

## Look What You Made Me Redo: Memory and Meaning in Taylor Swift's Rerecordings

*In this moment now capture it, remember it  
'Cause I don't know how it gets better than this*  
Taylor Swift in "Fearless," 2008

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Taylor Swift in "Fearless (Taylor's Version)," 2021

Back in 2008, Romeo and Juliet got married. It was bold for an 18-year-old girl to retell Shakespeare's most famous play with a happy ending, but Taylor Swift's single *Love Story* debuted number 4 in the Billboard Hot 100 chart. Thirteen years later, Swift proves to be even bolder—fearless, one could say—by retelling her own most famous play. *Love Story (Taylor's Version)* still debuted number 11 in Billboard last Valentine's Day, anticipating Swift's third number 1 album debut in less than a year. *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* dropped on April 9th, and it marked the beginning of the artist's most ambitious project so far. Taylor Swift is about to regain ownership of her discography by releasing copycat versions of her own albums, cleverly referred to as the *Taylor's Versions*.

Unlike her last two albums, Swift's re-release of *Fearless* did not come unannounced. After her old label Big Machine Records, managed by Scott Borchetta, was sold to entertainment entrepreneur Scooter Braun's Ithaca Holdings, the popstar expressed discomfort in a June 2019 Tumblr post. She claimed not to have been offered a chance to purchase her masters—the official original recording of a piece of music—and to have “learned about Scooter Braun's purchase (...) as it was announced to the world.” In particular, Swift seemed extremely disappointed that her “musical legacy is about to lie in the hands of someone who tried to dismantle it.” She accused Scooter Braun of “incessant, manipulative bullying” for years and reminded the public about

how in 2016 Kim Kardashian had released a phone call between her and Kanye West, Kim's husband and Swift's sworn enemy since the 2009 VMAs, which seemed to authorize West's cursing of Swift on his song *Famous*. After that episode, she says, "Scooter got his two clients [Kanye West and Justin Bieber] together to bully me online about it." The purchase was not reverted despite Swift being "sad and grossed out," but that was not the end. After signing a deal with the Universal Music Group (UMG) which allowed her to keep the rights to future masters, Taylor Swift revealed her plan in a late August interview to CBS: she would re-record the six albums now owned by Braun as soon as the legal clauses stopping her to do so expired.

Swift has since then moved forward with her career. Her first fully-owned album, *Lover*, debuted shortly after the CBS interview in August 2019. She released two surprise new albums during the 2020 quarantine that represented a significant departure from her older music—and *folklore*, the first of them, won the highest prize at the 2021 Grammys. Yet, Taylor Swift has simultaneously reminded fans and the media about the re-recording project, constantly phrasing it as the empowerment of an artist against the bureaucracy of the music industry. Swift's quest to revolutionize the legal discourse on copyrights and the relationship between artists and labels leans towards success as *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* breaks record after record—recently, Taylor Swift dethroned The Beatles for most leading debuts in a year. However, the rhetoric move of a re-recording exposes the fickleness paving the way to the popstar's success, prompting a much broader discussion about Art. Swift's not-so-new album questions the very concept of pop music, and it shows that contemporary aesthetics ultimately depends on our relationship to ourselves.

To understand Swift's re-recordings in this broader context, one must first recognize that pop albums are not only pieces of music but also products. The original and the new *Fearless* are works of art, but there is a commercial aspect which lies at the heart of Swift's argument with

Braun. As she writes on her Tumblr,

I walked away because I knew (...) Scott Borchetta would sell the label, thereby selling me and my future. I had to make the excruciating choice to leave behind my past. Music I wrote on my bedroom floor and videos I dreamed up and paid for from the money I earned playing in bars, then clubs, then arenas, then stadiums. (...) Now Scooter has stripped me of my life's work, that I wasn't given an opportunity to buy.

Underlying Taylor Swift's rant is her discomfort with the idea that something she produced is now owned by someone else. Economist Karl Marx has identified this feeling of discomfort in the context of nineteenth-century Europe when he coined the term *alienation*. In an early manuscript, he defines alienation as the process through which "the worker puts his life into the object, but now his life no longer belongs to him but to the object" (72). Much like the original *Fearless* album to Swift, the labour of a worker "becomes an object (...) that exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, (...) a power of its own confronting him" (72). Due to the capitalist mode of production, the music Swift wrote on her bedroom floor is no longer hers.

