



POP MUSIC, CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Popular Music, Technology, and the Changing Media Ecosystem

From Cassettes to Stream

Edited by
Tamas Tofalvy · Emília Barna

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Pop Music, Culture and Identity

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Graduate School Humanities and Sociology

University of Tokyo

Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo, Japan

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Tamas Tofalvy
Department of Sociology and
Communication
Budapest University of Technology
and Economics
Budapest, Hungary

Emília Barna
Department of Sociology and
Communication
Budapest University of Technology
and Economics
Budapest, Hungary

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PRAISE FOR *POPULAR MUSIC, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE CHANGING MEDIA ECOSYSTEM*

“Popular music and technology have always been intertwined and co-constituted. With the emergence of digitalization, the meetings of music and technology have changed, possibly diversified, but still stayed dependent on cultural contexts. Tofalvy and Barna have edited a collection that clearly displays these diversified practices of digital music cultures. With examples from different countries, genres and musical communities, *From Cassette to Stream* is breaking new ground for a research area often focusing on Anglo-American examples and discussions.”

—Ann Werner, *Associate Professor of Gender Studies, Södertörn University, Sweden, co-author of Streaming Music (2017)*

“The post-Spotify world of streaming has failed to kill off the cassette tape. Today’s pop music is technologically embedded in an array of different devices, platforms and media. This wide ranging book by a new generation of media scholars tracks a fascinating assortment of case studies from China and Japan through to European underground scenes. It powerfully shows how this digital ecology, arises from the complex interaction of different cultures, technologies and social groups.”

—Trevor Pinch, *The Goldwin Smith Professor of Science and Technology Studies, Cornell University, author of Analog Days: The Invention and Impact of the Moog Synthesizer (2004)*

“This is a timely collection that provides much-needed guidance on how we should navigate the vexing thickets of music in a changing media landscape. The pace of change afflicting music cultures—from taste formations to the dominance of streaming platforms, stylistic transformations to how we discover new music—is bewildering at best and unintelligible at worst. The essays here provide clear-headed thought on the ruptures, continuities and challenges facing contemporary music. The collection will not merely embellish existing debates on music and technological change, but set new agendas running on how we should come to terms with these changes without falling into reductionism, polemic or panic.”

—Nick Prior, *Professor of Cultural Sociology, University of Edinburgh, UK, author of Popular Music, Digital Technology, and Society (2018)*

“With an eclectic collection of chapters, this book provides a significant update on how music and (digital) technologies shape one another, by featuring numerous perspectives on the constant reconfiguration of music through the adoption of new technological affordances and the survival or revival of others. The editors Tamas Tofalvy and Emília Barna have compiled a very informative and influential book that will no doubt appeal to numerous readers interested in all things that have to do with music, cultures, materiality, and (digital) technologies.”

—Dr. Raphaël Nowak, *Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research*

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Emília Barna, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor at the Department of Sociology and Communication of the Budapest University of Technology and Economics, Hungary. She completed a Popular Music Studies Ph.D. program in 2011 at the University of Liverpool. Her main research interests include music scenes and technology; the music industries and digitization; popular music and gender; and cultural labor. Together with Tamás Tófalvy, she has co-edited the volume *Made in Hungary: Studies in Popular Music* (Routledge, 2017). She is a member of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music, and Working Group for Public Sociology “Helyzet.”

Pauwke Berkers, Ph.D. is Associate Professor of Sociology of Art and Culture at the Department of Arts and Culture Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. He has published widely on issues of ethnic/racial and gender inequality in arts and culture in, among others, *Cultural Sociology*, *Gender & Society*, *Journal of Gender Studies*, *Metal Music Studies* and *Poetics*.

Stéphane Costantini, Ph.D. is Doctor in Communication Sciences and Associate Researcher at the University of Paris 13. His work, which relies on socio-economy of cultural and communication industries, focuses on the strategies of industrial players and the practices in the field of digital and collaborative web, and the uses of amateurs and professionals in the music world. A decade of professional experience in the field of cultural

communication (music, audiovisual, theater, copyright) has enabled him to cross-reference the views of cultural and digital world professionals with academic research.

Benjamin Düster is a Ph.D. candidate at Griffith University and an affiliate member of the Griffith Centre for Social and Cultural Research. His research interest focuses on the use of cassettes and the significance of materiality in contemporary music consumption as well as the current dynamics within independent music scenes. He co-authored the chapter “Cassette Cultures in Berlin: Resurgence, DIY Freedom, or Sellout?” (Routledge, 2018) together with Raphaël Nowak.

Jessica Edlom is a Ph.D. student and Adjunct Professor at the Department of Geography, Media and Communication, Karlstad University, Sweden. She is participating in the three-year Interreg research project MECO—Music Eco-systems Inner Scandinavia—focusing on a Scandinavian music industry in transition. Her research areas are strategic communication, brand building, social media, cultural industries, fandom, and audiences. Prior to academia, she worked for 15 years in advertising as a brand strategist and art director, with a focus on branding. She has worked with strategic communication for many different public and private organizations, as well as in the cultural and creative industries.

Zhongwei Li is a Ph.D. research fellow in the Department of Media and Communications at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He holds an M.Phil. in Sociology from the University of Cambridge and a B.A. in Pedagogy from Beijing Normal University. His current research focuses on the ways and means of non-mainstream music consumption, the politics of youth subculture, and the cultural history of Post-Reform China. He has recently completed his doctoral thesis titled *Cut-Out: Music, Profanity, and Subcultural Politics in 1990s China*.

Paolo Magaudda, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor in Sociology of Culture and Communication at the FISPPA Department, University of Padova (Italy), where he is part of the PaSTIS Research Unit (Padova Science Technology & Innovation Studies). His research interests lie at the intersection of science & technology studies, media studies, and cultural sociology. He is especially interested in how musical practices are re-configured by technological innovation. His most recent books are *A*

History of Digital Media. An Intermedia and Global Perspective (with G. Balbi, Routledge, 2018) and *Vite interconnesse. Pratiche digitali attraverso smartphone, app e piattaforme* (in Italian, with M. Driusian and M. Scarcelli, Meltemi 2019). He is co-editor-in-chief of the journals *Tecnoscienza. Italian Journal of Science & Technology Studies* (STS Italia) and *Studi Culturali* (Il Mulino).

Loïc Riom is a Ph.D. candidate at Center for the Sociology of Innovation, Mines-Paristech, PSL University. His areas of interest are live music, cultural infrastructure, and the music-tech sector. He is the winner of the 2015 Young Researcher Award of the French-speaking Branch of Europe of the IASPM and the co-editor with Marc Perrenoud of the book *Musique en Suisse sous le regard des sciences sociales*.

András Rónai, Ph.D. is a music journalist. He is the editor of the Hungarian music industry blog *Dalszerzo.hu* and a freelancer at other prominent Hungarian music magazines including *Recorder*, covering music from mainstream pop to the fringes of experimental scenes. He has a Ph.D. in philosophy, his dissertation *A kifejezés* (Expression) was published in 2017. He is currently working with Anna Szemere on a book about the album *Én leszek a játékszered* (I'll Be Your Plaything) by Bea Palya for the series 33 1/3 with Bloomsbury.

Julian Schaap is Assistant Professor in Sociology of Music at the Department of Arts and Culture Studies, Erasmus University Rotterdam, the Netherlands. His research focuses on social inequalities on the basis of class, gender, and race-ethnicity in (cultural) consumption and production practices, with a focus on (popular) music. His work has been published in journals such as *Consumption Markets & Culture*, *New Media & Society*, *Popular Communication*, and *Sociology*.

Cibrán Tenreiro Uzal, Ph.D. is a Lecturer in Audiovisual Communication at the University of Santiago de Compostela, Spain. His work examines the relations between music and cinema and the creative production of fan communities and scenes. He earned his doctorate with a thesis about fandom and the modes of representation of live music on film. Outside the academy, he works as a cultural journalist and plays in bands like *Esposa* or *Ataque Escampe* and participates in projects like the Galician Bizarre compilations or the Cineclub de Compostela.

Tamas Tofalvy is Associate Professor at the Budapest University of Technology and Economics, Department of Sociology and Communication, head of the Communication and Media Studies major's Digital Media program. He is also fellow at the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Media Research Group and project lead at the MODEM (Hungarian Online and Digital Media History) Project. Between 2013 and 2017, he was Secretary General at the Association of Hungarian Content Providers (MTE) and, between 2010 and 2014, co-founding chair of IASPM Hungary and its sister organization, the Music Networks Association. In 2012–2013, he was a Fulbright fellow at Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

Samira van Bohemen, Ph.D. is a Grant Researcher and Assistant Professor in Popular Culture and Identity Politics at the Department of Public Administration and Sociology at Erasmus University Rotterdam. Her research deals with questions of how young people perceive and practice sexuality and how different technologies, cultural associations, and social inequalities mediate these perceptions and practices. She has published her first study about music as technology of the sexual self in *Poetics*, but also has recent research on techno and ecstasy mediating sexuality forthcoming in cultural sociology. Her work has been made possible by a large research grant awarded by the Dutch Fund for Sexuality Research (FWOS) and an EUR Fellowship grant.

Andrew Whelan, Ph.D. is Senior Lecturer at the School of Humanities and Social Inquiry, University of Wollongong, Australia. His research interests include online music distribution and the social practices conducted around music in digital formats, and bureaucratic administration through digital documentation. He has published in *Social Media and Society*, *Open Cultural Studies*, *First Monday*, *Sociological Research Online*, *FibreCulture*, and the edited collections *Music at the Extremes* (2015), *Networked Music Cultures* (2016), *Researching Music Censorship* (2017), and the *Routledge Companion to Global Internet Histories* (2017).

James Williams, Ph.D. James is a Senior Lecturer and Programme Leader at the University of Derby teaching music composition, performance, and improvisation. He previously lectured in music composition at the University of Hertfordshire. Having read Music at the University

of Bristol (2011), and at Edinburgh University (2012), he wrote his doctoral thesis at the University of Wolverhampton (2016) on the collaborative and creative interactions between contemporary acoustic music and live electronics. His research interests focus on an anthropology of music, investigating behavioral, social, creative, and collaborative processes. He is particularly interested in how such musical behaviors exist online within social media, viral videos and memes, and cyberculture. His research rests on ethnomusicological methodologies and sociocultural modes of music analysis.

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CHAPTER 1

Continuity and Change in the Relationship Between Popular Music, Culture, and Technology: An Introduction

Tamas Tofalvy

INTRODUCTION

The origins of the relationship between technology and popular music go back as far as the initial formation of popular music itself, and the beginnings of the music industry (Braun 2002; Frith 1986). With the advent of sound recording and reproduction, radio and electricity enabled the transformation of the practices of music production, consumption, and sharing in various different ways. The spread of recorded music empowered the sale and distribution of music as a product independent from live performances (Burnett 1992), and related to this, the record label and the “traditional” music business model were born. The traditional record label structure was created and maintained with the aim of selling as many recorded music items as possible. Business models, industry strategies and music consumption preferences are intertwined with the

T. Tofalvy (✉)

Department of Sociology and Communication, Budapest
University of Technology and Economics, Budapest, Hungary

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perspectives and limitations offered by technology in the digital ecosystem as well. During the rise and fall of eras defined by Napster, file sharing, MySpace, online radios, iPod, music stores, and in the most recent streaming age, we have seen a sequence of conflicts involving a network of artefacts, policies, laws, corporations, musicians and other stakeholders. The history and present of the popular music industry, business, audiences and discourses demonstrates the inseparable and co-evolutionary nature of music and technology—that their development mutually depends on each other. But what patterns and interactions might be unearthed in this relationship, and how does the interaction of music and technology work? Focusing on the relationship between recorded popular music and digital technologies, in this introduction, I intend to outline a culture-centered narrative regarding the co-evolutionary nature of music and technology, and inspect the following questions. What is the most beneficial way to approach the interaction of music production, distribution, sharing, and consumption, on the one hand, and technology, on the other? How do cultural meanings of audio formats and music technologies change over time and across communities? Finally, how do those cultural meanings coexist with the use of technologies, and how might culture shape technology?

“NEW” TECHNOLOGIES, POPULAR MUSIC, AND SOCIETY

So why all the anxiety? The key, in my view, is the currently uneasy relationship of music with technology. In the last 10 years, there has been an explosion in the ways that music can be discovered and consumed driven by technological shifts. Unfortunately, the industry was caught unawares when the digital tide first hit and is only now really acting on the changes it has wrought. But this feels like a paradox because music and technology have traditionally been good bedfellows throughout history. Instruments, records, cassettes, CDs, radio, TV, concert hall amplification are all examples of technologies that have expanded the possibilities for making, discovering and listening to music. (Bolza 2008)

The thoughts of Federico Bolza from 2008, the then senior director of digital development at Sony BMG, tell us a lot about the contradictory and uncertain nature of ideas centered around the relationship between music and technology. One of the uncertainties lies with the fluid scope of

technology. When we call recent changes and developments in the music world “technological” or of technological origin, then we obviously refer to digital technologies and the Internet, the immaterial network as well as the gadgets and tools. Not *technology* in general, but particular *technologies* perceived as new. Yet with this notion coexists the universal meaning of technology: Technology as the sum of all tools and procedures through which music is to be born and represented—the universe of instruments, records, radios, studios, acoustics, amplification, and formats.

Interpretations of digital technology, often perceived as new, thus “the” technology (cf. Taylor 2001, 6–7), are characteristically inseparable from the technologically deterministic view that those novelties in certain ways define, direct, and shape music, as well as determine its production, distribution, and consumption. Naturally, this interpretation is also paradoxical, as however evanescent this angle in deterministic accounts may be, cultural and social traits are equally important in the diffusion and evolution of technology. The attitude of the late-reacting recording industry might provide an example to this. As it is widely documented, recording industry lobbyists, especially the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) (Electronic Frontier Foundation 2008), initially framed mp3 and online music sharing as either a fad or a crime (Andersson Schwarz 2014; Leyshon 2001). It thus forced innovations in digital music toward a particular direction, in accordance with the support of the copyright regime’s legislative infrastructure backing such—by now partly defunct—technologies as DRM (Digital Rights Management, see McCourt and Burkart 2003).

It was not exclusively the technology of file sharing, but also a vast array of industry interests, consumer needs and reactions to it that contributed to the fundamental reshaping of music industry and music scenes in the post-Napster era. Yet, the narratives’ nature on the issue remained predominantly similar. Similarly, technologies (or, “the” technology) are central subjects of most of the artefact-centered narratives trying to grasp the events and trends of the last two decades regarding the relationship between music and the internet. Either in a negatively deterministic way—as the by now proverbial sentiment of “internet killed music” reminds us—, framing “new” technologies as threats or inferior. Or, often loaded with technophile enthusiasm, offering them the main role of the protagonist (as the various “saviors” of the music industry resurface from time to time).

A SIDES, RADIO EDIT, AND YOUTUBE STARS: CHANGING MATERIALITIES OF MUSIC CONSUMPTION

As it is represented in the majority of historical works, popular music as we know it today was born as a consequence of a series of changes in the technological ecosystem. The technologically deterministic focus in those narratives (Katz 2004) is not a coincidence. Although music has always been inseparable from instruments and acoustics, at the beginning of the twentieth century, three closely related technologies—sound recording, radio, and electricity—took the role of “technology” and thus became dominant in the recollections regarding the advent of popular music.

Sound recording and reproduction, radio, and electricity enabled the transformation of the practices of music production, consumption, and sharing in various different ways (Anderson 2006). The spread of sound recording and recorded music empowered the sale and distribution of music as a product independent from live performances, and related to this, the record label and the traditional recording-based music business model were born. The traditional record label structure, based on the dominance of a small number of so-called major labels, was created and maintained with the aim of maximizing record sales. The monitoring and scouting of potential new and sellable talents was subordinated to this aim; so was the division of labor between composers, musicians, and producers; marketing and PR activities; the creation of sound recording protocols and studio procedures; the established ways of cooperating with partners, contractors, and specialists; and the architecture and maintenance of the copyright law regime.

“Video Killed the Radio Star”—the 1979 The Buggles song written by Trevor Horn, Geoff Downes, and Bruce Woolley—succinctly summarized the widespread assumption according to which by the end of the 1970s, the era of the radio had finally come to an end, thanks to the emergence of television technology. A few decades later, in 2010, “Internet Killed the Video Star,” performed by The Limousines, reflected a similar mood: Internet technology, by the end of the first decade of the new millennium, had killed television and all related cultural formations. The Internet as a convergent medium has indeed contributed to the transformation of music-related social practices and of the creative industries in many ways, under the umbrella term of “digitization” (Allen-Robertson 2013, 2015; Anderson 2014; Bennett and Rogers 2016; Burnett 1993; Hesmondhalgh 2013; Born 2010–2015; Spilker 2017). Production of certain styles

and genres of music has become more democratized and less location-bound with the proliferation of digital tools and online communication. The boundaries between artists and consumers have also become blurred (Ebare 2004). Besides, with the advent of widely accessible and freely downloadable music, old business models—based on the sales of live performance returned after a century dominated by record sales—and new models were also tailored exclusively to online sales (Collins and Young 2014; Marshall 2013; Tschmuck 2016). The complexity of the narratives of the relationship between Internet and music shows us the extent to which technology's perceived role in music is culturally determined: The period after the appearance of Napster on the turn of the twenty-first century has been evaluated as revolutionary and a time of crisis at the same time (Nowak and Whelan 2014; Carter and Rogers 2014; Leyshon et al. 2005).

Beyond the parallel existence of conflicting narratives, what role does culture play in the diffusion, interpretation, use, and innovation of music technologies and formats? Although it seems attractive to describe the formation of music culture as deterministically defined by technologies, the developments of the last century of popular music suggest that the relationship is rather bidirectional, and cultural phenomena are underdetermined by changes in technology—both tools and formats. Technological change is ongoing and is not altering the culture of popular music necessarily and immediately. As an example, DVD, or later Blu-ray technology could have been used for the storage of music, aside from audiovisual content, but those formats have not become the default means in the distribution of music, nor have they led to the inception of longer albums or tracks. Similarly, album formats and track length shaped by this tradition have not adapted to the infinite storage space available on the Internet, although practically music of any length can be stored and made accessible online. Nevertheless, for a while the personal computer was the central music player device in most homes in the Western world. Modular or mobile memory cards, sticks, or other storage units, however, never became default formats for the music industry. When a band releases an album on a pen drive, for instance, it is usually interpreted as a reflexive, ironic act rather than established practice. Also, it is virtually impossible to find oeuvre collections on HDD drives for sale.

Music television did not kill the radio star, and neither has the Internet the music television or the radio star. Besides underdetermination, the parallel existence of technologies is similarly important (Cwynar 2015). In

the current music technology ecosystem, vinyl, audio cassettes, CDs, and various analog and digital formats, similarly to devices such as turntables, tablets, smartphones, and mp3 players—all of which have their own histories (Taylor 2001, 7)—exist simultaneously. The fact that those tools, technologies, and formats—often pictured as representing different stages in technological evolution—do not necessarily terminate other technologies deemed as inferior or less evolved demonstrates that this idea of evolution also underdetermines the use and role of technology in culture.

Simultaneously, usage patterns and functions are subject to change. What was once considered as the essence of life-like sound reproduction (such as records on the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Katz 2004) now might be considered as the representative of warm, analog sound—a modern design piece and collectible item reverbing nostalgic attitudes at the same time. In different eras, and for different relevant social groups (Pinch and Bijker 1984), different traits of technologies open to interpretation become important and shape usage (Pinch and Bijsterveld 2003). With the diffusion of audio cassettes, a previously less dominant aspect of music listening—portability—became of primary importance. The partial relocation from the Hi-Fi-equipped living room to the streets later played an important role in the innovation, marketing, and interpretation of subsequently appearing technologies. The CD, the MiniDisc, and later the iPod and the diffusion of all mobile digital players were triggered by a strong market need dominated by the key notion of portability. It is thus hardly possible to define culture-independent technological specifications and evolutionary traces in the history of music technologies and formats (Sterne 2012). What could be attempted instead is to determine what meanings given technologies bear in given social groups and time periods, and how those references change and get in conflict with each other. And, how those conflicting meanings and interpretations shape the use and innovation of technologies. With the help of three theoretical tools—namely cultural meaning, relevant social groups, and cultural capital—I aim to interpret the role of a number of instances of cultural and value formation in the history of music formats and audio technology formation.

In the 1980s' Hungary, for those who wished to escape from the state ideology and wanted to express themselves, the punk scene, for instance, provided a possibility to do that. For the ruling elite, on the contrary, punk was the threatening, uncontrolled opposition of the underclass. In the interpretative framework of punk, the DIY instruments and

low-quality bootleg recordings were considered authentic, while in the eyes of the wider public, they were symbols of destruction, amateurism, and frugality. Music interpretations, knowledge, traditions, and ways of thinking shape cultural meanings attached to technologies, dependent on given social contexts (Strauss and Quinn 1997), which are inseparable from the use and evolution of technologies. All those cultural meanings are constructed in a social environment and form part of the social negotiations and conflicts. Pinch and Bijker (1984) uses the term relevant social groups to describe those collectivities that favor a particular technological solution or attach a particular cultural meaning to a given technology, as opposed to other technologies or meanings. The model of relevant social groups does not necessarily help to precisely describe those collectivities—the aim rather is to trace the process of attaching constructed cultural meanings to technologies.

The clash of relevant social groups interpreting new technologies in radically different ways can be exemplified by the copyright, policy, and technology “war” following the advent of peer-to-peer file-sharing technologies. The RIAA, as the association representing the stakeholders most dependent on the copyright regime, interpreted the phenomenon as potentially dangerous and made all efforts to eliminate the technology by threatening or suing users. The then blossoming networked “pirate” and free culture movement supporters, on the contrary, understood the technology as the facilitator of creativity and information exchange, also inspired to create a new copyright/left paradigm (Andersson Schwarz and Burkart 2015; Fredriksson and Arvanitakis 2014). The different attitudes led to different ways in innovation. While on one side, the development of closed formats, DRM tools for blocking copying and sharing were on the forefront of strategic thinking, on the other side, open source, protocols for hiding online behavior, and sharing platforms were born.

Finally, the notion of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986; Thornton 1995; Suhr 2012) makes the interpretation of the relationship between cultural meanings and relevant social groups and hierarchies easier, embodying it in a unifying framework. The accumulation of cultural capital strengthens the positions in the social hierarchy, and the ways in which cultural capital can be accumulated is determined by the given sociocultural contexts and local cultural meanings. The collecting of cultural capital is intertwined at several points with technology in the lives of musical collectivities. In the following, I analyze examples of cultural meanings such as values, ethical assumptions, aesthetic judgments, and traditions having played important roles in the shaping of the technological ecosystem.

VALUES, MEANINGS, ETHICS: CULTURAL FACTORS IN THE FORMATION OF MUSIC TECHNOLOGIES

Several chapters of popular music history show how interests and values attached to certain technologies create situations in which the popular deterministic narrative—according to which music recording technologies evolve from an elementary state toward better-functioning technologies that necessarily eliminate inferior ones—errs (cf. Taylor 2001; Théberge 2001; Morton 1998–2006). One of those chapters is on sound quality. The relationship of sound quality to recorded music is problematic in multiple respects. In some instances, sound quality comes as secondary after a different trait, such as portability. As in the case of the CD, audio cassette, or various mp3 players, portability has been achieved at the price of sound quality loss. The problem is further complicated by the relativity of “good” quality: The definition of “better” and “worse” sound quality is highly problematic and culture-dependent. What defines good sound quality? Life-likeness, detailedness, or such complicated criteria as the saturation or warmth of the sound? Or simply volume?

One of the most important examples of the latter aspect overruling all others is the history of *loudness wars* (Vickers 2010)—an example also illustrative of the relativity of good and bad sound quality. According to a narrow interpretation, loudness wars started with the 1980s with the diffusion of CD technology. CDs from that era tended to be “louder,” meaning that newer records sounded louder than previous ones when played at the same volume control stage. Increasing the volume of the recordings was done during the mastering phase in the studio, mainly with special compressing methods and by “cutting off” some of the details of the recording.

As has been shown by Devine (2013), loudness wars did not begin in the 1980s, rather they had been present at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries at the beginning of electronic sound amplification. The result—if sound quality is defined by the detailedness, life-likeness, and undistortedness of the sound—was serious damage, distortion, and radical simplification of the sound in every case. Cultural roots of this phenomenon accompanying the last century of amplification and recorded music point out that according to the mass audiences, the perception of better sound was dependent on the perception of higher volume. On jukeboxes, the radio or the Hi-Fi system in the living room, the record that sounded louder at the same volume control stage was more attractive,

thus more sellable. This created constant pressure on the record labels and studios, as well as resentful opposition on the side of audiophiles and critics (Anderson 2007). In this context, relevant social groups creating and representing the conflicting cultural meanings of loudness are on the one hand the critics and audiophiles, in whose opinion engineering loudness to this extent is harmful to sound quality; on the other hand, the wider audience and record label studio professionals, in whose interpretation elevating loudness is a valid method for manipulating sound, which results simply in a more attractive sound.

The relationship is further complicated by the diverse and problematic nature of loudness and the complex economic nature of the issue. As fulfilling mass consumer needs was at stake, the goals and expectations were the same in all parts of the backers of the procedure, but cultural meanings of loudness were entirely different in the case of a sound engineer, producer, or music listener. Thus, the nature of cultural capital that could be accumulated in this interaction is also diverse. The role of an engineer working on a highly successful “loud” album may have appeared attractive or prestigious for the potential customers or for like-minded producers, but definitely not in the eyes of the audiophiles or critics.

In underground punk aesthetics, the intentionally low-quality instruments, bootleg recordings, and bricolage visual materials were not simply the outcome of the scarcity of resources and results of being outside the major label ecosystem, but products of cultural—aesthetic, ethical—motivations of the scene as a relevant social group. The aesthetic low quality (the damaged, the rasping, the amateur, the noisy, the deformed) from the angle of ideologies of independence and DIY ethics is not simply aesthetically superior but ethically proper practice as well. Producing a record of outstanding sound quality can be interpreted as the violation of the punk ethic, and it is possible that taking part in the creation of such a product might result in a decrease of the participants’ cultural capital in the community.

