also to his own former work¹¹ and thereby reinforcing his status in the gangsta hip-hop world. The story is situated in the fantasy world of a candy shop, in which both the shape and taste of those delicacies are clearly to be interpreted metaphorically.

The visuals of the video elaborate on the sensual fantasy laid out in the text. The fantasy world is set in a large mansion, which is accessed by the singer in a big “pimp” car. Inside the pastel-colored interior of the mansion we find ladies who dance, who bathe in chocolate, and who emerge from seemingly lifeless paintings and statues—naturally all in service of the protagonist of the story. At the end of the video, the latter finds himself having fallen asleep in front of a drive-in restaurant, and only having dreamt all the sweetness.

The music to “Candy Shop” underlines both the fantasy and the sensual aspects of the song text. The chromatic sample which dominates the musical outline of the song evokes overtones of the exotic, an effect supported by the instrumentation in low strings and the Dionysian flutes in the chorus. The melodic ornamentation appearing regularly in the flute sample is another reference to oriental exoticism. The heavily syncopated drum samples playing against the on-beat synthesizer chords and chromatic samples, finally, accentuate the sensuality of the song’s theme. In the video, the beat sets in only when the door to the mansion has been opened and one of the

girls begs 50 Cent to enter, indicating that the fantasy starts then and there. Upon the singer's waking up in his car, the music stops abruptly: the fantasy's over.

The ringtone to "Candy Shop" is a very brief but effective musical condensation of the song. It summarizes its key characteristics, playing only the chromatic bass line, the on-beat synthesizer chords, and the flute sample. Whereas both instrumentation and melody of this short extract of the song already are powerful reminders of its musical and textual atmosphere, an added melodic grace note makes sure that the exotic mood is captured in these few seconds. The disruptiveness and performative capacity of this powerful musical *madeleine* will inevitably induce individual and collective memories related to music, video, artist, or gangsta subculture in the audience. Since a ringtone is consciously chosen, listeners will contemplate the callee's and possibly their own relation to it. The floating subculture of which this ringtone marks the cultural memory is that of gangsta rap, and by unpacking his mobile music library its carrier stages a cultural performance of what in a paraphrastic manner could be called "floating fabulousness".

Floating fabulousness is about flaunting ghetto style, about allegiance to or knowledge of gangsta culture, and about communicating this subcultural position with musical signs that are always virtually present, irrespective of one's geographical location or social situation. Loosely connected to a heterogeneous multitude of floating subcultural communities, the mobile-phone owner knows that when her ringtone sounds it will immediately start a performative and communicative process that subtly transmits messages regarding musical and subcultural identity. The above analysis of how ghetto fabulousness is transposed into floating fabulousness through the use of the "Candy Shop" ringtone is but one illustration of this aspect of mobile communication, and presents a useful perspective on how to approach other performative acts in which ringtones function to initiate culturally contextualized performances.

Conclusion

As virtual, communicative, and cultural performances, musical ringtones have the inherent capacity to function as publicly disseminated *madeleines*, which suddenly announce themselves and disrupt everyday social situations. For this reason, ringtones can be seen as a means to actively display and communicate a loyalty to floating subcultures, as well as triggers for cultural performances within the spatial sphere of the ringtone's carrier. The flaunting character of these performances lends itself perfectly to the display of fabulousness: hearing a ringtone *will* induce mnemonic reflections.

Our findings concern musical ringtones primarily. Sound effects or recorded speech can equally invoke communicative and cultural performances, but we consider the vast array of individual and shared musical memories to be significantly more powerful in invoking "*madeleine* trails" and in manifesting (sub)cultural identities. This does not mean that we think that the functioning of ringtones as communicative

and cultural performances is established only when complete songs are played; even the smallest musical unit, such as, say, a bass line or a vocal timbre, can open up a whole archive of other songs—and unpack their (sub)cultural libraries. It is exactly this aspect of ringtones that has made them such a successful expansion of the music industries—they establish an ultra-short commercial not only for a certain song, but also for the whole range of connotations attached to the song itself, the artist, the album, the accompanying music video (if any), and other, similar artists.

The owner of a ringtone, moreover, carries these connotations with her, and, by adding this cultural marker to her physical appearance, she brands the ringtone just as much as it brands her. As commercial ringtones are distributed and acquired predominantly via digital media, the ringtone thus makes e-commerce emerge in offline life in a literally corporeal form.

Our conceptualization of ringtone communication, finally, raises questions regarding the nature of, and scholarly approach to, mobile music. Just like other forms of mobile music, such as boomboxes or loud car radios, the ringtone is a mnemonic trigger that publicly marks subcultural belonging, but, differently from these, the moment of its sounding is unexpected, unannounced, virtual, disruptive. Like the Walkman and the iPod, the ringtone serves a personalized soundscape tailored to the user's likings as well as to her body, but, unlike these, its sounding is necessarily public. Most importantly, however, the ringtone entails a rich amount of cultural information and is able to communicate that information in an extremely short period of time and often in extremely poor quality. Its strong reliance on the listener's musical memory work forces us to interrogate the thin line between the earworm we carry around in our heads and the sounding music on boomboxes or iPods. To what extent should mobile music be distinguished from virtual music, the music that is always-already there in our heads, ready to be awakened? The ringtone demonstrates that it takes only a musical bite the size of a *madeleine* for such virtual musical worlds to be activated; thus it should be evaluated in the space between mobile music and musical memory.

Notes

- [1] With the notable exception of recent work by Sumanth Gopinath.
- [2] It is important to note that we distinguish our use of *inner* and *outer* from that of Sadie Plant, who uses similar terms to describe two forms of mobile phone use “[a]mong small groups of friends or associates”: *innies* take to themselves and try to shield mobile conversations from group interaction, whereas *outies* tend to integrate their mobile phone usage into ongoing proceedings (Plant 32–33).
- [3] Except, of course, in cases where the caller accidentally calls a person without knowing it, for instance when redial or preference keys are pressed when tucking away the mobile phone in a tight space.
- [4] In 2005, the US music industry had a revenue of \$12 billion; \$600 million came from selling ringtones (Gundersen).
- [5] See for instance <http://ringtonesociety.com/>.
- [6] Cf. also Deleuze and Guattari (291–309) on the (de- and re-territorializing) mnemonic powers of music and its functioning as *mémoire involontaire*.

- [7] This is an important extension of Caroline Basset's idea (352) of the mobile phone as a mnemonic operator.
- [8] Cf. Fischer-Lichte's analysis of emergent meanings in aural performances (*Ästhetik des Performativen* 209–26).
- [9] If, very hypothetically, she were a member of some postmodern eclectic art scene, her combination of two musical lifestyles might be considered perfectly original and acceptable.
- [10] One of the results of these developments is the critical reworking of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) subculture theory. This is not the place to discuss the distinctions between subcultures, neotribes, *Bünde*, and scenes. For brevity's sake we will employ the term subculture here for less or more coordinated, music-based youth cultures, without attaching stringent or generalizing characteristics to them.
- [11] "Got the magic stick", for instance, is a reference to "P.I.M.P.," the song with (among others) Snoop Dogg that established 50 Cent's fame and career.

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