To make proper sense of this process of alienation, we have to view pop albums as commodities. Marx writes in *Capital* that a commodity is "an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another" (303). Commodities have human labour embodied in them, so that when looked at "as crystals of this social substance" they are Values (305). Swift is aware of her role in attributing value to *Fearless*: the past she leaves behind and her life's work are clear references to the labour she embodied into the original album, and she even wrote that "when that man [Braun] says 'Music has value', he means its value is beholden to men who had no part in creating it." But the Value of a commodity is two-fold: they have use-values as long as they are useful to a consumer, and they have an exchange-value relatively to other commodities "as the proportion in which values in use of one

sort are exchanged for those of another sort” (304). Whereas the exchange-value of Swift’s albums is apparent in many ways—the sale of the label, the money she earned “playing in bars” to pay for the productions—, there is a more nuanced debate as to whether a piece of music is indeed *useful* to satisfy our wants. But Marx argues that “the nature of such wants, whether (...) they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference” (303), and also that “to become a commodity a product must be transferred to another, whom it will serve as a use-value, by means of an exchange” (308). Fans serve their fancy by eagerly buying Swift’s albums in either their digital or physical form. They establish the recording as commodities by reinforcing their utility.

Precisely this underestimated and highly unquantifiable use-value is being leveraged by Taylor Swift with the re-recordings. Swift’s strategy consists not on regaining her labour from the original recording of *Fearless*, since as a commodity the album is now alien to her. On the track “It’s Time To Go” from her 2020 album *evermore*, she sings that “he’s [Braun] got my past frozen behind glass, but I’ve got me.” Swift is aware that she, “instead of being in the position to sell commodities in which his labour is incorporated, must be obliged to offer for sale that very labour-power” (Marx, 337). But Marx writes that “nothing can have value without being an object of utility. If the thing is useless, so is the labour contained in it; the labour does not count as labour, and therefore creates no value” (308). With the re-recording, Taylor Swift embodies her remaining labour-power into yet another product in order to disqualify her own labour already embodied in *Fearless* by decreasing the use-value it has to her fans. Consequently, she will decrease the original record’s exchange-value. Put by Marx, this value of *Fearless* is a quantitative relation “constantly changing with time and place (...), accidental and purely relative” (304) to other commodities, such as *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)*. If fans buy and stream the latter much more than the former, their proportion in an exchange changes. A week after the

release of the re-recording, the original *Fearless* has already experienced a performance drop of almost 20% as measured by Billboard (Sisario). *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* is Taylor Swift's successful attempt to render *Fearless* useless.

Beyond *Fearless*, however, the first re-recording is also successfully changing the way we view the relationship between artists and labels. Swift's revolt against the current mode of production in the music industry is essentially a quest for human emancipation, "a restoration of the human world and of human relationships to man himself" (Marx, 46), as she is striving to empower artists as controllers of their own labour-force. The re-recordings, especially to artists, inscribe a sense of community. In yet another viral Tumblr post dated November 2019 about legal threats Taylor Swift had been receiving from Braun and Borchetta, she writes

I feel very strongly that sharing what is happening to me could change the awareness level for other artists and potentially help them avoid a similar fate. The message being sent to me is very clear. Basically, be a good little girl and shut up. Or you'll be punished.

This is a revolt against censorship, against the delimitations "around what is seen and can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak" (8), which is essentially the definition of politics provided by contemporary philosopher Jacques Ranciere. To Ranciere, art is inherently political because aesthetic practices are "ways of doing and making that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility" (8). The current ways of doing and making pop music involve a division between master and songwriting rights. Swift is proposing that "young artists or kids with musical dreams will read this and learn about how to better protect themselves in a negotiation." Her proposal is phrased as the revolt of the good girl, but it is also the insurgence of the poets exiled from the kallipolis. Swift proposes an alternative form of visibility for artists that complicates the labour relationships. The re-recording is an attack on the music industry that

relies on the political power of art.