Even if in less radical ways, similar patterns can be observed nowadays in the so-called Budapest bedroom pop music scene regarding the relationship between “lo-fi” sound quality, technology use, and the ethos of the scene. As Emília Barna’s (2014) paper demonstrates, according to the bedroom pop music performers, the (intentionally) low sound quality expresses such values as the distance kept from commercial music production, community values of belonging as opposed to mass production,

lack of demand for professionalism, DIY ethics, and a lifestyle in general. Similarly, the scene's relationship with technology is as complex as that of the cultural meanings connected to sound quality. Music is born in a bedroom studio, set up in a regular apartment, whose offline material reality provides a safe, comforting space, but the studio, the music, and the performers themselves are continuously online. They communicate and compose through the Internet, they keep in touch with the scene via the means of social media, and they publish their works online. Or, online and in audio cassette format. What cultural reasons can be observed behind this particular choice of technology? What kinds of cultural meanings attached to formats are formed in accordance with sound, aesthetics, ethics, lifestyle, and identity?

In certain cultural contexts, after the appearance of technologies deemed as new and more developed, certain older technologies thought to be outdated and doomed to death may become interesting and start to flourish again. "Once digital media arrive as 'other,' as cyborg sound, the analogue seems to breathe, however rasping the sound"—as Hegarty (2007) puts it in reference to the recent revival of audio cassettes. Thus, with the diffusion of the new technologies almost automatically a nostalgic turn is taken toward the previous, more "humane," "warmer" technologies and sounds. In the last decades, this has been demonstrated by the revival of such formats as the audio cassette and vinyl. Usage of the cassette format lives in a particular symbiosis with the nostalgic, offline lo-fi aesthetics and the high-tech online everyday-life practices. The audio cassette could be important because of its "metallic" sound, on the one hand, and on the other hand, because of personal nostalgic narratives and of the attachment to collectible items (Barna 2014). Also, for the 30-something music listeners in the first decade of the new millennium, the audio cassette brings back the sound of the significant bands of their childhood, for those who were born and raised in the 1980s and were listening to music for the first time most likely the cassette was the first and default medium, and the Walkman the default device (du Gay et al. 1997).

The generation nostalgia plays a significant part in bringing back the format and most of the genres closely tied with it through the genres of post-punk, riot grrrl, industrial and noise, among others (see Hogan 2010). Closely tied to this trend, the lifestyle and feeling of the 1980s

underground DIY ethics is being revived in independent label scenes. The studiously outdated, nostalgic technology in turn finds its way to its niche audience through the latest, most state-of-the-art online social platforms.

Besides values of nostalgia, personality, “realness,” and opposition, cassette culture emphasizes a particular way of listening to music through the medium. As with a cassette, it is virtually impossible to skip to a track (as opposed to vinyl or mp3), but one has to reel forward to the next pause on the tape instead, so “the actual tape and the album become one and the same” (Kevin Greenspon in Hogan 2010). This way of listening thus consciously opposes and negates key buzzwords of the current technological ecosystem, namely personalization and immediate access.

As Magaudda (2011) points out, for both practical and symbolic reasons, in a number of music scenes the use of vinyl format is fundamental. Most frequently, besides digital releases, vinyl is the default parallel or secondary release format. Symbolic reasons might be traced back to the domain of design. Limited edition, colored or transparent pieces made unique by multiple solutions are basically intended to create the impression of an artisanal product and as such, they are intended to enter the space of the living room as collectible items signifying the musical taste of the owner, the collector. Collection of vinyl records as physical objects channels the ethical and aesthetic expectations into a social dimension, in whose creation the whole value chain of the stakeholders involved in the production, distribution, and sales and consumption of records takes part.

As presented in Pip Piper’s (2012) documentary *Last Shop Standing*, following the dramatic decline of independent records stores in the UK, record stores formed an alternative universe for music enthusiasts. In that universe, owners had a special place, they knew all local music consumers as customers, and they in turn knew the owners personally. Record stores were places not just to buy records but to learn about music and simply just to hang out—they functioned not as mere shops but as institutions, as local social hubs, important sites within scenes or networks of creativity (Leyshon 2001). Despite the decline of record stores and vinyl turning into a niche product from being a mass product, the complex social ethos of record collecting is still present in some (sub)cultures that deem record collecting and using vinyl at DJ performances as an ethically proper practice (Vályi 2010). Those social functions are maintained online, or moving to the digital realm (Baym 2000, 2015, 2018; Bennett-Peterson 2004).

SHELVES, FOLDERS, PLAYLISTS: MUSIC, TECHNOLOGY, AND IDENTITY

What is playing on your turntable right now? What kinds of records do you have on your shelves? What kind of music is being downloaded to your hard drive? What tracks can be found on your Last.fm playlist? What have you listened to recently on Spotify? As music plays a central role in creating and maintaining identities (Born 2011), formats and media of recorded music have been present in the representation of musical taste, thus in the communication of musical identity, and the construction of subjectivities through changing listening practices (Kassabian 2013), from the very beginnings. Who is being represented as authentic in the relevant taste community—in other words, how successfully they accumulate their cultural capital—is dependent partly on how the available musical stocks are stored and displayed.

The appearance and diffusion of new technologies in some cases appear to disrupt the until then conventional relationship of music and collectivities. In some cases, the very same traditional conflicts live on, and are reproduced in the gradually transforming technological ecosystem (Bijsterveld and Pinch 2004). The same duality can be observed in the creation of identity communicated by the storage and display of recorded music. The diffusion of the mp3 format was perceived to disrupt in many respects the community practices linked to the until then dominant carriers. New modes, new tools, and practices appeared, but the identity forming and sharing mechanisms represented in the storage of, and listening to, music were constantly reproduced in the changing technological context.

Successful presentation of authenticity in the given technological context partly depends on the success of professionalism and the presentation of being involved. A considerable, well-organized vinyl collection containing a given genre's most important pieces is not about musical education, or literacy—professionalism communicates the time, capital, and resources devoted to compiling the collection. Stored music in mp3 format offers different ways in representing authenticity through the communication of devotion and professionalism. As a considerably huge collection does not necessarily signify a considerable investment, and as—due to the immaterial nature of the digital format—it cannot function as part of the interior, other aspects become more important. Commitment can instead be communicated by the presentation of the time and resources

devoted to putting together a collection of thousands of albums, or hundreds of thousands of tracks and their detailed organizing.

The key moment in both cases is the arrangement and representation of the so-called metadata (Morris 2012). Until the appearance of the CD format, all information related to the music was to be found outside the actual medium—the carrier. Now, in the digital world, the metadata is often actually the same as the musical content described by it—as in the case of a file-list or, taking a step even further, the act of listening to music itself, as in the case of a playlist or a streamed track on a streaming platform in the cloud (Burkart 2014; Johansson et al. 2018). This difference has its own significant importance with regard to the self-representation, identity, and subcultural capital accumulated by representation and communication. On the one hand, the circle of the relevant metadata is narrowed down to the data including the name of the performer, the title of the album and the track, or its time length. On the other hand, in cloud-based playlists, metadata gains significance not by representing storage data or file organization details, but by communicating real-time music consumption behavior. In cloud-based music listening, quantitative aspects of music collecting—whether the collection is vinyl-, cassette- or mp3-based—are hardly possible to evaluate, as in the cloud a virtually infinite amount of music can be accessed any time. Devotion and professionalism, and thus authenticity, are less likely to be demonstrated by the act of collecting than by the actual listening through proper timing and selection. Interestingly, this way the communicated, represented, and actual music listening practices and rituals are moving closer to one another, leaving a smaller room for “posing”—a practice that would allow the questioning of the authenticity. The archiver is replaced by the curator, who is striving for the old-fashioned respect and recognition, and reproducing and recreating the accumulation mechanisms of cultural capital in a technological ecosystem said to be transforming and new (Barna 2017; Morris and Powers 2015; Jansson and Hracz 2018).

The essays in this edited volume deal with such questions and dilemmas centered around the social and cultural aspects of popular music and technology, focusing on the creation of cultural meanings and on the social practices that enable this process.

Part I provides a critical overview of theories addressing popular music and digital technology. *Paolo Magaúdda* aims at expanding the theoretical toolbox of music scene studies by focusing on the notion of infrastructure. The chapter addresses the ways in which the notion was adopted in

early music scene research, arguing that a lack of theorization has characterized seminal works in this field. *Stéphane Costantini* offers a critical perspective on digitization by considering the divergences between three notions that have been employed to examine the geographical, social, and economic dimensions of music, namely scene, proto-market, and the musicalized network. *Tamas Tofalvy* analyzes the notion of the underground, stressing that while the concept itself has changed over time, the reproduction of subcultural capital serves to maintain underground niche cultures in the interrelated contexts of media technologies and sociocultural dynamics.

The chapters in Part II offer an analysis of the relationship between musical cultures, taste, constructions of authenticity, and technology. *Emília Barna* argues that although cultural omnivorousness and the rise of cultural hybridity have been associated with cultural diversity and the social process of democratization, this picture is complicated by the—partly new—ways in which symbolic power continues to be asserted through taste and distinction in the digital music environment. *András Rónai* analyzes the notion of frictionless music as it is constructed in the music industry press. The chapter shows how playlists and voice control both contribute to the decontextualization of music, and the making traditional metadata such as genre obsolete. *Samira van Bohemen*, *Julian Schaap*, and *Paauwke Berkers* explore ways to understand the alignments of ethno-racial categories with Spotify playlists on sex and love. They argue that these are tied with music genres and relatively stable ideas about racialized bodies, which bear consequences for how the sexual self is musically “composed.” Part II closes with *Jessica Edlom*’s chapter on the authenticity of popular music brands. The chapter investigates the concept of authenticity in popular music in the digital environment—the ways in which authenticity is manifested and created, if it is created, on social platforms regarding music brands.

Part III offers case studies on the materialities of music consumption from outside the Western core of popular music production. *Li Zhongwei* demonstrates the dynamics and interactions between the entangled dimensions of music’s materialities in the subculture of the “cut-out generation” in 1990s’ China. The chapter nuances the theoretical debates between music as sound and music as a “thing” and demonstrates how the various dimensions of music’s materialities can shape, and be shaped by, the media ecosystem which they inhabit. Analyzing contemporary aspects of cassette culture, *Benjamin Düster*, drawing on a fieldwork conducted

in six major Japanese cities provides an overview of current cassette scenes and cultures in Japan, focusing on the *enka* industry, DIY cassette labels, and events like the annual Cassette Store Day.

The chapters of Part IV reflect on music scenes and the uses and discourses of social media. *Andrew Whelan* looks at the relationship between technology, memory, and critique in the writing on vaporwave, while also describing and contextualizing the interpretive frames typically used for making sense of vaporwave. *Loïc Riom*'s chapter aims to address the question of music discovery through the case of the Sofar Sounds collective. Based on an ethnographic investigation of their events, the chapter presents an overview of the movement and argues that Sofar Sounds invites to further explore the issues of discovery within contemporary music consumption. The chapter by *Cibrán Tenreiro* approaches videos that capture the activity of the Galician underground music scene, doing it through film analysis and interviews. The chapter argues that these videos imply a rupture with the canonical tendency to give stars a central role, taking some elements from home movies and reflecting the collective nature of scenes, and offering a new perspective on the dynamics of digital cinema and the current public sphere. In the closing chapter of Part IV and the book, *James Williams*, through analyzing the works of Cassetteboy, a London-based electronic music-parody duo, explores the role of music in the overlapping space between social media, viral memes, comedy entertainment, and politics.

CONCLUSIONS

Stories of the inseparable relationship between music technologies, formats, and culture, as has been demonstrated through the examples above, are worth being told from a social and cultural perspective for two main reasons. Firstly, because technological specifications tend to underdetermine the patterns of usage, and secondly, even the specifications themselves are inseparable from cultural traits and meanings in the technological ecosystem, as are the processes of innovation. Technological specifications, traits, tools, artifacts, and procedures have meanings, and they do not affect societal patterns deterministically. It is not the function that leads their use, but usage gives new meanings to the ever-changing functions: the social and cultural construction of technology—involving the negotiation and conflicts of relevant social groups and the accumulation of cultural capital—continuously goes on.

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PART I

Networks of Technology and Popular Music



Music Scenes as Infrastructures: From Live Venues to Algorithmic Data

Paolo Magaudda

INTRODUCTION: INFRASTRUCTURES AND THE QUEST FOR NEW TOOLS IN POPULAR MUSIC STUDIES

In the last decade, the role of digital media in reconfiguring social activities has evolved quite radically, due especially to cumulative innovations such as social media, smartphones, datification, and the rising of platforms as pivotal online media entities, producing a condition of *deep mediation*, as it has been described by Couldry and Hepp (2017). These transformations are affecting many realms of our lives, including our relationship with music and how music is experienced in terms of genres, subcultures and local scenes. However, it is not easy to fully grasp the wide-ranging influences that digital media are having over music experience. Not only are many of these changes very recent and quickly evolving, making it difficult to build a solid perspective from which to observe

P. Magaudda (✉)
PaSTIS Research Unit,
FISPPA Department, University of Padova, Padua, Italy
e-mail: paolo.magaudda@unipd.it

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what is happening. On top of this, when facing these changes, established theoretical tools and intellectual standpoints in popular music studies look increasingly obsolete and therefore require to be extended further in order to address the distinctive qualities of phenomena such as datification, algorithmic music circulation, and the increasing centrality of digital infrastructures.

This chapter aims to fill some of these gaps by expanding *music scenes studies* in a specific direction, represented by the so-called *infrastructural turn*. Turning our attention to the notion of *infrastructure* is indeed one of the options chosen in the last few years by several scholars in media and communication studies to disentangle the complex intersection between media practices and digital technologies in today's hyper-connected society. These scholars—including, among others, Brian Larkin (2008), Jonathan Sterne (2012), Joshua Braun (2015), Nicole Starosielski (2015), Benjamin Peters (2015), and Musiani et al. (2016)—focused on different approaches and topics, adopting an *infrastructural perspective* to make sense of their respective issues. Following this mounting theoretical interest toward infrastructures in media studies, in the next pages I will explore the power of the notion of infrastructure for the studying of music scenes.

In order to do this, the chapter starts by presenting the notion of infrastructure, elaborated originally in the field of Science and Technology Studies (STS), outlining how it has become an increasingly relevant perspective among media studies scholars (Sect. 2). Then, in Sect. 3, I will address how the idea of music infrastructures has been embraced in seminal studies on music scenes, such as those by Ruth Finnegan (1989), Will Straw (1991), and Barry Shank (1994). However, I also acknowledge a lack of any robust theorization around this notion, up until the early 2000s, when the distinction between *hard* and *soft infrastructure* (Sect. 4) was introduced by Geoff Stahl (2004). Successively, in Sect. 5, I will take into account how the role of infrastructures has become much more important with the rise of the Internet and the increasing relevance of *virtual music scenes* (Bennett and Peterson 2004). Here, I also outline the limits of early approaches to virtual scenes, as they focused more on content circulating on forums and Web sites than on the power of infrastructural logics for shaping local or translocal music experiences and identities. Finally, in Sect. 6, I will explore some emerging phenomena related to the relationship between digital infrastructures and music

scenes, including the role of digital platforms, the significance of algorithmic data, and the future scenarios opened up by music formats based on blockchain technology.

THE INFRASTRUCTURAL TURN FROM MEDIA TO MUSIC

In these last few years, several scholars in media and communication studies have been attracted by a distinctive interest in infrastructures and have consequently embraced what has been labeled as an *infrastructural turn* (Bowker et al. 2009; Larkin 2013; Parks and Starosielski 2015; Plantin and Punathambekar 2019). This rising emphasis on infrastructures is supported by the recognition of several crucial emerging phenomena in digital society: from the relevance of technology and materiality in social processes to the multiple scales at which digitalization takes form; from the importance of invisible, taken-for-granted digital tools enabling social activities to the expanding relevance of entities like platforms, apps, and Web sites that characterize our deeply mediatized social organization.

The intellectual genealogy of a “dense” notion of infrastructure in social sciences has its roots in the interdisciplinary field of Science and Technology Studies (STS), where since the 1990s infrastructures have been recognized as crucial entities in the reshaping of social arrangements, collective practices, and human activities (Star and Ruhleder 1996; Bowker and Star 1999; Edwards 2003). Along the years, this perspective has also influenced several scholars in media and communication studies, so that an infrastructural perspective has been increasingly adopted as a useful entry point to disentangling the complex intersection between media materiality, dematerialized digital contents, data organization, and collective media practices (Parks and Starosielski 2015; Peters 2015; Braun 2015; Balbi et al. 2016; Plantin et al. 2018). Media theorist Benjamin Peters outlined that the idea of infrastructure has been at the very core of media studies, although implicitly, from the work of Marshall McLuhan and Harold Innis onward. A new life for an infrastructural perspective to understand media processes has been especially prompted by the reshaping of content distribution as consequence of digitization. As media scholars Parks and Starosielski noted, an *infrastructural disposition* allows exactly to “foreground[...] processes of distribution that have taken a backseat in humanities-based research on media culture, which

until recently has tended to prioritize processes of production and consumption, encoding and decoding, and textual interpretation” (Parks and Starosielski 2015, 5).

Nonetheless, the growing attention to infrastructures in media studies has only marginally infiltrated the study of popular music, being intercepted just by a few scholars whose interest has been mostly on the emergence of new music technologies. A prominent work in the music field with a declared infrastructural perspective is by media sociologist Jonathan Sterne (2012), who described the history of the mp3 music format, noting that “infrastructures of data networks and later the internet – and the standards upon which they are based – provided the water in which the mp3 fish swim,” and that the relevance of infrastructures is “not simply a question of the size of bandwidth in the network’s channel, of how big a data stream can pass through. It is also a question of how the network itself is built” (Sterne 2012, 16). Sterne articulated his infrastructural interest in terms of a *format theory*, an approach able to foreground the shift from the (already digital) CD to the mp3, not just as a new specific technical invention, but as the outcome of infrastructural work interweaving and keeping together technologies, actors, and economic interests at multiple scales.

Directly inspired by Sterne’s work, Jeremy Wade Morris expanded this line of inquiry by tracing the development of digital music as commodity, from the 1997 software Winamp onward. Although Morris did not explicitly adopt the notion of infrastructure, his analysis of the reconfiguration of music as commodity in the digital age outlines the crucial role played by different kinds of infrastructural elements such as platforms, formats, metadata, and interfaces. As we will examine later in the chapter, in the new digital landscape, a major influence on music circulation comes exactly from metadata, whose consequences do not only regard a more efficient circulation of music, but also an impact on how music “appears, how it can be used, and how it can be sorted and stored on a user’s various devices” as “it is made up of software code that is largely visible through other interfaces and devices” (Morris 2015, 19).

Although studies on music scenes have not to date embrace an infrastructural perspective, in the next section I will argue that it is nevertheless possible to trace an implicit genealogy of the use of this idea back to the early studies on music scenes, which had the merit to bring to the foreground how infrastructural, material, and spatial issues contribute to shape the organization of local music life.

INFRASTRUCTURES AS MATERIAL RESOURCES FOR MUSIC SCENES

The acknowledgment of the presence of taken-for-granted, invisible, underlying structures contributing to the shaping of local music activities and identities is a common feature in several seminal studies on music scenes. However, the recognition of infrastructural influences has been only partial and, in most cases, theoretically underdeveloped: On the one hand, the reference to the power of infrastructures in shaping local music scenes has often remained on a general, common-sense ground; on the other hand, the elaboration of a more nuanced notion of infrastructure has emerged slowly over the years and has struggled to recognize the varieties of infrastructural elements at play in music scenes. As a result, the analysis of music's infrastructural dimensions has generally been limited to addressing the importance of physical spaces within the city, such as concert venues, shops, recording studios, or other kinds of market-related organizations. In other terms, much of the early interest in the infrastructures of music scenes were characterized by the lack of problematization, without any explicit attempt to turn a generic reference of *infrastructures-as-material-resources* to a more sophisticated understanding, able to foreground the infrastructural dynamics shaping music scenes.

The earliest reference to an infrastructural dimension in music scenes can be traced back to a seminal work in the field, Ruth Finnegan's (1989) research on local musicians in Milton Keynes. In her book, Finnegan does not make any direct reference to the existence of a music scene infrastructure; nevertheless, she recognizes the decisive role of spaces and material resources in shaping music local life—for example, considering music shops or recording studios (Finnegan 1989, 273–277). Most importantly, in order to address the way local music scenes are organized, Finnegan elaborates another key spatial metaphor, related to mobility and space: that of *pathway*. Pathways are invoked to explain how “local music practices depend indeed on individuals' connections, but also have a certain abiding structure over and above the links of particular individuals” (ibid., 305). This notion is proposed by Finnegan to overcome more holistic notions, such as those of “music community” or “music world,” outlining how

...the many different forms of musical activity [...] were not random or created from nothing each time by individual practitioners, but a series of

familiar and – by their followers – taken-for-granted routes through what might otherwise have been the impersonal wildernesses of urban life. (ibid., 306)

This understanding of pathways as *taken-for-granted routes* matches quite well with the idea of an infrastructure, as pathways bring to light the presence of a recurring and obdurate configuration of local connections, instrumental to shaping relationships and options for local music practitioners.

An explicit reference to music infrastructures can be found in another pioneering text in music scenes studies: Will Straw's seminal article on articulation and change in alternative rock and dance music in Canada (Straw 1991). Although Straw's account focuses mostly on cultural and symbolic logics of music, he repeatedly recognizes the importance of music infrastructures, such as record labels or performances venues, which play a part in stabilizing local music organization. For example, Straw outlines that the reliance by alternative rock on "institutional infrastructures," such as "campus radio stations" or "independent record shops," was crucial in the process of valorization of this emerging music scene in the eighties (ibid., 376). Again, he points out the existence of an infrastructure made up by "enterprises catering to an interest in the history of rock-based forms of recorded music" and how they indirectly helped to establish interactions between punk rock and new wave, within the wider cultural space of alternative rock (ibid., 377). While Straw's use of infrastructure looks basic and lacking nuances (i.e., the non-specific reference to "institutional infrastructures" for both campus radios and independent music shops), it nevertheless presents an attempt to foreground how specific structures, underlying the work of artists and musicians, are core part of the cultural articulation of music scenes.

The centrality of infrastructural logics is more relevant in the analysis by Barry Shank (1994) on the rock and roll scene in Austin, one of the early academic books extensively addressing the concept of music scene. In his account of the development of Austin rock scene, the author highlights the importance of establishing a local infrastructure for music making and performing, up to the point that the rise of the local rock scene in Austin is explained as a "deliberate[...] and self-conscious[...]" attempt to "build an industrial infrastructure modelled on that of the national recording industry" (ibid., 17). In this case, music infrastructures are not seen just as the expression of local music making or the spaces inhabited by local

musicians and fans, but are understood primarily in terms of economic and productive resources supporting music production. In Austin, the distinctive feature of the infrastructure was the economic-oriented search for music contents available to be sold at national level, and the author also outlines how this distinctive infrastructural logic decisively contributed to shaping both Austin's music aesthetics and its identity.

From this research onward, it became quite common to use the generic idea of *local music infrastructure* to refer to spaces, economic actors, cultural institutions, and everything more obdurate than musical practices and meanings. There are several examples of this, including Ed Montano's research on the Sydney commercial electronic dance music scene, where the author outlines the role of "the dance music infrastructure of superclubs, media, promoters and trade fairs that underpins contemporary club culture" (Montano 2011, 75). Moreover, the list of infrastructural resources relevant in music scenes has expanded together with the evolution of musical practices. This emerges from the work by Tim Dowd (2014) on progressive rock festivals, which are explicitly understood as strategic infrastructural entities for the articulation of this *translocal* music scene. Dowd insists on the role of "a global infrastructure of specialized entities dealing in the recording, distribution, and evaluation of progressive rock of the past and present" (ibid., 160), also addressing the proliferation of prog-specific sources, such as magazines, fanzines, and online forums.

In sum, while along the years the role of spatial and economic infrastructural entities has been increasingly recognized and addressed, a more nuanced understanding of infrastructural affordances and constrains in music scenes has nonetheless remained marginal. In other words, for a long time, music scene studies have struggled to explore the wide range of relational qualities of infrastructural entities and their ability to shape, stabilize, and transform relationships between artists and audiences, places and identities, contents and consumption patterns.

SOFT AND HARD: INFRASTRUCTURAL DYNAMICS IN MUSIC SCENES

A step toward a more nuanced understanding of infrastructures in music scenes has been triggered by a short, but inspiring chapter by Geoff Stahl (2004) about the Montreal music scene. Stahl considers the Montreal independent rock scene and, specifically, the approach enacted by the

record label Derivative Records, addressing different kinds of local music infrastructures that influenced the scene. In doing this, Stahl develops an analytical distinction between two different types of infrastructures in music scenes: *soft* and *hard*. The author borrows this distinction from the work on creative cities by Charles Landry (2000), who argues that the planning of cities, whose growth is increasingly based on creative works, requires to shift the focus from cities' *material infrastructures*—such as roads, bridges, and buildings—toward *soft infrastructures*, intended as a heterogeneous set of skills, intellectual activities, collaborative tools for sharing ideas, and so on. Stahl adapts this basic idea local music scenes with the aim of looking at the symbolic and affective resources that contribute to articulate the identity of the Montreal music scene.

What makes Stahl's contribution particularly relevant is the fact that he attempts to explain the distinctive musical identity of the Quebecoise capital on the basis of the interactions between a weak hard infrastructure and a dense, rich, and meaningful soft infrastructure characterizing the Montreal music scene. This translates into the fact that

routes and routines are intimately connected, that the use of the scene's hard infrastructure has a reciprocal relationship to the textures associated with its soft infrastructure, and that the affective dimension of the scene reinforces its structural aspects (and vice versa). (Stahl 2004, 56)

Although the work of Stahl is less interested in unfolding the role of materiality in shaping music scenes and, instead, is more concerned with fostering an understanding of cultural and symbolic resources—in the same vein of the *mysthscape* concept elaborated in Bennett (2002)—, his effort nevertheless represents an attempt to theoretically develop the notion infrastructure in music scenes and, in doing so, disclosing the dialectic relationships between materiality and culture.

However, the analytical distinction between hard and soft infrastructures has been adopted only marginally in subsequent research on music scenes. An intriguing use of the dynamics between hard and soft infrastructures has been proposed by Stefano Barone (2016) to describe the Tunisian metal scene. The author insists on the tension between soft and hard music infrastructures to explain the distinctive identity of this music scene, looking specifically at how the two levels of local infrastructures interact with each other in a context characterized by a weak culture in terms of rock-based popular music, and also in lack of conventional music

infrastructures, such as record labels, firms, and music venues. In the case of the Tunisian metal scene, “hard and soft infrastructures interacted in complex ways, and their dynamism was not necessarily directed towards functional equilibrium” (*ibid.*, 27)—similarly to the aforementioned case of Montreal discussed by Stahl. One example of this tension is that due to the limited availability of venues and places, “when it came to seeing shows, forming bands, gossiping, meeting people, metallers [...] were forced to share the scene’s infrastructures with persons they felt distant from, but at the same time, in some twisted sense, close to” (*ibid.*, 30).