But *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, as a form of art, also attacks art itself. This album proposes an alternative to the established idea that art must be new. Swift has chosen a “mode of representation,” the re-recording, that is so far uncorrelated to the subject matter, pop music. Ranciere argues this process was central to the recognition of film and photography as legitimate forms of art. He says that these are two examples of mechanical arts due to their initial conception as “techniques of reproduction or transmission” (28). Although Swift is not the first nor will be the last artist to re-record her music, *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* arrives at a time when, besides the listeners, Alexa also has to decide which version of the album to play—and she plays Taylor's Versions, as said by Amazon on their Twitter. *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* pivots a conversation about imitation and originality in pop music, much like Duchamp's readymades and Pierre Menard's Quixote have done to the visual arts and literature. And, as Taylor Swift inserts the re-recording mode of representation into the broader conversation about art and politics, she uncovers a palimpsestic nature of music. Swift revealed that pop albums juxtapose several iterations of themselves with the listener's own interpretation, notes, and translations. Listening to *Fearless* is then an essential part of the process of creating *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*, not necessarily in a linear way.

Because of this introspective conception, the re-recording changes the way we perceive the whole of Taylor Swift's work by offering a redistribution of the sensible. That is, *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* “simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective paths and positions within it” (Ranciere, 7). Firstly, and in agreement with the relative value of a commodity, the re-recording allows one to make better sense of the original *Fearless* through leveraging their commonality. Musicologist Elizabeth

Margulis writes on her book *On Repeat: How Music Plays the Mind* that “repeated encounters with a piece gradually and implicitly teach a listener how to hear it on its own terms,” arguing that repetition “brings the music from a general backdrop of similar pieces toward (...) the microworld of the specific piece” (110). The re-recording is a powerful repetition, for it comes primarily from Swift herself. It significantly detaches the songs in *Fearless* from the general world of country music by making the specificity of each of them much more audible—thus, sensible. And, within the general framework of Taylor Swift’s discography, the re-recordings reinforce the “paths and positions” of each song.

To exemplify the impact that the tracing of a thematic trajectory through commonalities on Swift’s discography has on the sensible, take “The Best Day.” In *Fearless*, this was a lovely piece that an 18-year-old had written to her mom. But Swift revealed in 2015 that her mom was fighting cancer, and in her 2019 album *Lover* she included a very personal song—“Soon You’ll Get Better”—that addresses this situation. Therefore “The Best Day (Taylor’s Version),” which is lyrically and melodically a copy of its 2008 counterpart, is a bittersweet reminder of how Swift’s relationship with her mom was important to her. On a thread titled “What song hits differently 13 years later” on the subreddit r/TaylorSwift posted recently by user 1throwawayor4, several fans point out that they had not recognized the importance of “The Best Day” in the original album, but now they do. The user timelesslords says they

literally just started bawling as soon as I heard it. It sounds practically the same, but just knowing how much Taylor and her mom have been through (and going through similar stuff myself with my mom in the meantime as well) it just hit completely different.

The user reveals how the re-recording made Swift’s trajectory much more visible (audible), and how listening to this song has led them to experience—to bawl, a very sensorial experience—better their own feelings. Many other users describe similar feelings, such as watching their newborn

children while listening to this song, remembering their own teenage years, or mourning their late parents. Their own paths and positions within society—in particular, within their families—are being contrasted to Swift’s via their commonality.

Similarly, breakup hits from *Fearless* became joyful tunes in *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)*. Within Swift’s own trajectory, a woman who is famous for her several past heartbreaks but is now in a serious relationship for over four years with British actor Joe Alwyn, the re-recording of a song like “Forever and Always” carries a dramatic irony. The listener knows that Swift has found true love and so does the singer as a performer, but the singer should not be aware of that as the girl complaining she had felt “so low you can’t feel nothing at all” after Joe Jonas left her. On the same reddit thread timelesslords declares their newly acquired feelings for “The Best Day (Taylor’s Version)”, user kitties\_love\_purrrple chooses “White Horse (Taylor’s Version)” as her greatest ressignified piece. She points out that, when she had first listened to “White Horse,” she was going through the breakup of her “first serious/longer relationship.” The first time she listened to the re-recording, she was next to her long-term partner. “I realized that (...) I’m so much older and wiser, and all the drama I was going through at the time the original song came out basically means nothing now except a young girl’s doomed relationship,” she concludes. This phenomenon explains further why Swift’s new album has a greater use-value to her fans than the old one. It is a valuable human want to be able to express oneself, to feel, to sense. *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)* is better at satisfying this want for it inspires more self-reflection than *Fearless*, so that once the new album is out the old one is no longer useful. The psychological aspect of this process is explained by Margulis. “Repetition draws us into music, and repetition draws music into us,” she argues, “since human beings are fundamentally musical, when we understand more about the musical capacity, we understand more about ourselves” (180). Swift’s

new distribution of the sensible changes not only our perception of the world and of her trajectory, but also of our own position relative to who we were 13 years ago.