These kinds of infrastructural dynamics in music scenes have more recently been also elaborated by Andy Bennett and Ian Rogers (2016) in their book on music scenes in Australia, one of the most recent and comprehensive attempts to update the study of local music scenes. Bennett and Rogers extensively recognize “that the articulation of scenes and collective scene identities relies not merely on live music spaces but on broader infrastructures of scene, both hard and soft, where instances of scene activity can unfold” (Bennett and Rogers 2016, 105). The interaction between hard and soft infrastructure is addressed, for example, in the way the soft infrastructure, intended as a “cohesive, dynamic and emotionally embedded sense of scene,” is projected “onto the physical contours of urban settings” (*ibid.*).

The tensions between hard and soft infrastructures represent an attempt to develop an analytical understanding of music scenes’ infrastructures and their dynamics. However, as I will argue in the next section, the role of infrastructural dynamics in music scenes has assumed a completely different relevance when Internet-based communication and interactions have been adopted massively in musical practices.

FROM VIRTUAL SCENES TO DIGITAL MUSIC INFRASTRUCTURES

There is little doubt that the extensive adoption of digital media has represented a major challenge over the identities and features of local music scenes, yet this challenge still needs to be adequately addressed and incorporated in our understanding of music scenes. One of the early attempts to introduce online interactions as a constitutive element in music fandom has been Kibby’s (2000) study of the Internet-based music scene devoted to the folk artist John Prine, pointing out how the artist’s fans, disseminated globally, were able to communicate with each other. A turning

point in the debate about the Internet's role in articulating music scenes came up a few years later, with the introduction of the notion of *virtual scenes* elaborated by Andy Bennett and Richard Peterson (2004), who recognized that “participants in virtual scenes are widely separated geographically, but [...] come together in a single scene-making conversation via the Internet” (ibid., 10). The concept of virtual scene opened up a new space for conceptualizing those scenes in which face-to-face interaction is no longer the only, or the main, form of participation, and where mediated forms of connection offered by Internet became constitutive of musical life.

While studies on virtual forms of music interactions multiplied along the years (i.e., Whelan 2006; Théberge 2005; Baym 2007; Schaap and Berkers 2013), we are far from understanding the wide range of influences that the Internet and digital platforms have had on the conventional configurations of local music scenes. There is no doubt that the early wave of digital tools, in the nineties and early 2000s, has “given rise to a range of new creative strategies for the articulation of fandom and the creation of fan discourses” in the realm of music (Bennett 2004, 169). At the same time, as argued by Holly Kruse, “the decentralization and globalization of music production and dissemination have not resulted in the disappearance of local identities, local scene histories, or the perception that there are local sounds” (Kruse 2010, 625). Kruse also remarked that it is also “true, and obvious, however, that music scene participants are now more easily able to access and connect with each other, whether they are nearby or far away, because of the internet” (ibid., 632).

What seems clear is that since the times when the notion of virtual scene was elaborated in the first half of the 2000s, much has occurred in online music interactions (see also Kotarba and LaLone 2014, 65), including the birth of Facebook (2004), the adoption of music streaming services like Spotify (launched in 2008) as the main way of listening to music (see Balbi and Magaudda 2018, 181–182), and also the reshaping of music authenticity as a consequence of the rise of music platforms (Baym 2018). When the notion of virtual scene was coined, for instance, the positive role of the Internet was still commonly assumed in rebalancing the power between industries and fans, leading for instance Bennett and Peterson (2004, 11) to argue that, since “the virtual scene involves direct Net-mediated person-to-person communication between fans,” this kind of “scene is therefore much more nearly in the control of fans”—an optimistic perspective on the digital media ecology that today is much

less consensual among media and music scholars (i.e., Morozov 2011; Mazierska et al. 2018).

New kinds of digital infrastructures and platforms did much more than offer a new space for fandom or new opportunities to link together artists and listeners from different countries and regions. These infrastructures, thanks to their power to reshape how contents circulate and how relationships are maintained, altered the very same conditions for music circulation, listening, and fandom. The power of these infrastructures to organize, distribute, and deliver music content introduced distinctively new kinds of mediated relationships between artists, songs, and fans. The consequences of all this still need to be fully assessed, including how infrastructures and platforms contribute to generating new conditions of existence for music scenes, especially those articulated around local identities.

A recent assessment of the reshaping of local music experiences by social media is the already mentioned study by Bennett and Rogers on music scenes in Australia, where a specific focus is placed on the way platforms such as Facebook affect the experience of local fans. The authors recognize that today “virtual scenes are much more reliant on specific platforms, applications and websites” and that “virtual scenes and the virtual layers of local and trans-local scenes are woven together from data processing architectures with social interfaces, and these interfaces are constantly working to solicit subjects” (Bennett and Rogers 2016, 146). What the authors contribute is identifying how the logic of specific infrastructural media, with their distinctive affordances and constraints (i.e., notifications, liking, befriending, attending, and so forth), becomes an integral part of the forms of participation to a local scene, superseding older existing music practices (such as physical *postering* around the city). Hence, a major issue highlighted by the authors is the shift from people, and how they build their own (in Finnegan’s terms) pathways within a local music scene, to digital infrastructures’ logics, which “not only are adding new vectors and collaborative possibilities to the cultural space of local music, but are also deeply porous structures; without question, these technologies and the media they encourage defy the boundaries of the local” (ibid., 158).

Since technologies and musical practices *co-evolve* and are mutually shaped (Pinch and Bijsterveld 2004), it is important to pay attention to the historical development of music infrastructures and platforms in relation to music scenes. A historical sensitivity to the evolution of digital music infrastructures might help to highlight not only how new

technologies reshape musical practices, but also how music logics have contributed to certain specific features of digital infrastructures. This issue has been outlined in the study by Tamas Tofalvy on the transformations occurred in the extreme metal scene between 2004 and 2008, as a consequence of new forms of social media interactions. An inspiring example is the adoption of the devaluing label of “MySpace band,” which implies both a judgment about music aesthetic and the recognition of a platform’s logic related to the circulation of fame and visibility online. The adoption of MySpace as an early music-based social network “brought about radical changes in band communication and music distribution in the scene — but the changes themselves, the actual meanings and uses of the media platform were shaped by the scene’s own cultural tradition and by the conflicting value judgments” (Tofalvy 2014). In other words, what we can appreciate in this example is exactly the *co-constitutive* dynamics involving music platforms and scenes’ values and aesthetics judgments.

More generally, the two examples based on the role of Facebook and MySpace in the co-shaping of music scenes practices and values offer glimpses into the way digital platforms and infrastructures do something more than allowing new spaces of interaction or widening the geographical boundaries within which a music scene can be experienced. However, the rapid change characterizing today’s digital music circulation, together with the new layer of complexity brought by algorithmic platforms and datification, requires further work to grasp the evolving connections between music scenes and infrastructures. In the following final section, I will point to some relevant issues that the next wave of music scenes studies can hardly avoid considering in relation to the role of digital music infrastructures.

PLATFORMS, INFOMEDIATION, AND ALGORITHMIC DATA

To expand the toolbox for studying music scenes in the new digital landscape, where platforms and data circulation acquire a critical role, it is important to shift the focus on some crucial questions directly related to how digital infrastructures work. These questions include issues such as the logics of music platforms, the role played by algorithmic data, and the emergent future music formats, technologies, and metadata.

One major point of concern is the role played at multiple levels by digital platforms in the circulation of music scenes. Both generalist platforms

like YouTube or Facebook and music-specific ones like Spotify, Last.fm, or SoundCloud contribute not just to an improved dissemination of different music genres, but—more radically—to how these same genres are defined, represented, and intersecting each other. Platforms are crucial for how they reinforce the identity and circulation of music genres, but also—as an influential article by Tarleton Gillespie (2010) pointed out in relation to a platform such as YouTube—for their symbolic and political implications: The term *platform* is not neutral, but is rather part of digital companies’ “efforts not only to sell, convince, persuade, protect, triumph, or condemn, but to make claims about what these technologies are and are not, and what should and should not be expected of them,” establishing “the very criteria by which these technologies will be judged, built directly into the terms by which we know them” (Gillespie 2010, 359). A focus on the infrastructural dimension of platforms (Plantin et al. 2018) poses new questions for understanding the hidden and taken-for-granted practices supporting platforms’ functioning, as well as their architectural affordances and constraints and even the political implications of the process of *platformization* of digital media (Helmond 2015; van Dijck et al. 2018). Hence, a major question to deal with regards the consequences for music scenes derived by how contents’ circulation on music platforms is actually shaped by the pressure to monetize music and by the need to generate revenues primarily from listeners’ data collection and by attracting advertisers to pages containing music-related content.

The role of platforms as drivers in the articulation of digital music scenes resides also in the ability of algorithmic data and automated recommendation systems to shape music circulation and identities. In fact, automated, algorithmic forms of organization of content introduce a further infrastructural layer in music, because new logics of aggregation of sounds, identities, and taste are now emerging from the infrastructure itself, giving rise to a distinctive “datification of music listening” (Prey 2016). As it has been argued in an experimental study on YouTube by Airoidi et al. (2016) on music videos, the clusters of music tastes resulting from the interactions between listeners and the platform produce “crowd-generated music categories,” which derive from the repeated, crowd-based viewing choices by users, organized by platform’s algorithms. These taste clusters often respond much more to the situational reception contexts, rather than to music genres or their relation to a scene. More generally, what is important to observe is that alternative logics, based on the

power of algorithmic associations in organizing people's choices, are now an integral part of how music circulates and is made available to listeners.

However, when reflecting about emerging logics of data circulation in music consumption and taste formation, there are few cautions we should keep in mind. First of all, as outlined Gitelman and Jackson (2013), data produced by platforms and algorithmic processes are never neutral: Their alleged objectivity represents, instead, the outcome of a depuration process, hiding the work they entail and the situated logics influencing them. As a result, data may be thought as something always produced, filtered, and organized within the logic of infrastructures and platforms. Hence, the algorithmic organization of data about listeners' behavior is not transparent and self-sufficient, but represents a very messy and opaque intersection of machines and people, the aggregation of actual behaviors and strategic choices by firms and advertising activities (Bonini and Gandini 2019). Jeremy Wade Morris defined these emerging and largely opaque layers of intermediation in digital music taste as *infomediation*, intended as a set of "organizational entities that monitor, collect, process and repackage cultural and technical usage data into an informational infrastructure that shapes the presentation and representation of cultural goods" (Morris 2015, 452). All this translates into an increasing need to look at the evolution of the infrastructural infomediation practices and their influence in the shaping of music scenes' identities, at the intersection between human and machines, software interfaces listeners' behaviors, collected digital data, and the still relevant physical music gatherings and events. These do not stop to be relevant, but are nevertheless increasingly channeled through social media practices and other forms of technological mediation.

For instance, we can look at how the dialectic between algorithmic data and human-based curatorial choices is already part of the articulation of new meanings and forms of authenticity in music scenes. An example comes from a research on music curatorship by Emilia Barna, who focused on the case of *22tracks*, an online music discovery service centered on playlists and based in four European cities. The author outlines the enduring role played by localness in the articulation of the music identities, arguing that "the involvement of DJs in *22tracks* certainly seems to contribute towards the reinforcing of local, as well as online, niche music communities or scenes, through curators acting as local catalysts, giving support to local artists, even if the latter is not an exclusive concern"

(Barna 2017, 11). The example of *22tracks* also reveals how the explicit refusal of an algorithmic approach among DJs represents the enactment of a new kind of authenticity, outlining how pressures to music datification also offer the chance for the cultural reframing of music values.

The last issue to explore at the intersection of digital infrastructures and music scenes is the way future digital musical formats and standards could crystalize a set of prescriptions, actions, and relationships between musicians, contents, and fans. The role of formats in shaping music culture has been particularly outlined by Jonathan Sterne (2012) in his research on the mp3 standard. Among other things, in his book Sterne shows how the technical features of mp3 emerged from telephone companies' pressure to make profit, rather than from the aim to offer listeners a more satisfying music experience, outlining the political economy underlying the diffusion and the adoption of this digital music format.

If we look to the emergent trends in digital music industry, we can catch a glimpse into how digital music formats could reshape the relationship between listeners and music scenes. A pertinent example regards those formats emerging around the application of *blockchain* technology in music industry, including the adoption of features like *smart contracts* and *digital currencies* (Magaudda 2018; Baym et al. 2019). Indeed, several work-in-progress blockchain-based music formats are being designed around the idea that fans who buy songs would also acquire rights over the music, becoming holders of a share of royalties, in the hope to receive monetary rewards when these songs will be purchased by other people. This model characterizes, for instance, the platform *Vezt* (www.vezt.co), which in 2018 started to propose a music distribution system based on a so-called *initial song offering* (ISO). With the ISO, in the moment of the initial release of a song, artists and labels can sell music contents together with a portion of their rights, which are purchased through a digital coin issued by the same platform *Vezt*. The song's rights information is thus encoded on *Vezt*'s proprietary blockchain, which will distribute royalties through smart contracts when this song will be sold to or listened by other customers. It is not hard to imagine that this potential technological model of music distribution, based on a powerful algorithmic monetization of music content, may generate new kinds of relationships between musicians and fans, directly influencing both the affective involvement in a scene and, more in general, the interactions and values that bring together different players animating music scenes.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter is first and foremost a call to focus more convincingly on the role of infrastructures and platforms to expand the theoretical toolbox for the studying of music scenes in our contemporary hyper-connected society. In recent years, we have assisted a deep reconfiguration of music scenes, especially due to the rapid adoption of social media and streaming platforms. As it has also been argued by Nancy Baym about the evolving relationship between musicians and their fans in the digital context, the rising of platforms and infrastructures is currently at the basis of the emergence of a new musical environment, in which, “with the rise of social media, we’ll see creators and consumers brought back together in new ways, challenging boundaries that have long been taken for granted and reformulating relationships under new terms that have yet to be determined” (Baym 2018, 28).

On the basis of these arguments, this invitation to look more closely to the infrastructural processes supporting music circulation can be summed up into three relevant dimensions, characterizing how digital technologies unfold their influence on today’s music organization: the role of digital platforms, the organization and management of data, and the emergence of new music formats, for instance those based on blockchain technology. These are just three examples of how infrastructural affordances and constrains can contribute to the reshaping of the conditions under which music scenes are articulated, as well as the same logics of existence of music scenes based on a distinctive local identity. In short, this chapter has aimed at soliciting music scholars to look at the infrastructural organization of digital music circulation as an entry point to cultivate a distinctive sensibility able to intercept the heterogeneous entities that, in different ways and at different scales, are increasingly relevant in the reshaping contemporary digital music scenes.

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From Music Scenes to Musicalized Networks: A Critical Perspective on Digitalization

Stéphane Costantini

INTRODUCTION

In the social sciences, several notions have been considered in order to understand and analyze, in their collective dimensions, social phenomena relating to popular musical cultures. Indeed, British and French researchers influenced by the research fields of political economy and cultural studies have devoted themselves to the study of media production (production studies), and since the early 1990s, there has been an upsurge of work on issues related to the cultural industries. In this article, we want to look at the collective dimension of musical activity, and how it relates to its economic dimension, particularly with regard to the current context of music digitalization and the continuing hegemony of social media in music marketing practices. It is from this perspective that we will question the heuristic scope of the concepts and logic developed for the understanding of the modalities of development and emergence of musical projects. How do current musicians actually connect, or try to integrate themselves into the commercial—and often capitalized—sectors

S. Costantini (✉)
EHESS, Paris, France

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of the music industries (record production and publishing, live performance)? Is the surge of digital retailers and distributors, as well as social media, and their massive adoption by musicians, changing the traditional uses relative to the structuring of musical activities and the co-optation strategies between musicians? At this time, the notions of scene (Straw 1991), proto-market (Toynbee 2000) and musicalized network (Tassin 2004) will be discussed.

However, in our view, this research of operative terms must be simultaneously confronted with the empirical cases encountered, in order to consider the subject dynamically and constructively. Also, after a presentation of these concepts, they will be discussed on the basis of specific cases resulting from a Ph.D. fieldwork, showing the relations between the musicians' uses of digital media and the collective dimension of musical activities. The methodology used in this empirical work was based on a series of long semi-structured interviews between 2010 and 2012, with more than 35 musicians in France and the UK (Ile-de-France and Rhône-Alpes regions, and the urban areas of Bristol and London) and considering two distinct genres, rock and electronic music. Thus, after a presentation of the three notions mentioned above, we will discuss their heuristic value by focusing on two sets of musicians' practices: digital distribution and social networking.

MUSIC SCENES

The term of music scene has been used for long by the journalistic and academic spheres, referring to a local context (generally a city or a district) where a music genre originated or has been re-appropriated and locally adapted (Bennett 2004). However, it was not until the 1990s and in Anglo-Saxon countries that the first attempts to conceptualize the notion of the scene were made, and later on in France by sociologists of culture. For G r me Guibert (2006, 2012), the use of the music scene as a concept can be characterized by two main approaches: the "experienced" and the "perceived" scene.

The experienced scene places the accent on the ethnographic dimension of the scene. It studies the cooperation between the different players and their role in the common building of reality. In this, it aims at taking into account the activities of the scene in their complexity (see, e.g., Cohen 1991; Shank 1994; Hein 2003; Perrenoud 2007). The perceived

scene takes on the idea that the scene is crystalizing itself by representations constructed from the outside. In this sense, the perceived scene is the result of the focusing the music and media professionals and public policymakers, and is not the reflection of the diversity nor the intensity of the musical activities that are taking place locally.

The disparities between experienced and perceived scene are particularly noticeable in the studied regional metropolises, where the visibility of a particular music genre appears “at the forefront” of the scene. In these cases, the style of music and the scene it represents tends to obscure other music genres, even though these styles would be an integral part of the scene. The formation of scenes and the emergence of musical styles thus contribute to divergent dynamics that sometimes find common ground in the constitution of local dynamics, which will be relayed by the actors at the national or even international level. This is the case, for example, of the Grenoble music scene, which, in the 1990s, developed around reggae music, to which the leading bands of that era added other influences such as French chanson (*Sinsemilia*) and Berber music (*Gnawa Diffusion*). These two bands of national renown—at least for connoisseurs of the musical genre—still base their activities in Grenoble, and have contributed to the structuring of the local scene with the creation of structures of management, discographic production, and diffusion (*Echo Production*, *D’jamaz*, *Tchookar prod*). The formation of stylistic scenes has driving effects—or virtuous circles—favoring the development of a local music economy, illustrated by the increasing number of contenders in these music genres. Peter Webb’s (2017) analysis of the Bristolian scene reveals similar phenomena about trip hop, the genre that made the British city famous, while obscuring all the locally influential aesthetics that helped to forge it (jazz, dub, punk, hip-hop).

However, while the notion of perceived scene makes it possible to study the emergence of particular musical genres within geographical areas, it seems difficult to give an account of the development and co-optation of the multitude of musical projects that do not fit into the perspective of perceived scenes, that is, those that are not simultaneously identified for a given period as having a common geographical and stylistic dimension. Moreover, and from an epistemological point of view, the mobilization of the notion of scene and the attempts at “scientific fulfilment” to which it has been successively subjected have given rise to a

plurality of meanings that it is capable of covering. However, the meanings assigned to it do not appear to be fully compatible. In this context, the prolific nature of this concept has been debated: While authors such as Simon Frith describe it as a “fruitfully muddled concept” (in Hesmondhalgh 2005, 174), David Hesmondhalgh argues that its ambiguous use, as a concept that co-characterizes practices in a geographical context and space that transcends locality, appears to be “downright confusing” (Hesmondhalgh 2005, 174). Indeed, it seems that the polysemy of its meanings and uses—in sometimes contradictory ways—has prevented this notion from maintaining a sufficiently stabilized basis for the (relatively short) time of its collective construction, and has in this sense been counterproductive. Also, and following this author’s proposals, it seems appropriate to consider an eclectic range of theoretical tools, in which the notion of scene appears to be “a necessary, but not sufficient, way of thinking about the relationship between music and social” (Hesmondhalgh 2005, 175).

PROTO-MARKETS

The concept of proto-market, proposed by Jason Toynbee, may have helped to clarify these phenomena from a socioeconomic perspective, while remaining close to that of the scene and marked by a micro-social approach. Inspired by Bernard Miège’s (1989) writings and the observation that it is difficult for the recorded music industry to recruit the musical labor force (which is in its own interest), particularly because of its multiplicity and extensive size, Toynbee suggests that the development of new popular musical forms “takes place in a series of ‘proto-markets’ which are not very closely linked to the capitalized sectors of subcontracting” (Toynbee 2000, 27). The distinction he makes between the market and proto-markets is that the latter bring musicians and audiences together in spaces that are not entirely “commodified.” Indeed, even though the nature of these activities is commercial, the level of activity cannot, in its terms, be explained by economic factors alone. In this sense, proto-markets constitute a field of restricted production (Bourdieu 1992) in which the imperative for artists is to distinguish themselves from the values associated with the mass market.

From this point of view, the contribution of an understanding of music scenes as proto-markets seems to us to be twofold. On the one hand, it

makes it possible to shed light on the dynamics of structuring musical projects by taking into account their more or less strong integration into the music industries. This notion also seems to us to imply that the understanding of the ways in which musicians are integrated into the industries that produce them must be questioned on the basis of the relationship these industries have with the proto-markets. On the other hand, it can be noted that the notion of proto-market is positioned outside the notion of scene and its territorial grounding as defined a priori, as they are illustrated by the local rock scene or electronic music networks. In other words, this notion places greater emphasis on the stylistic variable from which distinctions and matching between musicians and small musical players are made. In this sense, we agree with Keith Negus when he suggests that “genres are more than musical ‘tags’, they are social categories” (Negus 1999, 181). In this sense, it can be stated that the proto-markets composed of musicians in a given territory do not only correspond to the perceived scene, but also to the experienced scene, where a greater or lesser diversity of bands and musical styles coexist. In this case, the careers of the musicians who are part of it diverge from those of the perceived scenes, for example, within structures that, while forming a minority, are nonetheless active and potentially lucrative.

MUSICALIZED NETWORKS

The last notion that seems useful for our understanding is the musicalized network. Shaped by French sociologist Damien Tassin, it aims to take into account the set of links that relates closely or remotely to a music band. Made of friends and relatives at first, this network tends to get “musicalized,” that is specializing around musical activity. For Tassin,

The evolution of the practice constitutes a social experience which tends to specialize in musical activities, it is visible through the methods of functioning and constitution of groups. In other words, the initial local practice becomes overlapped by a larger musical network whose frontiers extend beyond the original framework constituted by elective friendships from the same geographical territory. (Tassin 2004, 98)

The main characteristics of these networks are their poor institutionalization and peer co-optation. What can be explained by the lack of structures

(such as booking agencies, musical publishers, or record companies) in a given space, for a shared aesthetic, can also be explained by the availability (or scarcity) of groups sharing the same aesthetic sensibilities, likely to cooperate with each other and to infuse structuring dynamics conducive to the production of a perceived scene. This phenomenon therefore enables the illustration of the importance of the stylistic variable, and thus of the musical genre, in the logics of matching between musicians and structures. The significance of this is also emphasized by the authors of cultural studies (Frith 1996; Negus 1999). It also allows us to refine the remark made by Tassin: If the initial musicalized network has a tendency to expand according to wider aesthetic and geographical criteria, the co-optation modalities with a more professionalized network can then generate a structuring according to a more restrictive genre dynamic that outstrips geographical criteria. Ultimately, the notion of musicalized network helps us to seize the articulations between the structuring of musical activities, relational agency, and co-optation that happen within.

Now we have described these three notions, we can try to encompass them (i.e., take their heuristic insights) through the notion of music network. In this perspective, we can distinguish three types of music networks, with differentiated socioeconomic logics. Stylistic networks are concentrated on eclectic niche music genres, where members are very mobile but have low economic capital. Local networks originate from the experienced scenes, where members are very rooted geographically, but the musical styles are generally more focused on popular genres (rock, pop music, cover bands, etc.). Professionalized networks evolve around professionalized structures, such as booking organizations and music venues, labels and publishers. They can originate from a perceived scene or from the co-optation of musicians by a set of businesses.

These three kinds of networks can overlap with each other, but not necessarily: The borders between the first two types are porous, but they are both more or less ideologically opposed to the third one, as the latter is more commodified—its co-optation logics are more determined economically than socially or aesthetically.

These network articulations greatly affect the matchings between musicians or bands and bookers or labels in a given territory. For example, musicians can look out of their geographical area—for a label or booking agency—if their music genre is not strong in their own city. Genre variable plays an important role here in structuring the matching and co-optation

logics, as the extension of the artists' music networks toward more commodified players tends to overtake the geographical criteria, and concentrate on genre dynamics.

DIGITALIZATION: NEW USES IN MUSIC DISTRIBUTION AND NEW MARKERS OF ARTISTIC RECOGNITION

In order to study the issues linking musicians' development (in both economic and artistic terms) and co-optation in the current context, it seems essential to take into account the changes that the music industries have undergone during the past fifteen years due to the influences of the multinational companies that are sometimes referred to as the "new majors"—Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, Microsoft—or GAFAM (Bouquillion et al. 2013). With the substantial drop in sales of physical music and the development of the market for digital music, the services offered by these big players (and a myriad of others) are encouraging new distribution methods for music at the production level (small record labels, often held by musicians themselves). Moreover, the strategies of these actors are also positioned downstream of the value chain, encouraging users and professionals to adopt uses that redesign the ways in which cultural and informational products circulate. From this point of view, many of these players have entered market segments that had previously been untapped or left partially vacant by "old" music and media players (see in particular Benghozi and Paris 2001; Belleflamme 2003; Beuscart 2007; Benghozi 2011).

As far as musicians are concerned, these changes have allowed independent musicians to bypass a certain number of industry bottlenecks (Benghozi and Paris 2001), contributing to a blurring of the boundaries between amateur and professional musicians (Coulangeon 2004, 2008; Costantini 2012). This change is to be related to the tendency—which started in the 1980s and is still ongoing—toward the sustained development of musical practices and the general increase in the number of musicians in advanced capitalist societies. This phenomenon thus accompanies the multiplication of the music production units (home studios, micro-labels) and the advent of the "self-produced artist" (Jouvenet 2006). In other words, there have never been so many musicians in the "artistic reservoir" (Huet et al. 1978; Miège 1989), which contributes to the phenomenon of content overproduction (Menger 2009).

Secondly, with the massive adoption of digital content platforms (user-generated or not) and digital social networks, we are witnessing the gradual extension of markings of artistic recognition to the relational metrics and counters displayed by digital devices (the number of likes or video views, number of friends, fans, or followers) and the emergence of online notoriety (Beuscart 2008). If we consider notoriety as a form of capital, with a strong obsolescence and likely to be valued in several markets, its place of construction and objectification is now as much online, on sites such as YouTube and Facebook, as in sales rankings (physical or digital) or in concert venues. Significantly, marketing professionals within the recorded music industry mobilize the digital devices developed by these new players on a daily basis, both upstream (research for new talent or musical genres) and downstream (dissemination and promotion of content). But above all, these professionals are increasingly trying to articulate these two poles, maximizing the relationships between upstream and downstream marketing. While marketing's influence on this sector is more of an underlying trend than a recent one (Negus 1999), we can nevertheless observe that the development of the digital music market tends to amplify a rationalizing logic within the sector (Hesmondhalgh 2007).

Moreover, the removal of the artificial scarcity of symbolic goods in the digital era has led to a massive endeavor to reproduce this scarcity by concentrating on the mechanisms of visibility and notoriety. This phenomenon leads to increasing disparities among musicians, since music companies are mainly focusing on the signs of visibility, thus preferring the "bigger" or "promising" artists instead of the "more obscure" musicians. As a result, we can point out a general injunction among musicians to "be online," to have a serious online presence and have their music available to their potential fans, but also professionals (labels, venues, and booking agents). Moreover, what we can see is an ongoing trend of musicians ostentatiously expanding their network (or musicalizing their network), which has been increasingly important. For a musician, the main goal of these online strategies of facilitating accessibility and circulation of online music is to "look professional." On this occasion, they take endeavors to facilitate the accessibility of their content to Internet users merge with those of the quest for visibility on the Internet, whose results will eventually be mobilized for the development of their musical activity. Musicians' access to digital distribution, as well as to social networks, is therefore considered in this context as significant indicators of a certain form of

public recognition. Furthermore, it would be fair to assume the evolution of these digital practices leads the musicians to put aside the sense of belonging, on a geographic or stylistic basis, as they have to compete on an attention market (Boullier 2009), which tends to have individualizing effects.

In this perspective, the concepts of scene and proto-market may look less pertinent to acknowledge the mutual co-optation dynamics happening between musicians. And conversely, the notion of music(alized) networks appears useful as the musicians' digital practices are aimed principally at extending their music networks. However, a closer look at their digital practices allows us to refine this analysis and see the heuristic contribution of both concepts of scene and proto-market.

DIGITAL DISTRIBUTION AND MUSIC GENRE DYNAMICS

First of all, if our enquiry has revealed a certain fragmentation in the uses of social media, broadcasting platforms, and digital distribution services, this apparent diversity should not, however, obscure the many regularities that can also be observed. With regard to online distribution and promotion practices, we have noted that their diversification is consistent with a rationalization of the means of communication available to musicians, who try to reconcile a multi-mediated visibility strategy with maximizing their online presence, where the majority of their potential listeners and buyers are expected to be.

However, this does not imply that online distribution and promotion practices are the same among the practiced music genres. In the punk and indie rock genres, we noticed several initiatives to bypass dominant digital retailers iTunes Store, Google Play, and Amazon mp3, through creating specific alternative platforms such as CDID (which stands for "Indie CD") or Mondisquaireestmort.com ("my record dealer is dead"), in analogy with the alternative physical distribution channels adopted by punk cultures in the early 1980s. Through these endeavors, we can see a willingness for prioritizing short supply chains and supporting the DIY ethos as a constitutive aspect of these genres' cultures. These platforms, which despite from being global, can have a very local outreach, tend also to prioritize A-List bands from a particular sub-genre in a more or less determined area, and may sometimes correspond to a growing "perceived scene."

In the case of the electronic musicians that we studied, the practices linked to the distribution of digital content tend to differ from, or only partly overlap with, those of other amplified music practitioners. Certainly, the titles or albums produced by the electronic musicians observed are also available on the major downloading or music on demand platforms, thus requiring the implementation of a distribution contract between their labels and one or more digital distributors. However, we have noticed that these digital contents are mainly promoted on specialized electronic music platforms, such as Beatport or Juno Downloads, targeting their sales to DJs and amateurs, connoisseurs of electronic music. It should be noted that unlike other fee-for-service sales platforms, these latter only contract with labels and therefore have a right to control the quality of the content they provide. Moreover, the characteristics of the mentioned electronic genres entail that these platforms' functionalities combine the categorizations and the rankings of songs according to a multitude of sub-genres (rather than by artist), by title (rather than by album) and by a logic of "Tops" (inspired by radio and discographic charts). As one of our French interviewees recounts in our interview: "(...) on downloading sites, like BeatPort and so on, guys who are in the Top 100, in the Digital Top, they're rarely very famous guys. They're guys who make a good song, and it's like a blind listen session, something that sells itself" (Nico, Tambour Battant, Paris, France, interview by the author, 2011). Contrary to the logic of "Tops" and "Hit-Parade" aimed at the general public, which tend to favor artists who have already been identified or recognized in the past, these specialized platforms would thus be, by the activities of its customers in the restricted niches corresponding to a musical sub-genre, more inclined to highlight a variety of artist-producers that are little known to the public. In our opinion, this specificity finds its explanatory sources in the strong fragmentation of the electronic music market, based on a constantly refined differentiation of its productions, as well as a "continual movement to outshine past works" (Jouvenet 2006, 136). Thus, based on factors that actively contribute to the rapid expansion and renewal of the offer, electronic music seems to have found, with digital distribution, a particularly fertile breeding ground for its development. This being so, the incessant turnover should not imply, on the contrary, a lack of interest in the external signs of valorization that these downloading platforms produce. Considered in part as a mark of recognition by peers, each entry of a song in the Top 100 of an electronic sub-genre is proudly announced by artists on their

personal pages within social networks, and can appear, for example, in their biography.

From these observations, we can acknowledge that the musicians' sense of local belonging has not disappeared in the digital age, nor the stylistic distinctions in the rock and electronic music sub-genres. Indeed, we can consider that these elements of sociability have either been reconfigured with the opportunities offered by digital technology, be it through the musicians' initiatives putting up a digital distribution platform, or through specialized platforms such as Beatport, which focus on subgenre classifications in their editorial choices to gain popularity among electronic musicians, labels, and fans. In our view, these examples can also illustrate the contradictions and oppositions between the different networks mentioned above, as they show the integration of the socioeconomic logics emanating from stylistic or geographic networks by a more commodified ("professional") network.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND MUSICALIZED NETWORKS

A second point can be made by observing the musicians' promotional use of social networking platforms. When it comes to online circulation of music and specialized information, a substantial number of online fanzines, blogs, and Facebook groups have also emerged this last decade. Started and regularly updated by band members, music collectives, or individual enthusiasts, these devices have been integrated into the studied musicians' online communication strategies. The common attribute we can discern about these Web sites, blogs, and groups is that they are all specific to a genre or a geographical area, or both, thus re-creating a sense of belonging.

In order to understand the musicians' stakes involved, a quick look at the origins of these "online networks," and particularly on the first popular social networking platform, MySpace, may be useful. Indeed, during what can be termed the "golden age" of MySpace, from 2006 to early 2009, the simultaneous presence of a large majority of actors and musicians on this social network first participated in the transposition of the musical networks on the Internet, but it also allowed the densification of the links within these musical networks. In other words, by giving visibility to the links of interknowledge between bands, MySpace gave musicians wider access to information about other members of the network that were geographically or aesthetically close, and allowed them

to mobilize them more directly. In this sense, the practices of visibility and internal emailing make it possible to initiate or renew engagements and collaborations within musical networks. However, it is rare that they alone are able to extend these networks significantly, at least to the point of giving musicians access to the “professional network,” as suggested by the “urban myths” that have accompanied the rise of the social network. As Beuscart demonstrated, “MySpace does not make it possible to bypass intermediaries in the construction of a national notoriety that makes it possible to envision a sustainable musical career” (Beuscart 2008, 24). Moreover, through the studied musicians’ practices, we can see that in most cases, they are primarily aimed at maintaining and strengthening relationships within a pre-existing network, geographically or stylistically located, and are rarely directly co-opted by “professional” networks with a stronger economic dimension. Indeed, the practice of friending has been built more in a cumulative logic of external signs of artistic recognition than in a logic of extension of the internal network of possible collaborators: on MySpace (and the same applies to Facebook), the more “friends” you have, the more popular you look.

While the disengagement from MySpace by many musicians circa 2010 largely corresponds to its recovery by the Facebook network, we can also witness a fragmentation of promotion and networking practices, mainly fueled by the musicians’ needs in broadcasting music and videos. In this perspective, the music platform SoundCloud, launched in 2007, has mainly been used by electronic musicians for its capacity to serve as a social network as much as a broadcasting platform. It has become the market leader among audio-only content aggregators, especially for electronic dance music and (to a lesser extent) hip-hop (Allington et al. 2015). While sharing songs posted on other social networks, blogs, or sites is one of the most widely used features, its use by many musicians as a social network allows for internal sharing of musical content and networking close to the practices described above about MySpace. Indeed, the research led by Allington et al. (2015) showed that the platform greatly facilitates engagement in various valuing activities: “following” users, reposting tracks posted by other users, “favoriting” tracks, commenting on tracks, and engaging in conversations with other users through such comments.

An illustration of this phenomenon can be found through the discourse of Benoit, from French electronic band Tambour Battant, praising the positive sides of SoundCloud for musicians networking: “On Soundcloud,

between pros and between DJs, you can upload and send tracks, you can even download some of them. There are systems of groups, labels, and you can send it to all in one click, so it's very well done" (Ben, Tambour Battant, Paris, France, interview by the author, 2011). Built originally as a music broadcasting platform, it seems that the use of SoundCloud suits electronic musicians particularly well as they have been able to re-create their networks (made of producers, DJs, and labels), and make private sharing easier between artists and labels. In this case, the SoundCloud platform, while being created for all music genres, seems to fit electronic musicians and networks more accurately, facilitating collaborations and further co-optations. Once more, this example illustrates the significance of genre labels which musicians subscribe to for the digital era.

CONCLUSIONS

Far from assisting a homogeneous disintermediation between musicians and industry, the musicians' communication and distribution practices are based on pre-existing practices, which can still be geographically rooted and keep definitely genre-related forms of sociability. In this sense, this study identifies among the musicians a number of specific uses, which vary according to their aesthetic orientations (genres) and their inclusion within musical networks, and keep on producing sense in the digital era. On the other hand, the search for expansion of their own musical network can somehow be understood as an ostentatious quest for signs of artistic recognition. However, we have also seen that these uses and strategies mainly have an instrumental character; that is, they enable musicians to pursue their musical activities and define their aesthetical identity, by creating and nurturing links with the professional networks. This suggests an ongoing interdependent relationship between musicians, labels, and booking agents, which is more or less strong depending on the "market dimension" of each musician's network. This proves, at the same time, the ongoing relevance of the notion of proto-markets.

In addition, taking account of genre considerations, we have seen that the musicians' uses of (and sometimes creation of) digital distribution platforms are differentiated according to their own modalities. In this context, electronic music tends to distinguish itself from the rest of the amplified music genres, which can be appreciated both through the specificities of their choices of social media and the content platforms used, but

also in their choices of online distribution services, whose characteristics can be adapted in particular to the aspects of this musical “meta-genre.”

Thus, far from being the object of unambiguous appropriation, the musicians’ uses in terms of online distribution and social media platforms seem to fit their specific logics, in particular according to their communicative priorities and their stylistic networks. These empirical findings provide at least two insightful implications for theoretical arguments and for future research in the field of popular music studies. Firstly, and on a collective and macroeconomic level, it reminds us that even if the digital music platforms and services act on a global market, their uses are not. In this sense, musical networks still play a great role in the development of the digital music business, encompassing both geographic and stylistic issues in a socioeconomic perspective that often determines the musicians’ online strategies. Secondly, and in a more individual and microeconomic level, these findings show the active role taken by musicians themselves in the advent of digital music services. Furthermore, in order to be fully understood, they should also be considered as service customers, early adopters, even potential business makers in the digital music industry, and not as mere “content creators.” With the rising model of the artist-entrepreneur in the global music business, these implications have to be taken into account for future research in the field of the popular music studies to fully apprehend the issues surrounding digitalization.

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Niche Underground: Media, Technology, and the Reproduction of Underground Cultural Capital

Tamas Tofalvy

INTRODUCTION

“...This very topography of popular music in terms of underground versus overground, margins versus centre, has been steadily dissolved this decade, partly because of the web and partly because of the economic upheavals that have beset the music industry”—wrote Simon Reynolds (2009) in an essay for *The Guardian*. Indeed, in recent popular and scenic discourses, and cultural criticism, there is a frequently recurring narrative, according to which unlimited access made possible by the Internet and digital platforms have, in fact, already eliminated the concept of the underground. This is because music that may be heard by practically anyone can no longer be called underground (see also Graham 2010b).

Inspired partly by this contemporary discourse, in this chapter I wish to analyze the notion of the underground, in the interrelated contexts

T. Tofalvy (✉)

Department of Sociology and Communication, Budapest
University of Technology and Economics, Budapest, Hungary

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of media technologies and sociocultural dynamics of collectivities organized around music. My argument follows two main tracks. On the one hand, I discuss how, in different technological, social and scenic contexts, the meaning and use of the underground may change over time; yet how the reproduction of subcultural capital maintains an ever-changing underground. On the other hand, I attempt to theorize and historicize the notion of the underground, by using, among others, theoretical tools borrowed from the Bourdieusian-Thorntonian approach of subcultural capital (Thornton 1996), and the approach I would term “cultural technology studies” (practiced by authors such as Gitelman 2006; Marvin 1988; Jackaway 1995; Sterne 2012; Baym 2010; and presented by Paolo Magaudda’s work on scenic infrastructure in the present volume; Magaudda 2020). By doing so, my aim is to better integrate one of the most widely used terms relating to popular music, which is nevertheless rarely reflected upon, into the methodological realm of popular music studies, in order to gain a better understanding of a central issue in the field: the formation, hierarchical organization, and symbolic creation of niche cultures.

WHAT IS UNDERGROUND?

The origin of *underground* as a term and concept is similar to the other keyword in describing musical communities, namely the *scene*, in that initially it appeared in the political and subcultural, rather than academic discourse (while scene was introduced by music journalists). However, they also differ in the sense that while the concept of the scene was met with an enthusiastic response by scholars, and a growing number of academic papers attempted to conceptualize, theorize, develop it over the past decades (Straw 1991; Hodkinson and Deicke 2007)—as well as debating and questioning it (see Hesmondhalgh 2005)—ethnographic studies on underground communities (Thornton 1996; Fikentscher 2000; Chatterton and Hollands 2003; Matsue 2009; Panuzzo 2010) rarely focus on the conceptualization of the term underground itself.

This is probably one of the reasons why the first two book-length studies on the underground state that the notion has not been paid enough attention so far. Sean Francis Cashbaugh, in his dissertation on the cultural history of political and art underground in the United States, calls the underground an “undertheorized realm” (Cashbaugh 2016, 35), and

Stephen Graham “a desperately neglected realm of musical activity” (Graham 2016, viii) in his work *Sounds of the Underground*, which was the first book-length academic attempt to theorize the concept and put it into a historical perspective. According to Graham’s approach, underground is closely knit with the notions of fringe, ultra-marginality, non-commercialness, and radical aesthetics, among others:

I’m writing specifically about noncommercial forms of music that exist in a kind of loosely integrated cultural space on the fringes and outside mainstream pop and classical genres. What I’ll call “underground” musical forms – noise, improv and extreme metal but also fringe practices like post-noise experimental pop and even some kinds of sound art – share a world of practitioners burrowing away independent of mainstream culture. They may be trying to resist that culture politically, but they might also just be satisfying themselves by making music for small audiences and little to no profit. My argument here is that due to shared practical, musical, and in many cases, political allegiances, these practices can be described collectively using the guiding metaphors of the “underground” and the “fringe.” (Graham 2016, vii–viii)

Besides the term fringe, which Graham prefers to use, several other notions turn up in both academic literature and public discourse as alternatives or complements to underground. The most widespread attributes are probably the nonofficial (Hagen and DeNora 2011) or unofficial, counter-culture (Klaniczay 2003), avant-garde (Graham 2010a), indie (Hesmondhalgh 1999), or DIY (Bennett and Guerra 2019), which emphasize different aspects of subcultural activities. Such notions as nonofficial, alternative, or counter-culture indicate an outsider stance or opposition to majority culture and the aesthetic and political mainstream through emphasizing otherness, independence, or active rebellion. In some cases—avant-garde and indie could be examples here—they may not only signify something “different” or “independent,” but rather a specific style of music. The concept of counter-culture is much more clearly politically charged and refers today mostly to the attitudes, aesthetic and political views related to the movements of 1968 in Europe and the reinterpretations of related views or sentiments. (For further readings on the relationship of the indie, the alternative and the underground, see Matsue 2009; Barna 2012; Szemere 2001.)

Another concept that may be useful as a tool in approaching the notion of the underground is niche (Anderson 2006; Jenkins 2006). As opposed to the notions listed above, niche originates in consumer culture and markets research (Schaefers 2014). Niche cultures—highly specialized and selective, narrow markets, or cultural segments organized around particular tastes—signify an important distinction between simply “less popular” and carefully targeted products with deliberately narrow audiences in the domain of the cultural industries. Since underground genres or artists typically attract smaller audiences than popular genres, but not necessarily smaller than a merely relatively unsuccessful pop music performer, the sheer size of an audience or scene underdetermines the underground nature of a niche collectivity. An underground genre could form a “complete” genre or scene in itself—drone would be such an example, operating with long-held noises and extremely slow-motion guitar effects, or even experimental music and noise, which do not have any trends that may be called mainstream. However, in most cases, variations of a genre span the most diverse levels of popularity, from niche interest to mainstream. For instance, thrash metal, house, drum ‘n’ bass and techno (Vitos 2012) have had their own popular, mainstream performers, alongside underground trends known only by a very few. These frequently wander from one register to another depending on the concurrent context.

Graham (2016) himself emphasizes that providing a strict definition of underground is practically impossible. Partly because of the heterogeneity of different (musical and non-music-related) practices that are called underground, and partly because underground is a contextual social construct, whose meaning is reformulated and reinterpreted under different sociocultural circumstances and in different historical periods. Therefore, in trying to grasp the notion of the underground, it seems more fruitful to focus not on the “what,” but rather on the “how” aspect. How are niche cultures that are deemed to be underground created, recognized, and maintained, and how may the concept of the underground change by being embedded in different scenic infrastructures? In the following, partly by building on Graham’s findings, I attempt to outline a brief historical overview of the continuity and change of the underground, with a view to the role of media technologies in the context of sociocultural patterns.

THE FIRST UNDERGROUND: THE POLITICAL AND THE UNOFFICIAL

Graham (2016, 10) distinguishes between two chronologically distinct undergrounds based on the materiality of their distribution networks. Thus, in the earlier period, physically anchored networks were predominant (such as those based around fanzines and physical shops), while in the more recent one, web-based distribution dominates. Although the role of materiality, media and technology is indeed crucial in shaping underground practices by offering infrastructures (Magaudda 2020), in my approach, I will distinguish between three overlapping eras, focusing not only on the materiality of distribution, but also on the interaction of geographical, cultural, economic, and technological factors.

The now global concept of the underground has carried numerous layers of meaning over the past decades and in different geographical areas, such as the United States, Western Europe, and Central and Eastern Europe, which typically no longer refer to existing conditions, but rather live on as metaphors. One such layer is the name itself, the origins of which may be traced back to the postwar period, but which was first used to signify niche cultural communities opposing political regimes from approximately the 1960s. At that time, the label was synonymous with the groups confronting the concurrent political establishment, status quo, or oppression—whether in the east (Szemere 2001) or in the west (Cashbaugh 2016)—professing and voicing alternative ideas, intertwined with counter-cultural organization and occasional anti-establishment rebellion. The first wave of practices that emerged (or rather descended) as underground was products of, or reactions to, oppressive political systems. The formation of the term, the connection between its now metaphorical, once possibly literal meaning and message is clear: representatives of the culture exiled underground by the power dominant “on the surface” continued their activities—such as playing and listening to music—in a world uncontrollable and unseen by authorities (Szemere 2001). “Unofficial art. An artistic ‘movement,’ which neither supports nor attacks the establishment, but resides outside of it. By attacking it, it would acknowledge its existence”—as Béla Hap (1973), one of the figures of the Hungarian underground, commented on one of the (least militant) segments of the underground. This segment opposed the communist regime by completely withdrawing themselves from societal and political action.

Boundaries between the underground and non-underground—due to authorities keeping vigilant watch over participants—were necessarily very clear at this time, and the stark differences between their technological regimes and media platforms also reflected their opposition. As, for instance, during the era of totalitarian regimes in the Central and Eastern European region, the technological means for music production, distribution, and media were uncompromisingly controlled by the state (recording studios were run by the state-owned monopolist recording company, so was vinyl manufacturing, and the only mass broadcasting media available were the state-owned radio and television [see Draganova and Blackman 2019; Szemere 2001 on the Bulgarian and Hungarian examples, respectively]). The use of those means thus clearly indicated whether a given production belonged to the state-supported mass culture or to the counter-cultural, nonofficial underground niche.

This relation of power was clearly reflected in the use and display of music technologies and media. As, for instance, releasing a vinyl LP album was possible only through the official production channels, and by bands who were favored by censorship boards, for the banned or unacknowledged musical collectives, the DIY bootlegs of underground live events remained, distributed on tapes, and later cassettes. Similarly, niche discourse on music had to remain in the underground media: While the favored bands were often featured in the (also state-owned and run) newspapers or youth magazines, underground bands were discussed in illegally printed, copied, and distributed materials called samizdat (Sükösd 2012). In the meantime, a different counter-cultural underground sphere developed in the cold war period in the United States, also characterized by opposition to power and mass cultural values (Cashbaugh 2016; Turner 2006), and manifested in various activities such as establishing self-supporting commune settlements, circulating DIY materials and organizing musical collectivities, such as the Los Angeles Free Music Society, from the early 1970s (Graham 2016).

The key concepts of the early phase of underground were illegality or semi-illegality, struggle and confrontation with power, opposition to the official political and artistic elite, devotion to alternative social ideals and the expression of those through various media; being peripheral, developing an alternative canon, transitionality, concealment, access available exclusively via the initiated. This political notion of underground continued to exist in Central and Eastern Europe until the end of communism. Yet starting roughly from the late 1960s and early 1970s, it began

to be accompanied by another, newer concept in formation, which infiltrated the earlier underground and gradually gained ground together with western capitalism: the underground set against the cultural space called mainstream.

THE SECOND UNDERGROUND: AGAINST THE MAINSTREAM

This new kind of opposition was no longer of political, but rather of economic origin. Mainstream music is released and distributed by major record labels targeted to a large, wide audience with the aim of making profit (Shuker 2001; Toynbee 2000). The underground, desiring to differentiate itself from this, began to indicate genres refusing this ambition and audiences deliberately choosing to remain unseen by the general public. The light yet expressive definition of underground attributed to Frank Zappa—"the mainstream comes to you, but you have to go to the underground"—refers to that interpretation of the notion. This one-liner implies, by emphasizing the imperative of choice, that underground assumes the active participation of listeners, in a somewhat hidden, but not completely closed environment. The key concepts of the underground in this context are voluntary separation from the mainstream (often representing, of course, the ambivalent attitudes of both denying and desiring the success of the bands who "made it"); production companies and distribution networks partially or completely independent from major labels, and some of them functioning based on non-profit business models (Hesmondhalgh 1998; Webb 2007); the conscious use of sounds, lyrics, and visuals unsaleable by the mainstream music business; and the formation and further proliferation of numerous new niche identities, genres (and subgenres), styles, and markets (Anderson 2006). The borders between the underground and the non-underground are not as clear as in the case of the political underground. Consequently, discourses on telling one from the other are flourishing. However, instead of focusing on the question of sheer access or the nature of the boundary between mainstream and underground, it seems to be more fruitful to reframe the key dilemmas of the underground-mainstream opposition within the framework of cultural capital.

In the wake of Bourdieu (1987), Sarah Thornton (1996) elaborated the concept of subcultural capital, which, in her analysis, is closely linked to the conceptual web of symbolic practices regarded as underground.

In Thornton's interpretation, club cultures as communities of taste organized around musical preference form various hierarchies of expertise, relationships, and skills, thereby defining what is authentic or "hip" and what is not. In the discourses described by Thornton, cultural capital built upon authenticity, credibility, "realness," and other positive subcultural indicators and values, is fundamentally connected to the interpretations of underground. Therefore, what is credible and real is at the same time also characteristically truly underground, and what is truly underground is necessarily credible and cool in the context of the whole scene.

Besides the particular electronic music scene—British acid house—studied by Thornton, in virtually all ethnographic accounts of the discourses of underground communities (from hip-hop through metal to world music), we can find a similar interconnected value system of authenticity and underground existence. Participants having more underground cultural capital at their disposal occupy a higher position in the scene hierarchy, and those who have not succeeded in gathering subcultural capital have an accordingly lower position. In a social network where the greatest symbolic value is the explicit expression of an oppositional stance toward the reigning political power, but technological means are scarce—such as in the first era of underground—revolutionary, non-conformist artistic concepts gain in value, but the state of the development of media technology becomes irrelevant. Moreover, the underground perception of music spreading through illegal, copied tapes, and cassettes is further enhanced by the poor sound quality, which indicates attachment to obviously non-state and nonofficial systems of production and distribution.