The re-recording project is grounded on memory and personal experiences of the listeners, but the resignification of *Fearless* proposed by the new album is more universal than particular. Whereas *Fearless* was an album characterized by a tautology—that it was *Fearless* because it was—the arrival of *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)* inspires the formation of a concept. Friedrich Nietzsche discusses concepts in his work *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, where he writes that a “word becomes a concept insofar as it simultaneously has to fit countless more or less similar cases” (83). The earlier album was akin to the Nietzschean idea of a word: it was an arbitrary linguistic assignment which does not express any real knowledge about the named thing but merely a designation of the “relations of things to men” (82). Now, the word fearless “is not supposed to serve as a reminder of the unique and entirely individual original experience to which it owes its origin, but (...) it simultaneously has to fit countless more or less similar cases” (83). As we compare *Fearless* and *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)*, we are equating unequal things “by overlooking what is individual and actual” (Nietzsche, 83), therefore turning Fearlessness into a concept.

Through conceptualization, Swift is successful because she leverages the Nietzschean arbitrariness with which we accepted her 2008 album as the true *Fearless*. To Nietzsche, truth is “a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished (...), illusions which we have forgotten are illusions” (84). In the booklet to *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)*, Swift writes:

When I think back on the *Fearless* album and all that you turned it into, a completely involuntary smile creeps across my face. This was the musical era in which so many inside jokes were created between us, so many hugs exchanged and hands touched, so

many unbreakable bonds formed.

She describes a sum of human relations with a high degree of embellishment, as seldomly a fan can claim to have exchanged a hug with Swift. One could even argue that this is an indicative of how much fetishism—“a definite social relation between men that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Marx, 321)—the original album has received as a commodity, for the relationship between Swift and her fans is now a relationship between *Fearless* and *Fearless (Taylor’s Version)*. That is the essence of pop music and fan fickleness: there is something irrational and arbitrary about the way we accept “new” hits into our playlists. Swift, due to mechanisms of conceptualization and fetishism, explicitly reminds us that *Fearless* was an illusion.

Paradoxically, that is why the new album has been so successful. As Nietzsche, Taylor Swift believes that “the thing in itself is likewise something quite incomprehensible for the creator of the language and something not in the least worth striving for” (82). The newness in the *Fearless* re-recording is not a newness that replaces the newness of *Fearless*, but one that reveals the absurdity of accepting as *Fearless* the past frozen behind glass by Scooter Braun. One could even argue that this newness also reveals the absurdity with which we approach our own teenage years—to quote the title track, the absurdity of thinking that “it’s the first kiss, it’s flawless, really something.” Swift’s project of re-recording her old albums is not a rewriting of her own history nor of her music. Rather than erasing her past, the singer invites us to feel, to question, and to understand what for us means to be fearless. To revisit our first kisses and ponder whether they were really flawless. And what an arbitrary fabrication of truth, what a sensible illusion that is one’s first kiss! Instead of resignifying the old pieces, Taylor Swift proposes that no meaning was ever intrinsic to the 2008 *Fearless* album. Instead of rejecting

Fearlessness in itself, she allows us to recreate it through our own new metaphors.

When Billboard reported that *Fearless (Taylor's Version)* had debuted number 1, the artist tweeted she was “in the studio all day recording the next one—it’s really so amazing what you all have done here.” Swift, as in the album booklet, recognizes Fearlessness as a construct of the fans. At the same time, she hints that we should start to conceptualize Redness, Speak Nowness, 1989-ness. Interestingly enough, fans were left to guess which era of the popstar they will delve into soon because the anachronism in being a teenager at the age of thirty has been eliminated by *Fearless (Taylor's Version)*. It is unpredictable whether the remaining five re-recorded albums will be as successful as this one, and Swift is aware of how risky her project is. Ultimately, she “can’t know if it gets better than this,” as she sang and resang in the title track. But her path towards success is clear: if Swift gives us new moments to remember and capture, the upcoming Taylor’s Versions stand a chance to transcend their role as commodities and become concepts. Fearlessly, Taylor Swift must take our hands and drag us head first into this nostalgic—and often pleasantly cringy—refabrication of our own past.

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