In his book *Making Popular Music*, Jason Toynbee writes:

The mainstream has to transcend *particular* communities in order to reach the largest number of people possible. It follows that in order to produce a mainstream the music industries must find musical texts and generic discourse which "fold difference in," and articulate distinct social groups together. (Toynbee 2000, 122–123, emphasis in original)

In this sense, traits of niche cultural production and consumption are exactly the opposite of mainstream production and consumption: reaching deliberately narrow audiences, emphasizing, embracing the "otherness" of the niche, and reflecting on the nature of belonging. When it comes to the accumulation of cultural capital in the age of the mainstream-opposing era, one of the most important credits in underground niche cultures is authenticity (Graham 2016). This can be

expressed through the communication of taste, work ethic, and scenic knowledge, among other things. As Fikentscher puts it:

...underground activities, whether primarily political or cultural in nature (some are both) can be said to take place in a limited space, inhabited by a limited number of participants who may establish various mechanisms to further the longevity of their activities. One of the most common of such mechanisms is the cultivation and control of insider knowledge. Musical connoisseurship is one of the attributes of underground membership. (Fikentscher 2000, 10)

Besides shared knowledge and taste, there are other, lesser-known, but equally notable factors of achieving an authentic status in underground scenic hierarchies, such as complying with a strict work ethic (Kahn-Harris 2004; Tofalvy 2014) and consistently building scenic careers (Macdonald 2001).

Such expressions and perceptions of cultural capital are intertwined with the use—and avoidance—of certain media technologies and platforms as well. In the paradigm of the anti-commercial underground, it was neither the state, nor political power, but the dominant cultural industry players that defined what kind of media technologies served the purpose of channeling content toward mass audiences the best. Channels of mainstream media (television, radio, and print newspapers) were designed to reach mass audiences. These thus served as gatekeepers, who were reluctant to enable the distribution of any content not capable of satisfying mass audience demands. As a consequence of, or at least pendant to this strategy, in underground symbolic networks defined by opposing the mainstream, the use of the channels and platforms of mainstream media was regarded as a signifier of low cultural capital. Thus underground communication, cultural production, and consumption moved toward alternative channels. Fanzines, pirate radios, copied cassettes, DIY merchandise, early web forums, p2p (peer-to-peer) networks, chat rooms and Lo-Fi recording technologies were capable of forging underground cultural capital, as niche audiences were supposed to be aware of, and value, the insider knowledge, taste, and network of personal connections behind such channels and products. With the fragmentation and accretion of available media platforms (which process began before the digitization of media, for instance with the expansion of cable television networks), this relationship between the accumulation of cultural capital and media

technologies was about to change. Nevertheless, in the quest for scenic or subcultural authenticity, the demand for telling the experts from laypeople, authentic and inauthentic scene members, or re-evaluating canons and musical works remained unchanged. The question is, what happens to this equilibrium in the digital ecosystem? How is it possible to forge and build underground cultural capital? What are the difficulties, barriers, possibilities, spaces, and who are the ones to succeed in the new context in forging cultural capital that may be perceived as underground?

THE THIRD UNDERGROUND: NICHE CULTURES IN THE DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM

Spaces and norms of the online realm have gradually changed over the past decades, so in mapping out the relationship between the accumulation of underground cultural capital and the Internet, we need to consider those changes. As in the case of underground practices, instead of drawing sharp boundaries, it is more expedient to concentrate on the shifts of emphasis from the early web to the era of streaming platforms. On the early web, the most important niche cultural platforms probably were, besides Web sites, the forums, listservs, and chat rooms in which scene members could access and share contents or information related to the scene (to share music itself in that period was not quite easy), and, most importantly, could communicate with each other and maintain their social networks (Lee and Peterson 2004). This was before the ubiquity of Google searches, and although some of the early search engines already existed, neither those technologies nor the culture of online search facilitated search-driven browsing and orientation on the web. For this reason, underground niche content was literally hidden on the early web, obscure and hard to find. Partly because of this and partly because of the architecture of online spaces, it was relatively easy to maintain offline hierarchies and boundaries of scenes online, as Paul Hodgkinson observed about the use of Goth forums in the 1990s:

In the unlikely event that a non-goth *did* subscribe to a goth discussion forum, however, the chances of their persevering for long were also relatively faint, due to the specialist and exclusive nature of discussion, and the tendency for mistrust and hostility towards outsiders (...) Consistent with this, the posting of inappropriate or ill-informed messages by those not sufficiently socialized into goth discussion-group norms was liable to

result in being flamed. While sometimes goths found themselves on the end of such treatment, it was particularly effective in excluding perceived outsiders. (Hodkinson 2002, 180, emphasis in original)

In this early phase of the Internet, further significant platforms providing room for niche cultural exchange were the first peer-to-peer file-sharing networks, such as Napster, Audiogalaxy, DC++, Kazaa, or Soulseek. The significance of these platforms was, on the one hand, that they enabled sharing of niche music that had disappeared from the shelves of brick and mortar stores and were available only on the long tail of file-sharing networks. And on the other hand, they enabled the initiating of scenic conversations either directly between fans, or in genre- (or subgenre-) themed chat groups (as in the case of Soulseek). The sharing of digital music collections with peers, even anonymously, offered an excellent opportunity for fans to showcase their sophisticated musical taste and connoisseurship. The size and quality of the collection, the ordering of items, folders, albums, and genres—similar to the organization of a traditional, offline record collection—all offered clues for the beholders for evaluating the scenic position of the collector. (Furthermore, the potential or actual illegality of sharing underground music on peer-to-peer networks also contributed to the subsistence of a sense of belonging based on counter-cultural sentiments, as in the first, material era of underground.)

With online search coming to the forefront of online navigation and orientation, users—deliberately or incidentally—could get acquainted with online spaces they had not had the chance to see before. Still, some niche performers managed to maintain their obscurity by hiding from Google, thus persuading listeners who showed interest to find their music for themselves through hard work. One of the examples of this attitude is the case of the genre *witch house*, also called *drag*, or, in other cases, *haunted house*. The name of this genre, according to one origin story, does not even come from the artists, but from a Last.fm user, who suddenly began to attach this label to the music thought by them to belong to this genre. The performers, who were discussed on the pages of *The Guardian*, *Pitchfork*, *Wired*, and *The New York Times* (Colly 2010; Wright 2010; Ellis 2010), and who played gloomy electronic music assembled, among many others, from hip-hop, drone, goth and film music samples, were especially fond of using names difficult to find with search engines, composed partially or totally of symbols (such as oOoOO, S4LEM, /// \\, †††, Gr†LLGR†LL, twYIY<ght>ZoN). They

removed their tracks uploaded to various free web storage spaces after a while to upload them on different locations, and so on; ambitious music listeners certainly had to struggle if they wanted to listen to their latest works.

Although the era of the social web (also known as web 2.0) has not brought about as radical changes regarding the democratization of the cultural industries (Hesmondhalgh 2019) as it was claimed by enthusiastic contemporary commentators and market players, it has led to a number of significant changes in the online lives of niche cultures. On the one hand, in the online music ecosystem, dominated by services such as Last.fm and MySpace, users finally had the means to legally access musical content and more platforms to discuss and comment on music and interact with peers. On the other hand, those platforms typically facilitated transparent and open interaction for various user groups and individuals, instead of supporting the maintenance of closed or secluded online spaces. For instance, Last.fm opened up the possibility for all users to get involved in categorizing¹ and tagging even underground bands, regardless of the users' background and knowledge about the band or scene. Similarly, on MySpace, everyone was allowed to create an account, upload their music, or get acquainted with other users. In this online environment, niche cultures unexpectedly became exposed to mass publicity, which initiated conflicts and vigorous debates among those who deemed themselves authentic members of a given niche culture, and the commenters or users reckoned by them as intruders (Tofalvy 2014).

As the social web moved swiftly toward the streaming ecosystem (with the dominance of YouTube and Spotify), all those gestures of hiding and obscurity became difficult to realize. However, the niche nature of underground music persists—ironically, precisely because of the huge amount of options and music available on the Internet. As a result of a process of fragmentation—a growing number of services and content offered by more and more providers—a “massively parallel culture” (Anderson 2006, 184) is being formed. This kind of proliferation of choices, along with the scarcity of time and attention, does not restrain, on the contrary, creates niche consumption patterns.

A spectacular illustration of this tendency could be the data measuring the number of plays of songs on Spotify, which inspired the idea behind *Forgotify*. According to Spotify data (Kumparak 2014), 80% of the approximately 20 million songs available (in 2013) had been listened to at least once, and 20%, about 4 million tracks, had not. On Forgotify.com,

one can play a random song—offered by the algorithm behind of the site—that has never been played before, at least on Spotify.

The bigger the selection, and the smaller the amount of attention that can be paid to an individual album or track, the more important the skills assisting orientation in the “crowded musical landscape” become, such as curation (Barna 2017) and digital literacy skills that mediate subcultural values of taste and selection. Digital skills of authentic curation and selection are not bound to the possession of music anymore, rather, they are related to fast search and navigation in the appropriate databases, and the well-timed sharing of tracks, playlists, music videos that best suit current niche trends and needs. In this environment, instead of highlighting opposition to the mainstream, emphasizing the way of sharing comes increasingly to the forefront. For the content with the promise of high cultural capital, one must continue to “go down” to the less frequently visited niche segments of the Internet. This once meant the music blogs linking to albums uploaded to file-storing services (from Megaupload to iFile), later to SoundCloud profiles, and more recently to Spotify playlists that feature the most hip and current music. Underground cultural capital was always a question of timing, too, as the everyday phrase “before it was cool” expresses aptly, indicating that one has experienced, heard, or seen something they appreciated among the first, and most certainly well before it had become appealing for the general audience. In Sarah Thornton’s words: “The underground espouses a fashion system that is highly relative; it is all about position, context and timing. Its subcultural capitals have built-in obsolescence so that it can maintain its status not only as the prerogative of the young, but the ‘hip’” (Thornton 1996, 118). In the attention economy of the fast moving online social media sphere (Wu 2017), emphasis shifts toward the extreme significance of precise timing: Who is the fastest to share and present the music currently authentic? What is the music that is accepted as authentic by scene members in the given moment?

Those strategies present an amalgam of practices originated in the first, and even more in the second era of underground niche cultures, providing social contexts and meanings for the accumulation of cultural capital, and ensuring that the underground remains a participatory sphere, an “intermediated space,” where there are no radical divisions between musicians, labels, and audiences, and which is motivated primarily not by business interests, but the devotion of sharing niche taste and a sense of belonging (Graham 2016, 12).

CONCLUSIONS

The belief that new media technologies, let alone the Internet, would put cultural formations to an end and disrupt the social status quo, for the better or worse, is not novel at all. This deterministic view has been present from the very beginnings of the world wide web: The Internet has been seen as the bringer of equality and democracy (Lessig 2006), later as the leveling tool for the music industry (Hesmondhalgh 2019), and also the liquidator of the underground.

Media technologies in themselves, as numerous historical examples from book printing through television to the latest online platforms show, do not necessarily eliminate pre-existing communities of knowledge and taste, nor internal needs and social demands that shape the hierarchic structures of communities. Rather, they serve as infrastructures by providing spaces for communities to interact (Marvin 1988). In this chapter, I attempted to argue for the idea that technological innovations deemed to be (with any optional prefix) “revolutionary” typically effect social configurations only within certain limits, creating new market relations in the cultural economies, channeling in already existing and persisting demands and supplies and conflicts in new ways. Applied to the particular case of the concept of the underground, this means that as long as all these social mechanisms that value hierarchies based on knowledge, taste, and authenticity exist, the accumulation of cultural capital will maintain the separation of self-reflective niche cultures even in novel infrastructural contexts.

Recent online and digital media trends indeed affected the rules of underground music networks and communities, but in a special way: transforming yet preserving the role and meaning of underground niche practices and communities. Although the birth of the underground was closely tied to counter-cultural movements, in the past (at least) four decades, this relationship has changed fundamentally, first with the dominance of the mainstream-oriented underground opposition, and more recently with the spreading of digital social media and streaming platforms, forming new underground practices, but preserving the core mechanisms of self-reflective niche cultures. As Stephen Graham (2016, 11) wrote, “the ‘going to’ remains,” and so do the ever-changing dichotomies of center and periphery, hip and uncool, popular and unpopular, mass and niche, mainstream and underground.

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NOTE

1. It is intriguing, however, that in this sense, *Spotify* has a shorter digital long tail than the *Ecast* database had back in 2004. *Ecast* was a company operating digital jukeboxes which were connected to a database featuring 10,000 albums, and 98% of the tracks were sold at least once per quarter, so only 2% of the songs remained unplayed—according to the “98 percent rule” (Anderson 2006, 7–8).

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PART II

Taste, Authenticity and Digital Media



The Relentless Rise of the Poptimist Omnivore: Taste, Symbolic Power, and the Digitization of the Music Industries

Emília Barna

INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims to explore the dynamic relationship between musical taste as a social phenomenon, practices of music consumption, and the transformation of the music industries along with recent technological changes, which I will simply refer to as digitization. I look at the ways in which music as a cultural form is situated in this relationship, and consider the function of cultural intermediaries—those actors which, through the process of mediating between social groups, as well as producers and consumers, create, reinforce, and shape social meanings associated with cultural products. The chapter offers a critical—but by no means exhaustive—overview of relevant theoretical approaches to music and taste, and complements them with an approach that incorporates aspects of technology, media, and the capitalistic logic of the cultural industries.

E. Barna (✉)

Department of Sociology and Communication, Budapest
University of Technology and Economics, Budapest, Hungary

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To date, the following two theoretical approaches have remained distinct: firstly, sociological studies of music consumption, which enable an understanding of the relationship between musical taste and class through concepts of distinction and cultural capital, but consider neither the capitalistic logic of the cultural industries, nor technological change as explanatory factors. Secondly, discourses of digitization—reflecting on the relationship between technology and the cultural industries—and the changing practices of music production and consumption, which in their turn often lack sociological depth and a critical perspective. I therefore argue for a complex theoretical approach that combines an understanding of the musical form, the technological and media environment of its consumption, and the social relations within which cultural consumption assumes symbolic meaning. A central question in this enquiry is related to tendencies associated with the rise of “cultural omnivorosity” as the legitimate taste and practice of cultural consumption, and, as a parallel process, the rise of cultural hybridity in the popular music mainstream. I will argue that although these tendencies have been associated with cultural diversity and the social process of democratization, this picture is complicated by symbolic power that continue to be asserted through taste and distinction, if in ever more subtle and complex ways. Prior to the discussion of three interrelated processes, namely the rise of cultural omnivorosity as a legitimate form of consumption, the increasing of cultural hybridity in the mainstream of popular music, and the emergence of the so-called popmimetic discourse, I offer an analysis of the music podcast *Song Exploder* as an example of cultural intermediation in the contemporary digital music environment.

THE CASE OF SONG EXPLODER

Song Exploder is a podcast started by US musician, composer Hrishikesh Hirway in 2014 and hosted by him until the end of 2018, when musician Thao Nguyen, also from the United States, took over. Each episode features a song or musical piece, “taken apart” by the songwriter, composer, producer, and, in some cases, contributing musicians: They are asked by the host—who sometimes asks questions in the podcast, while at other times we only hear the writers or artists—to detail the process of writing and recording. This generally includes the explanation of musical choices in reference to musical aesthetics, or personal or other contextual factors in the creative decisions; as well as the detailing of sources of inspiration and ideas, and the sharing of stories around the process of writing and recording.

The producers and hosts of the podcast, as well as the musicians themselves in each episode, function as (new) cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu 1984): They are curators, who, as musicians and writers, are able to select interesting songs and artists and ask the right questions—in other words, they possess significant (sub)cultural capital. By showcasing creative personalities and individual styles with their own unique tastes, they exhibit what elsewhere I termed a strong notion of curation (Barna 2017). The unique style and identity of the podcast are also reinforced by the visual design, which involves a drawing of each featured artist in the same style by Carlos Lerma. The chosen format is a podcast, as opposed to, for instance, YouTube videos, which arguably has a more highbrow connotation in relation to vlogging. The musicians in the episodes do not represent the absolute elite of songwriters and producers—with a few exceptions, such as Björk or Metallica—although their credentials, such as Grammy prizes, as well as popularity measured through album or single sales and YouTube views are regularly cited in the introduction for each artist. The hosts therefore seem to indicate that their choices are not arbitrary or personal, but rather a selection of artist considered as exciting, valued, and often “fresh,” while also not being at the very center of mainstream (as a Drake, Beyoncé, or BTS would be).

Notably, genre labels are typically not used in the descriptions, and rarely in the discussions, with the occasional exception where labels are employed to refer to certain musical decisions as stylistic choices—but the songs themselves remain uncategorized. This characteristic is indicative of a “post-subcultural,” cultural omnivore sensibility, where the significance and unique character of individual songs, musical ideas, and stories are placed before genre or subcultural affiliation. Nevertheless, expressions of taste abound through musical references to influences, inspirations, samples used, collaborations, as well as the creative choices made in the process of writing and recording.

Using classifications available elsewhere online, such as the featured artists’ Wikipedia pages or online reviews, “indie” styles such as indie pop, indie rock, and indie folk clearly dominate the choices, while electronic or partly electronic (the mentioned indie pop) styles are also very popular. The majority of the songs are therefore not in the classic guitar rock tradition. Hip-hop is also relatively frequent, although hip-hop songs are almost exclusively by male artists (with only one exception, the female instrumental hip-hop artist TOKiMONSTA—yet we do not hear female rappers’ voices). A number of female R’n’B artists are also featured. With

regard to gender overall, the second half (at the time of writing) especially is characterized by a relatively high number of female artists. During the first half, we hear 16 individual female artists (one of these speaking on behalf of a mixed-gender team), 61 individual male artist (with 4 speaking on behalf of mixed-gender teams), and 8 mixed-gender teams, resulting in 24 female voices in all over 85 episodes; during the second half, we hear 30 individual female voices, 48 individual male voices (6 speaking on behalf of mixed-gender teams), and 6 mixed-gender teams, making up 36 female voices over 84 episodes. The women are mostly from the indie (pop or rock) world, or representing experimental/art pop, dance/dream pop, indie folk, or R'n'B. Notably, starting from January 2019, episode 151, the presenter is also a female artist. The featured 16 composers (typically composers of film scores, or classical work), traditionally high-brow, however, are exclusively male, with one exception, where the artist is incognito and their gender is unknown.

The vast majority of the artists are based in the United States (the second most popular location is the UK, while Sweden, with four artists, is third). Their lifestyles, depicted in the episodes through the stories shared, are typically urban and cosmopolitan; access to technology and resources are taken for granted, material concerns are typically not mentioned. Toying around with technology, with instruments in a well-equipped studio or bedroom studio, for instance, is a typical way of narrating the birth of musical ideas. The primary themes emerging in the episodes include nostalgia narrated through a personal biography, reflections on important personal events and associated emotions, and where social issues are discussed, these are also often voiced as personal reflections (as an example, Bon Iver shares a story of how he was touched by the political situation at the Mexican border while recording there). Neither class, nor a structural view of gender relations are thematized: Motherhood is touched upon at least once, but gendered divisions of labor or other social inequalities are also largely missing. Issues around race and ethnicity or gender are indeed discussed by some of the artists, typically within an identity politics framework—nevertheless, apolitical personal stories are much more frequent. Creative connections, professional relationships that are also friendships are often evoked as sources for inspiration, and stories of resilience in the face of personal hardship—a dominant neoliberal narrative (James 2015)—abound. The related problems, even traumas, are often euphemized and generalized, for instance, with phrasings such as “I was going through difficult times.” In this sense, the episodes avoid significant social friction, while remaining interesting and diverse in a musical sense.

MUSICAL TASTE, CLASS, AND THE RISE OF THE OMNIVORE

“[N]othing more clearly affirms one’s ‘class,’ nothing more infallibly classifies, than tastes in music,” Pierre Bourdieu famously argued in *Distinction* (Bourdieu 1984, 18). Exploring the relationship between social class on the one hand, and cultural consumption and dispositions on the other based on empirical research conducted in 1960s’ France, he distinguished between *legitimate* taste—defined by those in possession of high levels of cultural capital—*middle-brow* taste, characterizing the choices of the middle classes, and *popular* taste, the cultural—and importantly, musical—preferences of the lower classes. “Legitimate” works gain their legitimacy from the symbolic power of the dominant class, resulting in the acknowledgment of their taste as “good,” as valuable, by the whole of society, including social classes that do not consume highbrow works in lack of cognitive or material access to these. In this understanding, value judgments regarding taste, cultural choices, and ways of engaging with culture, are—often unknowing—expressions of symbolic power, in which the dominant status—whether in terms of gender or class—is asserted on the part of the one making the judgment. (Although I refer to gender on the basis that Bourdieu himself has theorized patriarchal relations and the cultural mechanisms that reinforce them, in comparison with class, there is in general much less focus on gender relations in the sociology of taste.)

Bourdieu’s findings were later empirically tested within a US context through the comparison of survey data from 1982 to 1992, and again by prioritizing taste in *music* as opposed to other art forms. This resulted in Peterson’s theory of the *cultural omnivore* (Peterson and Simkus 1992; Peterson and Kern 1996), according to which a consumption pattern characterized by choices from a variety of cultural domains had gradually replaced the “univore,” “snob” pattern of highbrow consumption. For instance, instead of only listening to classical or contemporary art music, people with high cultural capital may increasingly choose to enjoy jazz and rock alongside these, and display a knowledge of, and familiarity with, a variety of music worlds. Omnivorousness here is defined as at least an openness to middle-brow and lowbrow forms, and the low-brow music genres identified by Peterson and Kern are all “rooted in a specific ‘marginal’ ethnic, regional, age, or religious experience,” such as country music, bluegrass, gospel, rock, or blues (901). On the one hand, “critical observers have suggested that when highbrows are open to

non-highbrow art forms, they seek out lowbrow forms created by socially marginal groups (Blacks, youth, isolated rural folks) while still holding commercial middle-brow forms in contempt” (Lynes 1954; Sontag 1966, quoted in Peterson and Kern 1996, 901).

Implicit to this assertion is an assumption of subjective processes of identification with “imagined communities” through music described by Simon Frith as the following:

And as a child and young man I also learned something of myself – took my identity – from black music (just as I did later, in the disco, from gay music). What secrets was I being taught? First, that an identity is always already an ideal, what we would like to be, not what we are. And in taking pleasure from black or gay or female music I don’t thus identify as black or gay or female (I don’t actually experience these sounds as ‘black music’ or ‘gay music’ or ‘women’s voices’) but, rather, participate in imagined forms of democracy and desire. (Frith 1996, 123)

Taking a critical view of Frith’s description of the process of identification through participating in the musical experience, it can be seen as a precise description of the ways in which a privileged listening subject—a white, educated male subject from the global core, which, at the same time, is the center of the global production of popular music—is able to symbolically tap into cultures that are “Other” in a social sense in order to experience and exhibit openness and tolerance toward the “low,” without risking his structural position (i.e., “becoming” black, gay, or female) (cf. Müller 2016). Claiming to like the mentioned (variety of) genres and being well-versed in them becomes a form of “multi-cultural capital,” signifying high status—a cosmopolitan lifestyle and a culturally tolerant worldview.

Whether the cultural omnivore thesis replaces or reinforces Bourdieu’s framework has been the subject of debate: Coulangeon and Lemel (2007) seem to suggest that Peterson and Kern’s findings contradict Bourdieu’s distinction theory, yet the latter argue that “omnivorousness does not imply an indifference to distinctions. Rather its emergence may suggest the formulation of new rules governing symbolic boundaries” (Peterson and Kern 1996, 904). Or, as van Eijck puts it, “[c]ontrary to ‘omnivore taste’ signifying a transcendence of class, consumption choices continue to be expressive of, and in their turn (re)produce class boundaries” (van Eijck 2000, 211). Rather, omnivorous consumption, along with the

(multi-)cultural capital it necessitates, becomes the marker of high-class status itself—a legitimate form of taste (cf. Barna 2018).

At the same time, Peterson and Kern also detected an appreciation of middle-brow music, that is, “twentieth-century mainstream commercial music,” among people with high cultural capital (Peterson and Kern 1996, 901). This cannot be explained by a kind of “tolerance” or “multicultural capital;” rather, I want to argue that it is related to the shifting status of pop-rock music itself, that is, its canonization and legitimization through “serious” popular or rock music journalism and rock music history writing. In Bourdieu’s understanding, *cultural intermediaries* (Bourdieu 1984) such as music journalists and critics, radio and television editors mediate between classes. And through this, they also contribute to changing the status and meaning of cultural forms.

Peterson and Kern’s explanations of the emergence of cultural omnivorousness are primarily sociological, with a focus on sociological changes—such as the increasing mobility, social and geographical—taking place within the global core (primarily US society, which is the focus of the empirical study). In addition, they also detect a change in the art world, making reference to entrepreneurship and “market forces” (905)—implicitly pointing to the role played by the industrialization of culture. Here, I want to complement these sociological explanations and argue that the role of the cultural industries, which manufacture meaning while being driven by a profit logic, and the dominant actors within them, such as record labels or music radio, should be considered with more emphasis—together with a further factor, namely the technological changes that are closely linked to the gradual transformation of the music industries. In the following, I therefore consider the relationship between digital technology, the cultural industries, and music as a cultural form.

DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND MUSIC AS A CULTURAL FORM: CULTURAL HYBRIDITY IN THE POPULAR MUSIC MAINSTREAM

The above points to the necessity of theorizing the relationship between cultural form and the cultural industries, which requires an engagement with the ways in which social structure is expressed and enacted through musical form (an academic endeavor which is in general hindered by the theoretical and disciplinary distance between music sociology and musical

analysis—a challenge that will, of course, not be solved in this paper). The relationship between cultural (musical) diversity and the structure of the music industries has been one of the main issues debated in relation to digitization. Critics of mass culture in particular, following in the Frankfurt School tradition, have associated processes of concentration in the corporate sphere—such as the emerging oligopoly of major record companies in the middle of the twentieth century—with cultural standardization, while decentralized production—such as the proliferation of independent studios and record labels during the 1950s, the “indie” distribution network established in the UK in the 1980s (Hesmondhalgh 1999), or the independent electronic dance music scene (Hesmondhalgh 1998; Smith and Maughan 1998)—with a pluralism of cultural forms.

Through a historical account of the music industries, Azenha (2006) nevertheless convincingly argued that the relationship between diversity and (de)concentration is not straightforward. The hit-oriented logic of the cultural industries entails that there is a constant centripetal effect toward the mainstream, through an incorporation of the niche or sub-cultural—as classic subculture theory (Hebdige 2002 [1979]) tells us; or, conceived more optimistically, through a constantly changing and diverse mainstream. Eric Weisbard (2014) offers a compelling account of the ways in which radio formats in the United States have contributed to the creation of “parallel mainstreams” integrating music originating and representing various oppressed groups—esthetic forms rooted in the “specific ‘marginal’ ethnic, regional, age, or religious experience” noted by Peterson and Kern (1996, 901), such as country or hip-hop—thus contributing toward the creation of a diverse cultural public. (The optimism of this perspective stems from an assumed link between these cultural forms and the representation of social groups oppressed along lines of ethnicity, gender, and class.) Focusing on the conditions of production rather than consumption, however, the same process can be viewed more critically as the continuous subsuming of subcultural, relatively autonomous cultural production under the capitalistic logic of the cultural industries. This cultural, and, at the same time, social process of incorporation is driven by the logic of the cultural industries, where the search for novelty and difference is constantly fed into the string of hit cultural products.

During the 1990s, a period of spectacular economic growth for the recording industry (right before the setback arriving with digital music distribution), it was not only the elite that “tapped into” low culture,

but music traditionally classified as high culture—classical music, opera—also reached mass audiences. The superstar status of “The Three Tenors,” the mass marketization of selections of classical music pieces through CD box sets upon the emergence the compact disc as a new format, as well as the founding of Classic FM in the UK as a radio station aimed at the popularization of classical music (cf. Fazekas 2018) all illustrate this process. Digital and online technology have contributed to the continuing of this tendency toward the blending, and crossing of, boundaries of genre and audience. In other words, toward a *hybridization* both with regard to dominant patterns of taste—increasing omnivorousness—as well as in popular music as a cultural form. Representatives of post-subculture theory, such as Andy Bennett, point to the hybridization of musical forms through practices such as sampling and remixing as an explanation for the flexibility of musical, fashion, and stylistic affiliations—the temporariness of connecting to “neo-tribes,” which he observes in the late 1990s, and describes as more characteristic at the time in relation to the spectacular youth music subcultures of the 1960s and 1970s (Bennett 1999).

In connection with this, audiences from the late 1990s onward have also experienced a general easy access to any musical content with the help of digital and online technology—mp3 and file-sharing and downloading platforms (whether legal or illegal), online mp3 stores such as iTunes, and later streaming services. This includes music outside of recently released hits or the mainstream, without much additional cost, such as seeking out obscure record shops or collectors physically, and having to tap into sub-cultural media and infrastructure (although this does not mean that these have disappeared, in fact they continue into the online world; see Tofalvy [2020] in the present volume). The process of cultural hybridization is thus closely linked to direct online access to content, which, through the technology of streaming combined with “smart” devices and unlimited mobile Internet access, is less and less bound in terms of time and space.

On a broader cultural level, a kind of simultaneity of styles and sets of aesthetic criteria linked to different times and different technologies can be observed. In *Retromania*, Simon Reynolds (2011) reflects on the nostalgic, or “retro-,” obsession of the popular culture mainstream today, which, besides film or fashion, can also be observed in the popular music world. Practices such as sampling old tracks through a multitude of cover songs and tribute acts, subcultural style revivals, as well as the proliferation of rock museums, exhibitions and other popular music “heritage” projects, in his view, appear to have at least partly replaced the striving for

cultural novelty. It could be added that “retro” has also functioned as a legitimization or consecration of the middle-brow—for instance, through retrospective rock biopics, which now also focus on artists such as Freddie Mercury or Elton John, outside of the strict “classic rock” canon. Pop hits of the 1990s have also gained new legitimacy through “ironic” modes of consumption (this point is further explored in the following section).

As an illustration of the direct relation between musical form, technology, and the capitalistic relations of cultural production, András Rónai (2020, in the present volume) aptly uses the term of *frictionless music* to refer to the crystallization of hybrid musical forms together with an ever-increasingly frictionless technology, which requires less and less of an effort to operate. As opposed to rewinding the tape, taking the CD out of its container and placing it into the player, or downloading the album and opening it in a music player software, on a streaming platform, an automatically assembled playing list catering to the listener’s personal taste awaits them at literally one click. (Notably, in the 1990s, Bill Gates named the creation of a “frictionless capitalism” as a goal of digital services aimed at making consumption spectacularly effortless; Gates 1995.) Hybrid musical forms, argues Rónai, manage to incorporate, stylize, and tame any potentially subversive musical—and cultural—innovation. The unproblematic transition between musical tracks and styles, therefore, enables us to simultaneously get rid of social friction on a symbolic level. (This is the inverse of the “magical” resistance [Cohen 1972] in subcultural signification through style: Frictionless music offers a “magical” way of overcoming difference in a multicultural dream of a society.)

The paradox of the mainstream is that despite this hybridity, mainstream hits have, according to music industry reports, become increasingly similar. This is partly due to the employment of big data enabled by streaming (MusicAlly 2018), partly the fact that the same star songwriting and producing teams are responsible for a significant proportion of hit songs. Moreover, according to certain statistics, they are also heard more often, at least in the United States, than, for instance, in the 1990s, as radio stations play the greatest hits with more frequency due to competition with streaming (Thompson 2014). However, existing analyses regarding taste, cultural forms, and digitization also have their limitations, including a bias toward streaming, while consumption within the realm of live music—the fastest growing sector of the music industries—remains less studied.

CULTURAL INTERMEDIATION AND SYMBOLIC POWER: THE “POPTIMIST” DISCOURSE

I observed above the role played by cultural intermediaries such as music journalists and critics, radio and television editors, or rock historians in the canonization and consecration of rock music. The more recent cultural hybridity in the popular music mainstream has, in its turn, been accompanied, and arguably reinforced, by the so-called *poptimist* discourse, which has emerged in popular music journalism as a counter-discourse and critique of “rockism” and its particular ways of authenticity seeking. The discourse of *poptimism* advocates the taking seriously of “pop” music, that is, commercial production, aimed at succeeding in the charts. *Poptimism* in this sense follows the philosophy of cultural, and popular music studies (even if much of popular music studies itself may be criticized for a “rockist” bias). It simultaneously embraces the pleasure of listening to pop music while asserting its legitimacy through making it the object of criticism. Broyles describes it as “a school of contemporary popular music criticism characterized by its rejection of the notion of the ‘guilty pleasure’ and traditions within rock journalism called ‘rockism’” (Broyles 2010, v), while Saul Austerlitz, who is broadly cited as having detected this tendency in music journalism, writes the following:

Poptimism wants to be in touch with the taste of average music fans, to speak to the rush that comes from hearing a great single on the radio, or YouTube, and to value it no differently from a song with more “serious” artistic intent. It’s a laudable goal, emerging in part from the identity politics of the 1990s and in part from a desire to undo the original sin of rock ‘n’ roll: white male performers’ co-opting of established styles and undeservedly receiving credit as musical innovators. (Austerlitz 2014)

One factor that has undoubtedly contributed to the rise of this discourse is the extension of music journalism and criticism itself in the online sphere through such unofficial practices as music blogging. On a cultural and social level, it can be viewed as the continuation of the omnivore turn through the breaking of the rock canon, with reference to the “whiteness” of rock, and an acknowledgment of the symbolic violence of the appropriation of “black” music forms, born under and expressing conditions of oppression, by white performers, cultural producers, and audiences. At the same time, the reference to “average music fans” can

be understood as what McGuigan terms “cultural populism”: “the intellectual assumption, made by some students of popular culture, that the symbolic experiences and practices of ordinary people are more important analytically and politically than Culture with a capital C” (McGuigan 1992, 4). “Culture with a capital C” here refers to legitimate culture (the Matthew Arnoldian “best that has been thought or known in the world”).

The main paradox of the popoptimist stance is that on the one hand, it is ostensibly aimed at combating elitism and promoting cultural populism, while on the other hand, it also involves the displaying of high levels of cultural capital and distinction. Ostensibly, it certainly opposes the bourgeois position of maintaining an intellectual distance from pleasure, and thus the body, and instead orientates toward the “low.” In relation to watching television, Jenkins, with reference to Bourdieu, describes this aesthetic position thus:

As Pierre Bourdieu (1980) suggests, contemporary “bourgeois aesthetics” consistently values “detachment, disinterestedness, indifference” over the affective immediacy and proximity of the popular aesthetic (237–239). The popular, Bourdieu claims, is often characterized by the “desire to enter into the game, identifying with the characters’ joys and sufferings, worrying about their fate, espousing their hopes and ideals, living their lives” (237–239). The “bourgeois” aesthetic Bourdieu identifies often distrusts strong feelings and fears the loss of rational control suggested by such intense and close engagement with the popular. Even when such critics accept some popular culture as worthy of serious attention, they typically read popular works as if they were materials of elite culture, introducing “a distance, a gap” between themselves and the text; the intellectual reader of popular texts focuses less on their emotional qualities or narrative interests than upon those aspects which “are only appreciated rationally through a comparison with other works.” (Jenkins 2005, 60–62)

Peterson and Kern also observe that the criteria of distinction “must not centre on *what* one consumes but on the *way* items of consumption are understood” (Peterson and Kern 1996, 904). This symbolic distance maintained from cultural works is not only classed, but also clearly gendered. Keir Keightley, for example, shows the historical process during which attentive, undistracted listening to music—as opposed to watching television, an audiovisual medium—came to be coded as masculine in postwar era United States through a “discourse around high-fidelity

sound reproduction equipment [which] at the time articulated a critique of television, rejecting it as a debased, feminine medium” (Keightley 1996, 155). “The opposition between high fidelity and television,” Keightley argues, “ultimately comes to operate within discourses of gendered taste, whereby high fidelity is cast as high, masculine, individualistic art, and television is portrayed as low, feminine, mass entertainment” (156). The symbolic distinction between pure audio and an audiovisual medium is also echoed in a digital media context in the more highbrow status of the podcast in relation to vlogging, mentioned above in relation to *Song Exploder*. The practice of record collecting and connoisseurship is similarly coded as masculine (Straw 1997), and more recently, the “coolness” and nerdiness associated with indie and hipster culture have served to reassert an alternative masculine habitus (Bannister 2006). Indie as a mode of aesthetic judgment (Fonarow 2006, 57–62) reasserts the Kantian aesthetic, that is, the appreciation of culture with the maintaining of an intellectual distance.

In his analysis regarding the effect of digitization on taste and the legitimate mode of consumption, Webster emphasizes a move away from the contemplative distance:

Savage et al. (2013) identify that younger generations are leading a move away from the Kantian aesthetic (i.e., the distanced appreciation of culture) defining tastes of the dominant classes, as described by Bourdieu’s (1984), to a more open and knowing expression of cultural aptitude, indicative of cultural omnivorousness (Peterson & Kern, 1996). (Webster 2019, 4)

At the same time, the mentioned popularity of retro, such as 1990s’ pop hits, is often joined with an ironic mode of consumption. In such cases, rather than canonizing the musical products in question, through gestures of distancing, only their (intellectualized) enjoyment is consecrated. In a sense, this is a reinforcement, rather than a subversion, of the Kantian aesthetic. A parallel may be drawn with the “reading against the grain” observed by Jenkins, observable in practices such as the ironic cult of “Bad” cinema (Jenkins 2005, 65). Thus, the paradox here is between, on the one hand, the intellectualization of the popmusician standpoint itself, drawing on theoretical ideas from cultural studies and identity politics, and on the other, the imperative of giving in to pleasure. The trick is one of asserting—middle-class, masculine—status, while also granting oneself the permission and freedom to appreciate and enjoy literally anything.

At the same time, the “oversimplified models of hegemony” characterizing the popoptimist discourse “undermine deep concern about identity politics” (Broyles 2010, v–vi)—let alone enable structural critique. While the popoptimist discourse does engage with the white and masculine bias of “rockist” writing, at the same time, with a gesture of “capitalist realism” (Fisher 2009), it knowingly embraces the commercial logic of pop. The dismissal of the guilt in “guilty pleasures” serves to justify an uninhibited enjoyment and celebration of the products of the music industries, in line with the dominant logic of capitalism.

CONCLUSIONS

Returning to the case of *Song Exploder*, the podcast offers an illustrative example of cultural intermediation in the digitized environment of music, where practices of personal curation continue to be valued and of relevance. The taste world it represents is in line with the cultural omnivorousness thesis, although it is also evident that those in possession of the symbolic power of tastemaking are in socially privileged positions. The discourse around musical choices taking shape in the course of the episodes tends to focus on the individual rather than the social, and tends to steer away from social and political friction. *Song Exploder* can definitely be considered to be “popoptimist” in its choices and in line with the aesthetic eclecticism and hybridity of a digital music culture dominated, at least in the realm of recorded music, by streaming. Nevertheless, its concept of dissecting and analyzing songs, while also shedding light on the creative process that is usually hidden from non-musician listeners, is an intellectual endeavor. It functions to educate the listener, while also potentially contributing to the canonization of a wide range of artists and musical approaches. Especially in its more recent episodes, it has challenged the masculine “nerdiness” of indie by opening toward female artists. The choices seem to follow a certain kind of logic—even quota—of including “enough” hip-hop and R’n’B artists, although indie sounds still clearly dominate the palette. The rockist stance is avoided; instead, a kind of musical tolerance and diversity is flaunted.

Song Exploder can thus be considered as a very good example to illustrate the convergence of cultural populism, omnivorousness, musical hybridity, and the employing of distinction in order to convey unique personal tastes and styles, perfectly suited to the digital and online environment of music. And while we are aware that taste and distinction are

deeply social and transfused by power relations, on the surface, the songs and the stories behind them remain personal and individual—just like the dominant way of listening to a podcast.

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Frictionless Platforms, Frictionless Music: The Utopia of Streaming in Music Industry Press Narratives

András Rónai

INTRODUCTION: THE IMAGINARY MEDIA OF FRICTIONLESS PLATFORMS

I will discuss the utopia of frictionless platforms, and then ask what kind of music “fits” this platform according to the utopia. I will call it frictionless music. In the process, I will analyze narratives found in the music industry press. My assumption is that it more or less represents dominant thinking in the music industry itself. In music industry magazines and blogs, industry people are regularly interviewed and even publishing opinion pieces, while music industry journalists often also work as analysts providing insights the industry relies on. If you go to a conference panel, what people working in the industry and people writing about it in the professional press say do not significantly differ. This is especially true about opinions on “where the industry is heading”: These are mostly out in the open, while specific developments may be kept secret, and industry

A. Rónai (✉)
Dalszerzo.hu, Budapest, Hungary

data are published only at irregular intervals. I chose articles for analysis after an extensive review of the relevant online sources (trade magazines and music industry Web sites, such as *Billboard*, *Music Business Worldwide*, *Music Ally*, all in English language), and most of the chosen articles were either widely referenced at the time of their publication, or were written by, or quoted, prominent figures of the music industry (as high-ranking executives or oft-quoted industry analysts). Some of the articles are from more widely read publications such as *Buzzfeed* or *The Atlantic*.

To approach the notion of frictionless platform, it is useful to start with the definition of friction. According to one definition, friction refers to “interactions that inhibit people from intuitively and painlessly achieving their goals within a digital interface” (Young 2015). While usually, the focus is on “intuitively and painlessly achieving,” the real but hidden (or rather hidden in plain sight) problem in music streaming lies in knowing what the “goals” are. On the one hand, in most cases, the goal is not just given, it is what *defines* the app, Web site, and so on, the friction of which is to be removed or reduced. On the other hand, that is not always the case: With, for instance, Facebook or YouTube, the “goals” of their users are rather vague.

As I will show, the problem of reducing or removing friction is not so much a task of designing the user interface to help users achieve their goals, but rather devising ways that reduce the “burden” on the user of having to have definite goals at all—of having to choose which music they want to hear. And thus the logical—if, perhaps, unattainable—conclusion is a notion of frictionless platforms that would require nothing else, and nothing more, from their users than wanting just *music*, and a notion of frictionless music as music that embodies a *general idea of music*, and nothing more.

It is important to investigate the—perhaps only theoretical—consequences of this kind of thinking and practice in the streaming industry, as thus we may uncover at least one factor in the success of a particular kind of music rising in recent years. Frictionless platforms may very well be “imaginary media,” but as Kluitenberg (2011, 66–67) wrote, “actual media machines give rise to intense speculation of what such machines might be able to achieve or what they signify. Conversely, imaginations of possible media continually give rise to actual media machines, even though these may not achieve what was imagined for them” (quoted by

Drott 2018, 329–330, who analyzes how fantasies represented in marketing and industry discourses “configure existing technologies of music recommendation.”)

While various aspects of streaming services have been widely analyzed—their economic models, the consequences of the commodification of digital music, the modes of constructing the listener–subject–consumers, and so forth (c.f. Eriksson et al. 2019)—I believe that my focus on the concept of frictionlessness and its equivalent in music itself will bring something new to the conversation, while of course overlapping with various previous studies.

The first step in uncovering the problem of goals outlined above is to determine *whose* goals we are talking about. I will first turn to the construction of the so-called mainstream audience, and the problems posed by their purported desires concerning music. Then I proceed to analyze the two main answers to the problem, namely playlists and voice control, and show how both point toward a notion of music stripped of its identifiers such as genres and context. This will lead me to the idea of frictionless platforms and their equivalent, frictionless music.

AUDIENCE CATEGORIES AND THE PROBLEM WITH THE “MAINSTREAM AUDIENCE”

In the music industry press, “people in general” are said to fall into different categories based on their relationship with consuming and paying for music. Some categorizations are based on polls or other quantitative data, some more on a kind of accepted wisdom. The number of categories also differ, they are usually somewhere between three and five, but for our purposes, these can be distilled into two.

There are supposed “music fans” or “super fans” or “music aficionados” who care about music very much, who read blogs and the music press, who are interested in discovering the latest, coolest acts, and so on—and they are willing to pay for music, either with money or at least with a considerable amount of their time. This category may be further divided into subcategories. The other main category is the mainstream audience. These are “regular” people who “like music,” but do not really know it beyond some favorites, do not follow “what’s happening,” and do not want to spend much time and energy on it. The question is whether these people are willing to spend money on music.

For example, Paul Lamere, a developer at music data platform Echo Nest had published a blog post entitled “The Zero Button Music Player” a few months before the company was acquired by Spotify. In this post, he quotes “a study conducted in 2003 and again in 2006 by Emap (a UK-based Advertising agency)” that “identified four main types of music listeners” called “savants, enthusiasts, casuals, indifferents” (Lamere 2014). Lamere speculates that “indifferents” not only spend zero dollars per year on music, but that “the number of interactions [they] will tolerate to create a listening session” is also zero. This is worth quoting partly because of the bold mission of the “zero button music player,” and also because of the striking contrast between Lamere’s savviness as an engineer and the crudeness of his estimations about the different categories of listeners.

It is important to note that these categories are not ones used *inside* the platforms by the recommendation algorithms (on the fluid nature of these categories, see Prey 2018). They—or more precisely, their supposed sizes—are rather used in the design of the platform itself. The category of “mainstream audience,” as any other category, is not based on the kind of music people belonging to it are actually listening to, rather the effort they put into choosing the music to listen to, and their willingness to spend money and attention to get it. Typical members of the mainstream audience are supposedly listening to top 40 radios or its local variant. Yet someone who listens to only one niche genre and spends little time to get her fix of that genre is also mainstream in this sense. (It is at least conceivable that there is somebody out there who follows, for instance, the “harsh noise” tag on Bandcamp, and only listens to the freely streamable tracks from the albums that come up in this feed.) There is no sign indicating that these categories are used in choosing what tracks are recommended to users; they are clearly too broad and crude for that. They are not useful once someone uses a platform, rather, they inform the way the industry is trying to lure people to use a streaming service, in whatever way.

Streaming platforms together with major labels—who own equity in the platforms—are precisely after the mainstream audience defined above. Either because their business model is based on scale, as Spotify repeatedly stated in press releases after their annual loss had been made public, they believe they will turn profitable when reaching an unspecified, but large enough number of users (e.g., “We believe we will generate substantial revenues as our reach expands, and that, at scale, our margins will improve. We will therefore continue to invest relentlessly in our product

and marketing initiatives to accelerate reach,” Dredge 2015). Or, because the appeal of streaming for companies like Apple or Amazon is the luring of consumers through music to their so-called ecosystem, perhaps even as loss-leaders. In both cases, the goal is to persuade the mainstream audience of the worth of the “value proposition.” And the key is subscription, either because services like Apple Music or Google Play Music do not offer a free tier, or, in the case of Spotify and Deezer, work as “freemium” services, the ad-based free tier is less profitable by an order of magnitude, and is presented to the music industry as a “funnel” leading users to subscription.

Only a few years back, a large number of articles in the music industry press basically argued that streaming was doomed on the basis that only the small number of music aficionados would ever pay for it, and on-demand access to a catalog of 30 million songs is not something the mainstream audience would want. An observation by David Pakman (2014) was widely quoted, according to which even at the peak of the CD era, the average annual spending in the USA was 64 dollars for those who paid for music at all, and it was considerably lower than the price of a subscription, namely 120 dollars for twelve months. From this perspective, the task is enormous: Making the mainstream audience pay almost twice as much as during what is routinely referred to as the golden era of the music industry. (In the annual reports of the International Federation of the Phonographic Industry [IFPI] on global recorded music, the total global revenue is still routinely compared to the peak of 1999—see IFPI 2018). Yet many analysts argue that revenue levels of this “golden era” are not attainable anymore, mainly because they were based on making consumers purchase a large number of tracks in the form of CDs packed with “fillers” consumers did not want. For example, Ball writes: “much of the industry’s pre-iTunes value was inflated, held up only by bundle-based packaging (viz. albums), rather than consumer demand” (Ball 2015).

THE SUPPOSED DESIRE OF THE MAINSTREAM AUDIENCE: CONTINUOUS MUSIC, WITHOUT INTERFERENCE

What do this mainstream audience want? The answer that came to dominate the music industry press in the past few years is formulated along the lines of, they do not care about the catalog of 30 or 40 million songs, and they may even be scared by it. Drott remarks that the phrase “paradox of choice,” coined by Barry Schwartz in 2004, is “widely adopted by music

analytics specialists” (Drott 2018, 329). The mainstream audience presumably want the hits, but these are offered by the radio. It is important that, as Morris and Powers point out, “streaming feels familiar to many users – resembling radio in its dematerialized musical distribution and its dependence on revenue sources other than sales” (Morris and Powers 2015, 108). But it is also important to differentiate streaming from the radio—which offers free listening, of course. In fact, top hits are increasingly dominant in top 40 radios now that the industry has access to a previously unimaginable amount of data regarding “what people want.” As Thompson (2014) writes in his “The Shazam Effect,” which brought the ways in which data are transforming the music industry—especially, but not only A&R—to widespread attention:

Label and radio executives, industry analysts and journalists agreed that consumers have more say than they did decades ago, when their tastes were shaped by the hit makers at labels. But here’s the catch: if you give people too much say, they will ask for the same familiar sounds on an endless loop, entrenching music that is repetitive, derivative, and relentlessly played out. (Thompson 2014)

Besides its alarmist tone, the article offers some telling numbers: “Top 40 stations last year played the 10 biggest songs almost twice as much as they did a decade ago. Robin Thicke’s ‘Blurred Lines,’ the most played song of 2013, aired 70 percent more than the most played song from 2003, ‘When I’m Gone,’ by 3 Doors Down” (ibid.).

But why then is “discovery” still a catchphrase if the industry believes that the mainstream audience want the “same familiar sounds”? The key is that streaming platforms need consumers to spend substantial time listening to music, which means not all of the tracks they encounter will be familiar. Steve Boom, the vice president of Amazon Music revealed the economic reason behind that in an interview with *Music Business Worldwide*: “[Alexa] allows music into our lives in a much more pervasive way [than platforms with more friction]. When you use something every day and it’s effortless like that, of course you’ll be willing to pay for it” (Ingham 2017a). This “pervasiveness” Boom refers to can be seen in the catchphrases streaming platforms use to describe what they offer: “unlimited music,” “soundtrack for your life,” “soundtrack for every moment,” “listen to music any time,” and so forth. The name of the flagship feature of Deezer—“Flow”—is similarly telling.

Now we can formulate the “goal” in the definition of friction and make the difference from radio more apparent: The mainstream audience is supposed to want *continuous music* that consists only of songs that they *like*, some of which are familiar hits, and some new “discoveries” without having to choose or interfere in any way. This continuity as the foremost temporal aspect of streaming is confirmed by the oft-quoted phrase of Spotify’s founder, Daniel Ek: “We’re not in the music space – we’re in the moment space” (Seabrook 2014; the peculiar temporality of streaming is analyzed in detail by Drott 2018).

Much has been written about the “contextual turn” of streaming, which refers to the idea that the flow of continuous music is mostly based on the activity of the listeners, and their desired mood. Prey’s analysis even reaches the conclusion that “at its extreme, context-based recommendation systems take the position that one equals one’s context” (Prey 2018, 1092). But from our point of view, the contextual turn is just the way of achieving of the outlined goal.

The two most important developments in achieving that (that are the other core parts of removing “friction”) are (the prominence of) playlists and voice control. While the first is a way of presenting a slice of the catalog *within* the interface of the streaming platforms, and the second is a new kind of interface, both serve the goal of reducing the necessity of choosing on the part of the audience. Analyzing prominent texts about them will shed more light on the utopia of frictionless platforms.

PLAYLISTS WITHOUT GENRES AND CONTEXT

The first and more widespread solution is making playlist the most dominant and most visible of the features, even to the detriment of traditional ways of sorting music such as albums, artists, or genres. Eriksson et al. (2019) offer a detailed timeline of this turn toward playlists, focusing on Spotify, but also describing other apps and startups. The authors also note that despite Daniel Ek’s statement, Spotify has not always been about playlists and “in the moment space”:

The early Spotify saw its task as providing access to music, filling the life of consumers with more music, as if they felt a need to remedy a general lack of music. But around 2013, Spotify’s curatorial turn reconceived its product based on a different image of the consumer. Now the selling point was to provide not more music but better music. (Eriksson et al. 2019, 62)

Streaming platforms are very visibly trying to push playlists that are “genre-less,” and are instead based on moods, activities, the time of the day, and the perceived location of the user, for example home, on the way to work, at the office, and so on. In an article which offered the first in-depth insight into the world of playlist curators, and is still unparalleled in this respect in the press, Ugwu (2016) wrote:

there’s a simple, economic reason why these companies are eager to categorize music in a more utilitarian way [than by genres]: It’s easier to scale. Sifting through 30 million songs based on genre and subgenre, like reading exit signs on a highway, requires a certain amount of foreknowledge on the part of the listener: You have to know what to be looking for. But anyone anywhere with a pulse knows, intuitively, what is implied by “Songs to Make You Feel Relaxed”. (Ugwu 2016)

Whether this is a summary of what journalists believe to be the economic reasons or, rather, the convictions of streaming service executives themselves is unclear—playlist curators prefer to talk about how they “take discovery to a whole new level for a huge number of users.” It is nevertheless in tune with what we know about the development of streaming—that is, that the idea behind the pushing of genre-less playlists is based on the idea that being aware of what genres one likes requires “too much foreknowledge” from the supposed mainstream audience. This is despite the fact that genres had been thought of as one of the most basic choices one makes about music.

Around the start of Apple Music in 2015, much of the discussion was centered around playlists assembled by human curators or algorithms, or a kind of combination of the two. Apple committed themselves to human curation, and one of the primary—or at least most frequently cited—reasons for this was that, according to the company, only humans were able to pick a song that is “the right fit” to follow a certain song. Notably, this conforms to the image of pervasive, continuous listening: A “bad fit” is something that halts this flow.

As playlists are often context-based, it is necessary to deprive music of its previous context. (One is tempted to say “its own context,” or maybe “original context,” but there is a reason to be cautious with using the word “original,” as the very act of recording music might be said to remove it from its “original”—meaning “live”—context, and thus any dissemination of recorded music can be conceptualized as “inventing new

contexts.”) The song belongs to the playlist, and to know anything about it requires making an effort from the listener—exactly what she is not supposed to do (often). Indeed, the recording industry, even though happy with the rise of streaming, by 2016 began to realize that it has become much harder to “break” artists, whereas it is now easier to “break” songs (see Joseph 2016).

“ALEXA, PLAY MUSIC”: VOICE CONTROL AS A REDUCTION OF FRICTION

A second solution is voice control, which was pioneered by Amazon’s streaming service Amazon Prime Music, and later adopted by other services. In the interview quoted above, Steve Boom asserted that “people in the music business get super-excited by that because it takes all of the difficulty, all of the friction, out of streaming music” (Ingham 2017a). At first, this could be understood as a simple reduction of friction in a more common sense—as in, the user does not need to learn to use a specific interface, she only needs to use voice commands—but reading a bit further reveals that this development also points toward a notion of music stripped of its context, such as genre. When Amazon Prime Music was introduced to the public, Bloom told Billboard that the company invested heavily into making the software understand what the consumer says:

The simpler it is for the consumer, usually the more complicated it is on the back end. We had to invest a lot in both metadata and machine learning, which means computer science to understand various attributes about music. The way people describe music is information that isn’t readily available. (Rys and Flanagan 2016)

Notably, the information that *is* readily available, but not sufficient for a low-friction music service includes metadata such as the name of the artist, the year of publication, and genre.

Of course users can ask “Alexa,” Amazon’s virtual assistant, to play a genre-based playlist, a specific song by a specific artist, and so on, but the flagship feature is the “Alexa, play music” command. Indeed, asking Alexa to play specific songs would make the device just a fancy interface equaling the search box of earlier phase streaming services. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that this is not the case, rather than merely by being

voice controlled, Amazon Music changes the way its users listen to music. As Shulevitz observes in relation to Toni Reid, the vice president of Alexa Experience, she

herself found that even the Echo's most basic, seemingly duplicative capabilities had a profound effect on her surroundings. "I'm ashamed to say how many years I went without actually listening to music," she told me. "And we get this device in the house and all of a sudden there's music in our household again." (Shulevitz 2018)

Shulevitz adds her own take:

You may be skeptical of a conversion narrative offered up by a top Amazon executive. But I wasn't, because it mirrored my own experience. I, too, couldn't be bothered to go hunting for a particular song – not in iTunes and certainly not in my old crate of CDs. But now that I can just ask Alexa to play Leonard Cohen's "You Want It Darker" when I'm feeling lugubrious, I do. (ibid.)

She also adds that according to Reid and various Amazon executives, the key is that interactions are "frictionless." One interviewee, Taniya Mishra, also offers a utopian—some would say dystopian—fantasy: She

fantasizes about a car to which she could rant at the end of the day about everything that had gone wrong. (...) With the focus possible only in a robot, the car would track her emotional state over time and observe, in a reassuring voice, that Mishra always feels this way on a particular day of the week. Or perhaps it would play the Pharrell song ("Happy," naturally) that has cheered her up in the past. (ibid.)

We are now at a point where almost everything that had been a "normal" part of the "normal" music listening experience becomes "friction": knowing artists' names, knowing what genres you like, going to the record shop, downloading an mp3, downloading an app, putting on a record, inserting a cassette, switching between radio stations, pushing the play button in the app. And the music industry is, in the words of Steve Boom, "super-excited" (Ingham 2017a). It may be an exaggeration on his part, but labels indeed showed a serious kind of "excitement" when they allowed Amazon Prime Music to have a mid-tier price—while according to various reports, previous attempts to license services offering

lower prices than the standard 9.99 dollars per months proved unsuccessful (see, for instance, Pakman 2014).

“MUSIC BECOMES THE EXPERIENCE”: THE UTOPIA OF FRICTIONLESS MUSIC

In relation to voice control and what he termed “Music’s Zero UI [User Interface] Era,” Mark Mulligan observed that “there is less friction between the listener and the music. The music becomes the experience” (Mulligan 2016). Being an industry analyst, Mulligan meant that quite literally: There is no other experience such as grabbing or moving physical things, pushing buttons, just the music.

As a thought experiment, it is not hard to imagine someone in Silicon Valley pitching a service that takes your blood pressure and other relevant physiological data, perhaps checks your activities on social media, and automatically chooses the right song to play the moment you enter your home, thus removing the last “friction”—that is, having to want *anything* besides *music itself*. Indeed, the CEO of Endel, the company that made headlines when their algorithm “secured a record deal” with Warner Music Group, said that

he envisions an interconnected hardware-software ecosystem through which Endel can keep tabs on the rhythm of users’ daily lives via metrics like their driving patterns and the number of events on their calendar, then automatically creates a custom soundscape at the end of the day that helps them best unwind. (Wang 2019)

That “vision” is about background music that already takes into account “personal user inputs such as time of day and location, as well as biometric details such as heart rate” (ibid.). But there is also the prediction of “music mogul” Troy Carter:

I think predictive analytics are interesting, where we get prompted to listen to music when we don’t know we want to listen to music, or a song comes on that you didn’t know you wanted to hear. So sort of when the whole world ties in together, and will know that you’re gonna be on a date and know exactly what song to play, because it knows who you’re gonna be on that date with and what mood you’re in. This sort of predictive analytics that are gonna come through prompts is gonna be interesting with music.

Right now we're sort of on-demand and lean-back, but I think it'll get to the point where music is sort of brought to you. (*Business Insider* 2018)

This is a prediction for the “next five–ten years.” Notably, here even the desire to listen to music is eliminated.

This is what, from a different point of view, music critic Simon Reynolds described as listening to music “becom[ing] less and less of an event” (Rónai 2017). The end-point, the utopia is music becoming a non-event, just experience. Media analysts, unlike journalists and critics, usually refrain from an explicit evaluation of this development; the reader nevertheless often gets the impression that they consider it, to put it bluntly, a bad thing. A welcome correction can therefore be found in the research of Anja Nylund Hagen (2016), who studied how streaming fits the everyday life of her subjects. From a theoretical point of view she describes as “inspired by sociological phenomenology,” she found that

music is no less important because it is taken for granted. On the contrary, I claim that the flexible applicability and multiple uses of the streaming technology (that afford this taken-for-granted position) rather enhances music's role in peoples' everyday life. Music experiences arise around simply listening to music, of course, but as part of daily tasks and activities music is also incorporated in the planning and execution of commonplace activities. (Hagen 2016, 240)

Even “secondary or background” listening experiences “maintain strong music-listener relationships, because listening has increasingly come to represent the lived experience of users' everyday life” (242). Notably, these findings do not contradict “listening becom[ing] less and less of an event”—indeed, background listening is not an “event” in Hagen's description, yet it is precisely by this (negative) feature that it can be “incorporated in commonplace activities.” It is also important to add that the subjects of the study were “passionate music fans.”

A totally frictionless music platform may very well be unattainable: Humans are notoriously unpredictable, so there may be no algorithm that could predict with a hundred percent certainty what songs a particular consumer will like at a given moment. Also, this will never become the only use of streaming platforms—in fact, industry analysts have been predicting a consolidation of the market for years, where different products (or different tiers within one product) would cater for the mainstream

audience and the music aficionados, offering better choice, better sound quality, and so on, for the latter. The “vinyl renaissance” can be understood in that context, as serving the super-fans with a decidedly high-friction format (i.e., if you want to play the LP).

“In sessions, people have genuinely been saying, ‘Oh, we need to make something that sounds like Spotify,’” the singer-songwriter Emily Warren is quoted by Marc Hogan (2017). Although previous formats, for instance CDs were associated with lifelikeness and sonic perfection, those associations were typically not related to a *particular* sound. Streaming, while having no such associations, apparently has a sound. Some of the features of “Spotifycore,” as this sound is sometimes referred to (the term is credited to Jon Caramanica), can be explained with economic reasons: A song has to catch the attention at the outset in order that it be streamed for at least thirty seconds, the threshold for generating income for the rights holders. Other features are dependent on circumstances that are likely to change: Music is most typically consumed through headphones, yet it is predicted that voice control would replace this most typical form of consumption and “bring back music to the living room.” My suggestion is that at least part of the features can be explained by the frictionlessness utopia that platforms are trying to approximate; that what seems a natural fit for platforms that are increasingly frictionless is *frictionless music*. The fewer choices the consumer needs to make, the less specific his or her purported desire to listen to “music” is, the less specific music itself becomes. Frictionless music is what embodies a *general idea of music*, and nothing more.

“People don’t care about coolness or trends, all they want is great music” has become almost a mantra in the music industry. For example, the manager Dave Bianchi states:

I say this to all my acts. There are eight ‘cool’ people in the world: four in Hoxton, two in New York and a couple in, I don’t know, Los Angeles. Beyond that, it’s people from where I’m from – council estates. Where people identify with Ed Sheeran and Adele because it feels real to them and it connects. (Ingham 2017b)

So what people *do* want is “great songs, connection, realness,” according to numerous interviews with A&R managers who signed this or that artist, or curators who placed a breakout star on their influential playlist. This may be reframed in the following conceptual frame: According to the

previous model, the music came from the artists and reached the listener *through* its context, which consisted of various layers such as genre, scene, social-political context, trends, fashion, and so on. Frictionless music is supposed to flow *directly* from the artist to the listener. It moves him or her, connects with him or her in a direct, unmediated way.

All context is relegated to the “story” of the artist—which is another important industry watchword. In an interview with *Billboard*, the CEO of Warner Music stated: “Every track needs a story around it” (Flanagan 2016). David Emery, at the time working for Kobalt Label Services, wrote—somewhat sarcastically—that “the latest thing that record labels are talking about is ‘storytelling,’” and “they, with their years of experience making and breaking artists, are the best storytellers. If you want to make it, you’ve got to have a good story. And they’re the ones to tell it” (Emery 2016). What “story” means here is personal and is obviously shaped to a great extent by the requirements of social media. The aspects that are concerned with music (and not to the story of the “real” person behind the music) are typically not references to genre, scene, or similar. Rather, they are stories about the efforts behind making music, the formative years, perseverance, and breaking through. Even the album format, the supposed antithesis of the playlist-oriented standalone track, has now been conceptualized as “a canvas that the artist can use to tell a story or communicate an idea” (Dredge 2018), or as a “world-builder” (Olivier 2018). “Immersive” works of art are those that are capable to build their own contexts.

An obvious feature of frictionless music, therefore, is that it foregrounds the human voice, the main instrument that can create the illusion of direct, contextless “connection.” Instrumentation is a kind of distilled version of pop music from the past few decades, either genre-less or hopping from genre to genre (Ed Sheeran is a prime example for the latter). When genre signifiers are used, they are “just signifiers” without “substance,” meaning the whole baggage that comes with belonging to a genre. The quasi-genre of tropical house, aptly described by Marc Hogan as “EDM without being EDM” (Hogan 2017), or artists often labeled “post-genre” like Post Malone offer good examples. On the one hand, this is exactly what critics have berated for decades as “generic.” On the other hand, it has now gained new meaning: Instead of “having all the requisite features of *a given kind of music*, and nothing more”—for example, a “generic love song”—it now refers to “having all the requisite features of *music*, and nothing more.”

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I have argued that reducing friction takes an unusual form in the music industry, as the majority of targeted users are considered to be the “mainstream audience” who are thought to want music they like without having to choose specific songs, or even specific genres. Thus the main forms of reducing friction, playlists (inside the platforms), and voice control (as a new kind of platform) are also tools for reducing the burden of choice. In this way, it also strips music of its context. In the utopia of frictionless platforms, users are not required to do anything besides having the desire itself to listen to music. The corresponding notion of frictionless music embodies a general idea of music, and nothing else.

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The Sex Playlist: How Race and Ethnicity Mediate Musically “Composed” Sexual Self-Formation

Samira van Bohemen, Julian Schaap, and Pauwke Berkers

INTRODUCTION

Around Valentine’s Day each year, popular music streaming service Spotify releases themed playlists for those who want to make the most out of the romance on offer. Spotify offers these in “sex” and “love” packages, but there is also a playlist to accompany those without a Valentine, with

S. van Bohemen (✉)

Department of Public Administration and Sociology, Erasmus
University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
e-mail: vanbohemen@essb.eur.nl

J. Schaap · P. Berkers

Department of Arts and Culture Studies, Erasmus
University Rotterdam, Rotterdam, The Netherlands
e-mail: j.schaap@eshcc.eur.nl

P. Berkers

e-mail: berkers@eshcc.eur.nl

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the “Top Global Heartache Songs” (Lynch 2018). Consider the picks for 2018. Does anything strike as odd? (Table 7.1).

A first thing one may note is the rather low ratio of female to male performers: In the “sex” and “love” lists, only one in ten are female artists and—while slightly higher (three in ten)—the “heartache” list displays a similar pattern. While unsurprising, on the one hand, as women are historically underrepresented in (popular) music production (e.g., Leonard 2007; Lieb 2013), topics such as love and romance, on the other hand, have both implicitly and explicitly been connected to notions of femininity rather than masculinity (Berkers and Eeckelaer 2014; Schippers 2002), making these skewed ratios rather puzzling. Possibly even more puzzling, however, and the focus of this chapter, is the ratio of black to white artists, which, as one may notice, conspicuously divides the lists from left to right: The top ten “sex” songs on Spotify are all by black performers, while the “love” list is dominated by white artists, with a ratio of eight to two. Strikingly, the “heartache” list is completely white. How should we understand

Table 7.1 Spotify’s “sex,” “love,” and “heartache” playlists

<i>Top global sex songs</i>	<i>Top global love songs</i>	<i>Top global heartache songs</i>
1. The Weeknd—Earned It	1. Ed Sheeran—Perfect	1. Sam Smith—Too Good At Goodbyes
2. Jeremih—Birthday Sex	2. James Arthur—Say You Won’t Let Go	2. Adele—Someone Like You
3. The Weeknd—Often	3. Ed Sheeran—Photograph	3. Passenger—Let Her Go
4. Jeremih—All The Time	4. John Legend—All of Me	4. A Great Big World—Say Something
5. Ginuwine—Pony	5. Ed Sheeran—Thinking Out Loud	5. Gnash—i hate u, i love u (feat. Olivia O’Brien)
6. SoMo—Ride	6. Bazzi—Mine	6. Birdy—Skinny Love
7. Rihanna—Sex With Me	7. Christina Perri—A Thousand Years	7. Post Malone—I Fall Apart
8. Trey Songz—Slow Motion	8. Sam Smith—Stay With Me	8. Ed Sheeran—Happier
9. Ty Dolla \$ign—Or Nah	9. Kendrick Lamar—LOVE	9. Christina Perri—Jar of Hearts
10. The Weeknd—The Hills	10. G-Eazy—Him & I (with Halsey)	10. Sam Smith—Stay With Me

Source Spotify

this rather puzzling alignment of ethno-racial categories with playlists on sex, love and heartbreak?

When considering these numbers, it is important to note that Spotify compiles these playlists (at least partly) based on an algorithmic selection from other “sex,” “love,” and “heartache” playlists that circulate on its platform. The core content of these playlists is thus based on streamers’ everyday encounters with sex and love, and the dissolution thereof. The compilation of playlists is, moreover, based on “power by numbers,” so the more popular certain songs are, the more likely that they will become part of a playlist. Songs that are played the most end up on playlists, through which they are then played even more. As such, the algorithmic compilation of playlists has become a new kind of cultural gatekeeper (O’Dair and Fry 2019), which has an effect on how tastes are shaped—including those based on notions of sex and love.

In this chapter, we demonstrate how playlists are used instrumentally as a technology of the sexual self that aids in how people, especially young people, foster sexual affect, sexual encounters, and sexual self-formation. Our conceptualization of this comes from both Foucault (1988) and DeNora (1997, 2000, 2003), with the first defining technologies of the self as technologies “which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality” (Foucault 1988, 18).

This is explained in light of Tia DeNora’s (2000) well-known work on music as a technology of the self, and increasing evidence that most people “use” music as a complementary activity to what they are doing rather than a focused activity (Marshall 2019). Especially now that we have entered the era of streaming, people more than ever before are in the position to take control over their musical self-formation through playlists: having millions of songs to build their “desire” on and the opportunity to have them played when they “desire,” wherever they “desire” (Bergh et al. 2014; Bull 2005; Torrens and Hertzog 2004). Playlists provide a highly customizable or tailored backdrop to sexual activities, and as such they offer possibilities for the experience of erotic agency (cf. DeNora 1997; Evans et al. 2010). Yet, looking at the content of sex versus love playlists, we argue that this agency is limited for the way ethno-racial categories are tied with music genres and relatively stable ideas about racialized bodies, which bear consequences for how the sexual self is musically “composed” (DeNora 1997).

MUSIC AS TECHNOLOGY OF THE SEXUAL SELF

Importantly, the pressing nature of the puzzling alignment of “sex” with “black” and (the dissolution of) “love” with “white” lies within the pressing nature of music as a device for cultural and physical transformation. Music is notorious for its ability to connect the inside world of private—physiological and mental—processes with the outside world of public culture, structures, and experiences (Bull 2005; DeNora 2000; Frith 1996, 2003). As such, it continuously permeates the already pervious membrane between the self and the social, aligning body with culture, with music forming and transforming the body, bringing bodies into action, connecting certain bodies, while—often simultaneously—separating others (Bull 2007; Negus and Velázquez 2002; Prior 2014; Schaap 2019). As music anthropologist Ruth Finnegan once argued:

Whether in deeply intense fashion or more light-touch action, music provides a human resource through which people can enact their lives with inextricably entwined feeling, thought and imagination. (Finnegan 2003, 188)

And in that context, music is “a well-practised device for the production of desire,” Tia DeNora adds, quoting musicologist Richard Lepert (1993, quoted in DeNora 1997, 61). According to DeNora (1997, 2000, 2003), music is both *representative* and *constitutive* of the self and the social, and as such is also representative and constitutive of intimacy. Music has the power to communicate already formed ideas of intimacy that are either publicly or physically experienced, but it also has the power to shape these experiences through embodied practice, which in its turn has the power to (re)shape cultural representation.

Music has the power to “compose” sexual agency (DeNora 1997). It functions as a powerful technology of the sexual self (Van Bohemen et al. 2018; Van Bohemen and Roeling 2020), allowing listeners to move through sexual situations, to discover what types of intimacy they like and dislike, to articulate otherwise inarticulate feelings, to change their moods, heighten sensation, shape interaction, and thus aid in the formation of pleasure. The popularity of this regulatory usage of music is evidenced by streaming services’ increasing reliance on “moods” or “needs” (e.g., “sleep,” “focus,” “diner”) rather than genre, to guide listeners to the music on offer. Clearly, music helps to regulate the self and the social

in intimate interactions (see Juslin and Sloboda 2010; Sloboda 2005). For sex in particular, music has the power to drown out other sound, to reinvigorate memories of previous encounters and experiences, to help people concentrate on the tasks and movements at hand, or to set certain physiological events into motion.

Recently, research by Van Bohemen et al. (2018) has shown that young people also use these opportunities in instrumental ways to change the self and physical interactions during actual sexual encounters. They report how their preferred sex music gives them “energy,” “stimulates” them, makes them “feel hot,” gives them “butterflies” or brings out their sexy “alter egos,” and so forth. This often happens in an automatic or semi-conscious way, which is comparable to Gabrielson’s (2011) descriptions of strong emotional experiences through music. Music often also functions as a way for them to find out whether they are on the same sexual “level” with another sexual party or as a means to create a situation in which they definitely feel “in sync.” It also has the power to reinvigorate memories of past sexual experiences. A power that is sometimes used strategically by young people to make a particular sexual experience more special, but that just as well requires careful selection and also a sequencing of songs that are not already tainted with “other” life experiences.

Some do this by purposefully compiling playlists in which music is synchronized to different phases of sexual activity. To understand this, Van Bohemen et al. (2018) draw on DeNora’s (1997) conceptualization of music establishing non-cognitive forms of “bio-feedback” that structure the situation and the bodies involved and has the power to heighten sensation. In this context, they particularly name a twenty-year-old Dutch-Surinamese boy, who states that he has multiple sex playlists which he compiles in segments, with music for foreplay, music for sex, and music for relaxation after sex. “You go along with the *vibe* of the music, so to say. And well, if you have a good playlist that stimulates that in a good way, then I think that because of that, in the end, you also just have better sex,” the boy they named Sunnery explains (Van Bohemen et al. 2018, 24). “And that’s also what I base my music on, more slowly in the beginning, more relaxed. Then actually bang-music, just bang-bang-bang and then slowly cool down like.”

This quote alludes to some of the things we know from research about music and dance as well as sports, which shows that music affects motivation, physical performance levels, perceptions of exertion, and the overall pleasure of movement. Music’s rhythm, or its speed, is considered of the

utmost importance here, with faster paced sounds producing the highest levels of arousal and performance (Anshel and Marisi 2013; Edworthy and Haring 2006; Karageorghis et al. 1999). These studies show that the properties of the music, such as its rhythm, tonality, voice, and valence, also have a role in bringing about musical affect, which works through the idea of affordances (DeNora 2000). This means that some music can simply be appropriated more easily for the formation of a certain type of feeling or selfhood, just like some music can be appropriated more easily for “bang-bang-bang” sex than it can be appropriated for slow and soft sex.

Yet, it would be a mistake to read music’s influence on the formation of sexual agency as the music simply “working upon” people, with musical properties mechanically changing sexual selfhood and sexual situations. What we see is an interaction where people try to “work” with the music in order to achieve a good sexual experience. Keeping with our example of twenty-year-old Sunnery, we can see that he also does not mind when the movements do not correspond with the music at all times. However, he does mention one song “where if you haven’t come yet as a guy, you

Table 7.2 Sunnery’s sequenced sex playlist

<i>Sunnery’s sequenced sex playlist</i>	<i>Type of activity</i>
Woodkid—I Love You (acoustic version)	Foreplay
Lorde—Buzzcut Season	Foreplay
Gorillaz—Hillbilly Man	Foreplay
Flume & Chet Faker—“Drop The Game”	Foreplay
The Black Keys—Next Girl	Sex
ScHoolboy Q Ft. A\$AP	Sex
Rocky—Hands On The Wheel	
The Submarines—1940 (Amplive Remix)	Sex
MNM & Tourist Le MC & Fit—Adieu	Sex
Kanye West—Real Friends	Sex
The XX—VCR	Relaxation after
The Weeknd—Angel	Relaxation after
Explosions in the Sky—Your Hand In Mine	Relaxation after

Source Van Bohemen et al. 2018

should put some force behind it” (Van Bohemen et al. 2018, 24), indicating that you would need to work with the music to get the optimal result; in this case, he needs to be finished “in time” before the cooling down songs start to play (Table 7.2).

ETHNO-RACIAL MEDIATIONS OF SEX PLAYLISTS

Looking at Sunnery’s sequenced sex playlist, we again uncover a similar pattern of white artists predominantly catering to the romantic side of sex (the foreplay and relaxation after), while black artists provide the “bang-music” for the sex itself. (Although Sunnery has also included the music of a very white indie band for this purpose, showing that the juxtaposition of “sex and black” and “romance and white” is not completely fixed, variations are possible and sometimes seized upon.) The overall patterns of Sunnery’s sex playlist suggest ethnic stereotyping and racialization in certain music genres. Why are black and white artists patterned in such a way that the music produced by them is associated with different types of sexual affect, different types of sexual encounters and different types of sexual self-formation? A discussion of these ethno-racial mediations of sex playlists is largely missing from the literature on music as a technology for the sexual self.

Part of the answer lies in the fact that popular music is a key platform for social identification (Fiske 1998), particularly along lines of gender, sexuality, or race and ethnicity. Ethno-racial categories such as “blackness” or “whiteness” shape people’s understanding of music genres and, as a consequence, are reflected in which groups dominate certain genres (Roy and Dowd 2010). For example, while genres such as rock and country music have been dominated by whites (Hamilton 2016; Mahon 2004; Schaap and Berkers 2019), genres such as soul, hip-hop, and funk tend to be dominated by non-whites (Clay 2003; Neal 2013; Rose 1994). This does not only bear consequences for who listens to certain genres, but also the associations and classifications that people use to appreciate (or dislike) songs. Naturally, this warrants us to question to what extent understandings of different ethno-racial difference may mediate the formation and usage of playlists for the sexual self.

The racialization of bodies has a long history of sexualization and fetishization (Hall 1997). This may be most visible in the racial logic that is (still) applied in the categorization of pornographic material, where it is strictly normal to categorize based on terms such as “Black,” “Asian,”

or “Hispanic” (Nash 2014). This demonstrates that, at least in pornography, ethno-racial categorizations have become an important determinant to classify sexual tastes. While certainly not in the same realm as pornography, the more loosely carried ethno-racial associations regarding popular music that are used for sex seem to follow a similar logic. Although the sonic “display” of sex is certainly possible in music, it is the music video which affords the possibility to signify to listeners what is intended with a song by artists. Here, the ethno-racial background of artists matters: For example, studies have shown that videos made by African-American artists are significantly more likely to display sexual acts than those made by white artists (Turner 2011). This comes as no surprise, since white artists are more often—especially since the “intellectual turn” of rock music since Bob Dylan—perceived to make music “for the mind,” whereas non-white music is perceived as more “bodily.” Such widely carried perceptions can also be found in the idea that whiteness is essentially “cultureless” (Hughey 2012) and that white bodies lack “natural talent and rhythm” (Hancock 2008). These ideas are formative of how the sexual self (and other) is perceived as well and “reinscribe the racial essentialism and traditional pejorative status of the natural qualities of the African American body” (ibid., 792).

Van Bohemen et al. (2018) demonstrate that young adolescents include various genres into their sex playlists, ranging from acoustic music to R&B and dance music. But at the same time they had to admit that not all music genres were represented in these “sex lists”: Some genres such as heavy metal, Dutch *levenslied* folk music, and rap music were considered by young people as inappropriate for sex. Interestingly, especially these genres are strongly tied to ethno-racial categories, as heavy metal and Dutch folk music are associated with whiteness (Schaap 2015; Spracklen 2013), and rap music—especially “gangsta” variations—are associated with blackness. In other words: Songs that are deemed “*too black*” are not selected and songs that are “*too white*” are also not selected for these playlists. Notably, however, playlists tailored for sexual activities—particularly sexual activities that are considered more “rough” than romantic—are dominated by black artists, while playlists tailored for romantic “soft” sex are more open toward songs by white artists.

As we have seen in the introduction, the playlists offered by Spotify display a similar pattern, where music that is considered strongly sexual is dominated by black artists, while the playlists about romance and—most notably—heartache are dominated by whites. For example, a recent study

by De Laat (2019) demonstrated that “the presence of poetic allusions to sex by white performing artists, along with the absence of disavowals of infidelity also suggests that white women exact racial privilege through continued assumptions of their sexual propriety and purity” (11). These distinct patterns in how music is associated with *certain kinds* of the sexual self demonstrate how associations based on ethno-racial categorizations mediate the formation of a sexual self. Whereas blackness seems to bear associations of bodily pleasure, whiteness represents romance—or reflective encounters with the loss of it. This association between whiteness and romance is, however, highly classed, as *lebenslied* and metal have strong associations with working-class culture (Bryson 1996) and with being “too white,” which is why they are also perceived as “disruptive” rather than conducive to “good” sex.

CONCLUSIONS

Where does this leave us, with regard to music’s role as technology of the sexual self? Our discussion so far ties into one of the major points of criticism that has been voiced against DeNora’s work on music as technology of the self, and the emancipatory potential that some see in streaming platforms. David Hesmondhalgh (2008, 2013), among others, argues that this presents a too optimistic view of agency, with everyone being able to use music according to personal needs. There are always larger social contexts of power and inequality that need to be considered, he argues, as well as the fact that music may be used for creating experiences of solidarity and attachment, while also creating distance and detachment (for a discussion see Bull 2007; Negus and Velázquez 2002; Prior 2014).

Music not only has the power to “turn on” and to move a certain sexual situation further in a positive direction, it equally has the power to “turn off” and to create distance between bodies. Music can be a way to sexual agency, but it can also be experienced as impeding on that agency (Van Bohemen et al. 2018). Whereas some young people confided that they consider the presence of “the right” background music crucial to the construction of a pleasurable sexual experience, others experienced the presence of music as disrupting.

In all fairness, DeNora also never denied this, as she argues (1997, 55) that “as with all forms of culture” music’s “link with agency (and to the interpretations it inspires) is contingent upon local circumstances of use. Particular music may conspire with or against particular bodies,

they may constrain and/or enable particular desires and forms of conduct.” Music is not an empty signifier, but has certain properties—tonality, voice, lyrics, rhythm, and video images—that afford or prevent certain types of use. Musical affect is thereby accomplished through an interactive process between these properties and the way in which social actors make sense of them. People in that case work with the music, they bring in their own cultural associations, which, depending on other circumstances of use, may help accomplish pleasure as well as other cognitive, emotional, and physiological experiences from music (Gomart and Hennion 1999; Hennion 2003). Similarly, DeNora (2003) shows how music operates on this “interactive plane” with larger social developments, so that it is not only used as a tool for self-determination, but can also serve as a tool for the control over others and over specific situations (see also Bull 2007); a tool, moreover, that is itself situated within a larger cultural context of conventions, modes of being and doing, discourses, habits, and inequalities. Where music functions as a mediator for sexual agency, these situational factors mediate the mediations of music (see DeNora 2003; Hennion 2015).

Cultural associations with race and ethnicity will thus always mediate music’s mediations of the sexual self. But does that mean that there is no hope for change? Does music only help bring about the same patterns of inequality in its formation of the sexual self? Technically, the answer to this is “negative,” cultures are never fully formed and contain a host of different discourses that people may select from (Foucault 1988). And while these still limit the options for change, some of these discourses may actually challenge the types of inequalities we have discussed (Butler 1993), such as the “black-body-sex” and “white-mind-love” associations (cf. Evans et al. 2010). Similarly, a shift is notable in the way in which, particularly young people, select music, which seems much less based on the hegemony of genre and much more on regulating moods and needs, something which streaming services increasingly cater to.

At the same time, however, looking at the sex playlists and comparing them to playlists people construct for love and heartache, the alignments of “sex with black” and “white with love” do not seem very hopeful, and they may suggest that these associations run deeper than merely functioning as categorical tools. Ethno-racial categories have become latched to musical categories in cognition through socialization processes (Schaap 2019), making them difficult to reflect on in everyday life—let alone

adjust them. As such, it is essential to unearth how these categories continue to help shape and mediate the formation of (sexual) selves, and how streaming technologies (albeit unintentionally) cater to these processes.

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Authenticity and Digital Popular Music Brands

Jessica Edlom

...in this internet era everything's become quantified, we're data-rich and content poor. Social media is about image as opposed to truth. But truth resonates.

—Bob Lefsetz, May 20, 2017

INTRODUCTION

1.6 million likes and 26,900 comments is what an Instagram post by Lady Gaga from July 6, 2018, received (as of the time of writing). Lady Gaga has an engaged audience and always receives thousands of likes, but this post was particularly engaged with. The special thing about the post was the raw and authentic feeling and the natural look. Not at all the usual Lady Gaga, yet the fans really liked and encouraged it. Eventually, it turned out that there was more to the story: The post was part of the marketing campaign for the movie *A Star is Born* (2018), showing Lady Gaga's character in the movie. Nonetheless, the engagement surrounding

J. Edlom (✉)
Department of Geography, Media and Communication,
Karlstad University, Karlstad, Sweden
e-mail: jessica.edlom@kau.se

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the post shows how realness and authenticity in social media is something that resonates with us. In today's highly commercialized and digitalized world, there seems to be a longing for the authentic and real—genuine experiences and meeting others for real.

In popular culture discourses, *authenticity* has long been a debated and loaded keyword (see, e.g., Moore 2002). It is used for distinguishing music genres and expressions, but should not be seen as a property of the music or the artist (Rubidge 1996). The authenticity of music is often connected to performance and materiality. Moore asserts that authenticity is ascribed to, rather than inscribed in a performance and the performer herself, and the focus should be on the “activities of various perceivers, and the reasons they might have for finding, or failing to find, a particular performance authentic” (2002, 21). Social media creates new types of performances, which are conceived differently depending on the artist. In the music industry, this is often described through the division of artistic and commercial, or independent and commercial. But is this division enough or is it oversimplified? What happens to the understanding of authenticity in an era of digital mediatization?

The way music artists reach their audience has drastically changed in the last decade. In the social web era, it is no longer a question of using digital and social media or not—artists need to be constantly present and to interact with the audience on social platforms. New technologies offer new possibilities in reaching out, but also new challenges, as it is difficult to be noticed, liked, and loved as an artist in an overloaded media environment. The contemporary audience wants to meet the artist “for real” on social media (Aaker 2014; Greenberg and Kates 2014). Even the social platforms themselves have seen the importance of authenticity in order to create engagement. During a talk at the influential tech, music and film conference South by Southwest in Austin, USA in March 2018, Lauren Wirtzer-Seawood, Head of Music Partnership at Instagram headquarters, shared the success factors for musicians on Instagram: the importance of moving images and film; interaction with fans; frequency and consistency in posting; focus on content that is documenting the artist in a genuine way; and last but not least, authenticity, to be real “for real.”

In the digital world of today, there is a preoccupation with what is real and what is fake. We live in a technologically mediated reality, where people interact less with people and more with machines. Technology is at the same time rendered more human, with, for example, virtual reality and domestic robots. As society is simultaneously highly branded with

endless staged experiences, consumers are generally anti-advertising, have a hard time trusting digital content, and are longing for less made-up encounters and more real ones (Gilmore and Pine II 2007, 10). They want to be in personal contact with brands and they want to trust them (Aaker 2014). Beverland (2005) even notes that brands need to be perceived as authentic to be commercially successful. Creating relationships, emotions, and a “feeling of true” is seen as the core of successful brand building. Marketers clearly see the need of using authenticity as a brand positioning and strategy to appeal to the consumer. For a music brand, like a band or an artist, it is then important to earn their audience—be respected and trusted and this is done partly via image building and communication. Here is a paradox: Can a music brand be authentic and, at the same time, strategically constructed?

This chapter raises questions about how authenticity is perceived, how it is manifested and created, if it is created, in the online environment. It addresses how music artists should navigate communicating their images, or brands, while remaining “true.” The focus is to problematize and try to map out the heterogeneous and highly commercialized music industry where the division of artistic and commercial may not be enough, to understand authenticity in the contemporary music scene.

MUSIC INDUSTRY IN A DIGITAL AND SOCIAL MEDIA ERA

Digitalization, marketization, and globalization have changed the conditions of the music industry. *Popular music*—music aiming to appeal to a general audience (Frith et al. 2001), *commercialized and “made accessible to a broader range of people”* (Wade 2005, 45)—is deeply embedded in capitalistic discourse and relations. Music is continuously commodified, for instance, through so-called 360-degree deals (in which record labels receive a portion of income from all revenue streams of the artist such as merchandising and publishing). It is in many ways a commercialized and branded cultural field. Adorno (1972 [1991]), for example, famously argued that production and consumption of culture in capitalist societies are inevitably standardized for the industry in order to cater to audience expectations and tastes. With an exploding digital marketplace and a promotional culture online, commercialization has created new frameworks, boundaries, and values for music-makers (Baym 2018).

The Internet, and especially the so-called Web 2.0, offers new opportunities and challenges to the music industry’s business and management

practices in terms of digital distribution, changing ways of communication, changing consumer behavior, and the nature of relations between producers and consumers. It can be hard to reach out in a highly competitive digital arena—it is generally hard for an artist to get noticed and even harder to get chosen by their audience. To get “big” as an artist in today’s media landscape, the prevailing opinion is that you need big budgets, interesting spreadable content, professional assistance, and strategies in image building and marketing (Fournier and Avery 2011; Jenkins et al. 2013). At the same time, technology offers new tools for “doing it yourself,” at least in theory, which makes it possible to build a music career—record, produce, and communicate with the fans—without being signed and without having management or money. Already at an early stage though, the music industry adapted to the conditions of the Internet and understood the benefits of the affordances that social media provides (see, e.g., Baym 2012; Choi and Burnes 2013; Wikström 2009). The music industry’s ability to profit from engagement in different ways has partly been assigned to platformization (Nieborg and Poell 2018; Negus 2018) and datafication—the ability to harvest, analyze, and profit on data streams through networked digital platforms (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 2013). Thus, contemporary popular music marketing plays into what van Dijck and Poell (2013) has come to define as social media logic with connectivity in focus. The music industry is considered to be characterized by a high level of consumer interaction, co-creational production, and marketing (Gamble and Gilmore 2013; Gamble et al. 2018). The audiences play a central role in transmedia music marketing through their organic interaction and participation, influence on the message and the story line they provide (Zeiser 2015; Jenkins et al. 2013; Macnamara and Zerfass 2012; Mangold and Faulds 2009). The feeling of participation and inclusion also seems to be the drive for the audience to take part in this (Salo et al. 2013). Musicians are under constant pressure to build connections with their audiences. The work of a musician has changed; nowadays, it resembles more that of a skilled entrepreneur in the gig economy. Social media is seen as the recipe for musicians’ entrepreneurial success—it is absolutely necessary to be on social media and interact in order to build up an audience. Before, mass music audiences had no “real” relationship with distant artists, but today, through social media, musicians follow listeners between platforms and attempt to build lasting relationships.

The primary conditions in social media are to be personal and communicate—they are built to create never-ending interactions that generate an everyday sense of connection. Culture, economics, and technology push musicians toward authenticity and closeness. Audiences “expect artists to be constantly available to them, offering unique, personal glimpses of off-stage life. They see musicians as friends,” according to Baym (2018, 171). The more musicians are open about who they are, the more connected the fans say they feel. This creates both possibilities and tensions, as it is hard to master, both regarding personal boundaries and the need of being strategically managed. There is a need to negotiate these dialectic tensions: pull toward closeness and pull away from it, in order to be close enough but still have boundaries, to be strategic and in control. It is a highly commercialized music life, where music and artists are commodified and marketed by strategically crafted artists’ images in order to make audiences feel a sense of identification or admiration (Baym 2018). Today all musicians encounter a new way of being real, which is to communicate with the audiences as you would with friends. Musicians therefore need to develop strategies for choosing when and when not to communicate with audiences, and how. This goes for musicians at all levels. The music business is a highly heterogeneous one, where small, new, and independent artists are competing on the same arena as big, global artists with an entourage of management and music companies. The conditions vary, but the communication on digital platforms is getting more and more alike regardless of level of independence, artistic integrity and professionalism. The further away musicians are from commercial pressures though, the more authentic they are seen to be.

THEORIZING AUTHENTICITY IN THE CULTURAL FIELD

The concept of *authenticity* is ambiguous—it can relate to truthfulness of origins (e.g., playing according to genre specifics or history), and it can also stand for attributes and intentions. For the creative industry, the term has traditionally meant different things, depending on the field of creativity. When investigating the meaning of authenticity in relation to a music artist or a band, it is important to understand the different aspects of the concept and how it is used in the culture industry. Since the industrialization of culture, fans have sought to understand stars as authentic people, with whom they have an intimate bond. The fascination with authenticity can be traced to mediation. Without face-to-face

interaction, authenticity has become a way to recreate a personal sense of social relationships (Negus 2018). Theories about cultural and artistic production from the early and mid-twentieth century reflect this broad meaning and use of the term authenticity—from Benjamin’s classic work on photography and reproduction, where an authentic work was the original (1936), to Adorno and Horkheimer’s work on the culture industry (1944 [2007]), where authentic meant culture created *outside* of the creative industry, outside of mass culture. Dutton (2003) makes a distinction between *nominal authenticity*—for example, how close a performance is to the composers’ or writers’ intention, or to a tradition—and *expressive authenticity*—the degree to which the artist’s work is a personal or original in expression. Central concepts here are originality, honesty, and integrity.

Every cultural field is built around common values and requires social recognition. When it comes to authenticity, this is also the case: It varies and can mean different things in different fields, genres, and groups. According to Bourdieu (1984 [2010]), only those with cultural capital are able to truly differentiate between the authentic and non-authentic in the field. As a music artist, you have to recognize and relate to the standard norms in place in the genre, and reflect expected attributes and aspects of image building when communicating with the audience. In some genres, such as punk or indie pop, it is more important to have this knowledge than in others—they are more sensitive to what is authentic or not. For other genres, and for more commercial artists, the aspect of authenticity is more vaguely created, and perhaps less important.

Nevertheless, authenticity is something all cultural and creative industries are in some way preoccupied with, in efforts to create differentiation and attract attention of customers, critics, and gatekeepers (Jones et al. 2005). It concerns the experience and appearance of a cultural product such as an artist (as discussed in marketing and branding literature, see, e.g., Jones et al. 2005; Beverland 2005). The two main strategies that may be used for claiming authenticity for an artist are, firstly, working within a tradition, and, secondly, being original and having a creative voice that is one’s own. The latter can be seen as something that is there from the start or something that can be sought for, as part of being an artist, but also of crafting the music brand. Jones et al. (2005) make a distinction between *artistic authenticity* (being original and creative) and *commercial authenticity* (rendering authenticity as a brand). These are anchored in different social networks (Jones et al. 2005, 898). Artistic

integrity and authenticity are often put in opposition to commercialization (Moore 2002). Especially in mainstream popular music, where both the creation and promotion of music are done to attract larger audiences, the mainstream popular music artists are seen as less authentic and more independent artists as more. Joli Jensen has been studying country music and the aspects of commercialization and authenticity in this genre. She claims that when a form of cultural expression, such as country music, is commercialized, it becomes inauthentic—the antithesis of authenticity. It becomes artificial, according to the audience (Jensen 1998). At the same time, it is clear that perspectives on “selling out” have shifted (Klein et al. 2017). The new economic and digital realities make it necessary to turn an artist into a brand in order to make money. Music companies see their music brands as core assets to be used in all kinds of platforms and places. It is normalized for music-makers in general to be in a business and promotional environment. Artists at all levels know how to “package” and sell their art and music and be their own brand, according to my research among music artists in Scandinavia. The knowledge about how to be seen as authentic as an artist is therefore of value in brand building even in the cultural field (Hesmondhalgh and Meier 2014). Traditionally, the commodification and branding of music are often set in opposition with authenticity and integrity in the music industry. But there has been a change in the beginning of the twenty-first century, with increasing use of branding, sponsorship and cross-media in order to increase revenue, which also changes the view on authenticity as value (ibid.).

THE AUTHENTIC BRAND

Authenticity has been “co-opted by brand culture,” Baym states (2018). In contemporary organizational communication and marketing, authenticity is considered to be a cornerstone of a brand’s equity and value (Aaker 1996; Brown et al. 2003; Gilmore and Pine II 2007; Lu et al. 2015). There has been a shift toward “identity”-oriented branding paradigms and an experience economy where “authenticity must become the primary source of differentiation for commodities...” (Meier 2011, 407). Authenticity in brands is about the organization’s voice and appearance, a feel of trueness, and genuineness (Beverland 2005). However, the modern way of using the term is more about user’s perception of *values, identity, and auras* (Alexander 2009). Authenticity in branding is created and managed through both identity and image construction. It

is manifested in impressions people form about the product, its history, the production process, links to a particular place, and myths created by the producers. The authenticity of a brand seems to be a fluid concept that is socially constructed and negotiated—it gains its value from the consumer’s recognition of it as valuable.

Beverland (2005) asserts that marketing activities can create and recreate images of genuineness and a “true story,” relevant to the end user. It is not necessarily important that the aspects of authenticity are real, only that the customer perceives them as real. The customers might even have a hard time telling when it is “real” or not (Jones et al. 2005). Gilmore and Pine introduced the concept of *perceived authenticity* (2007)—how a consumer experiences a product, service, environment, communication, or person—and stress the importance of this aspect in marketing and communication. According to consumers’ perspective, you do not have to say you are authentic if you are. But if you say it, you need to act accordingly. Gilmore et al. (2007) claim there are standards of authenticity—being true to oneself, being what it says is or implement strategies for rendering authenticity—so-called real–real or real–fake perceived authenticity, in their vocabulary. Many businesses “fake it” by pretending authenticity in order to build brand. From a business perspective, it is important to learn to manage the process of behaving authentically and excel at it, and to understand that pretending to be authentic can harm both short- and long-term.

When authenticity is used in branding and communicated in the media, when it is mediated, it is based on illusions of authenticity that we silently agree upon—an “authenticity contract” is needed between the media producers and the audience and target groups (Enli 2016). Digital media have made it necessary to renegotiate this contract. *Mediated authenticity* relies on a successful practice of what can be called an *authentic illusion*. Enli points to this as a paradox, one that we are well aware of: “Although we base most of our knowledge about our society and the world in which we live on mediated representations of reality, we remain well aware that the media are constructed, manipulated, and even faked” (Enli 2016, 1). Authenticity is therefore something that we create together; it is an interplay between audience expectations and preconceptions of the real and media producers’ ability to deliver content that corresponds to this. Enli suggests seven criteria for identifying how mediated authenticity is created, which the audience relates to: predictability (according to genre conventions), spontaneity (created content that

seems spontaneous), immediacy (a sense of now), confessions (expressions that appear trustworthy and possible to relate to), ordinariness (regarding people that feels just like everybody else, not the stars or experts), ambivalence (something that feels honest and reel by being ambivalent), and imperfection (something too perfect is not trustworthy) (2016, 137). For music artists trying to reach out to their audiences—often knowledgeable and critical—these criteria can be crucial to understand.

MANIFESTING AND CREATING AUTHENTICITY IN THE CONTEMPORARY MUSIC INDUSTRY

Social media have profoundly changed communication with audiences and fans in the music industry, and the ways in which music brands are built (see, e.g., Choi and Burnes 2013; Baym 2012, 2018; Bennett and Strong 2018; Suhr 2012). This change is characterized by a greater degree of personalization and value creation on the part of the artists (Ogden et al. 2011). But the challenges this brings necessitate a more professionalized and deeply strategized marketing. In the music brand communication chain, there are many stakeholders that take part in communicating—from the artist, the management, record company, PR company, the aggregators and streaming service used, to even the fans. In this co-creational and at the same time commercial and branded digital environment, artists can experience a struggle: that of being themselves as artists in real life and on social media, and marketing themselves in order to sell the music or concerts. They are supposed to promote both authenticity and business-targeted self-presentation at the same time (Baym 2018). There seems to be a difference in how artists and their surrounded management relate to and define authenticity, depending on whether they are more commercial and professionalized or if they are small and independent – although these can also be professionalized. The major actors seem to be using authenticity in a more strategic way, as something partially—and even mostly—created. The independent actors—both management and artists—seem rather to emphasize the importance of being real and showing personality to be seen as authentic, and stress the importance and truthfulness of a personal voice and appearance.

When does music communication in social media feel real? Social media are built on interaction—a person talking to other persons. So how is authenticity manifested in this interaction? Who is “talking” and in

what kind of “voice”? There are different ways of showing and constructing authenticity in social media. One is to always be “real,” that is, it is the artist appears to be “speaking,” showing her everyday life, just being herself, without deliberately building an image. Another is to strategically create content that is appealing to the target groups or fans, a content they can relate to, which may feel real and close to them, although not necessarily.

There are different ways to construct authenticity in social media. When trying to create an authentic feeling of the artist brand in social media, it is possible to work according to the genre in both imagery and content of the posts (predictability), use colloquial language, often with exclamations and misspellings (spontaneity and imperfection), write in a personal way and address the audience as individuals (ordinariness, confessions, and ambivalence). The first criterion is most often fulfilled either by the artist herself “speaking” in social media, or when management or strategists communicate on her behalf. But the latter—coming across as spontaneous and ordinary—seems almost impossible for the management to do.

Who is “speaking” or writing on social media therefore seems central. Nevertheless, it can be hard for audiences to know who is speaking. The person who appears to be the musician can be the manager or a marketing assistant, often trained to speak on their behalf. Sometimes a post is signed with a HQ (headquarter) to indicate this, but not always. Artists with resources often have staff who handle their social media. Some artists have even begun using bots that work on Facebook Messenger in order to communicate directly with fans “in ways that neither algorithms nor rapidly scrolling timelines can impede” (Baym 2018, 164.) All these personal expressions and conversations that seem personal but are not can be seen as unethical according to Baym (2018). So, does it have to be the artist talking or writing by themselves on social media to create authenticity? From a major management’s or strategist’s view, it often seems obvious that it should not be the artist speaking or managing the social channels, since this may not be possible due to the artist’s lack of competence, time, or interest. In this way, the management has control of what is communicated on the artist’s channels. For some of the major artists, a personal voice does not seem important at all. In such cases—an example is the Swedish artist Håkan Hellström (with a rather large following on Facebook and Instagram)—although having an indie image, the writing is often openly done by a representative of the headquarters. In others,

they talk in their artist's voices—without letting the audience know. One example here is the commercial music brand of the Swedish boy band FO&O (earlier The Foo and The Fooo Conspiracy). This band was popular among a young Swedish audience from the start of 2013, until their breakup in 2017. Its members were put together by the music company Artist House Stockholm in order to form a band and a music brand suitable for a young audience. All communication, including guerrilla marketing—for example, film making in central Stockholm, which brought together fans—and social media appearance, was controlled more or less by the management, even if their social channels seemed filled with real encounters with the band members on and behind the stage or in the studio. The band itself expressed the need for being in touch with the audience. In an interview in the daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* (September 11, 2015), one of the group members stressed the importance of cultivating fandom: “We want to build a relation with our Foooers-family.” Their manager Johan Åberg expressed a different view in an interview in my own research:

The audience is so young. They don't really have the intellectual level in the dialogue on social media.... So we [the managers] are doing almost all the posts for the band, to make it work. We talk like they would. At the same time, when doing a Q&A on Facebook, for example, it's really important that they [the band] answer on their own. So it doesn't get mixed up with the other content. (Interview with Johan Åberg, March 8, 2016)

On the other hand, for a more artistically autonomous artist—whether managed or independent—to be authentic, it seems important that it is their own voice in social media. A band like the Swedish Death Team, who have a clear indie image despite being contracted and managed by a major label, stress the need for being authentic “for real,” doing all content by themselves and not being led by the management in terms of communicating in the best way with their fans:

One of our biggest problems have been that we're sometimes too cheesy. So our record label has tried to make us more cool. So they are like: stop doing that. We get a lot of instructions pretty often like, “OK you are doing this interview now, try to be cool. Please don't be cheesy.” Then they've noticed that it doesn't work, so now they are getting us scripts.

“Say this and nothing more.” But we don’t follow scripts. (Q&A on a Record Union music business event, May 25, 2016)

Here, there is a clear struggle between strategies and practice, and between artists and management.

With this in mind, is the duality of artistic and commercial authenticity enough? One might argue that if it is important—as marketing literature would have us believe—to show *the real* artist, to create content reflecting the personal and true, and also do this right in order to keep the authenticity around the brand, regardless of the size of the artist, the division of artistic and commercial may not be enough. Even the smallest artists seem to be “building brands” in strategic ways and therefore trying to control their presence on the social platforms. Is this not commercial authenticity? Perhaps instead we should talk about *real* and *created authenticity* when it comes to communicating it on digital platforms.

What is possible for an artist to do when it comes to being regarded as authentic? Are there any limits, any dos and don’ts? According to Holt, postmodern “branded cultural resources must be perceived as authentic”—if the branding efforts are seen as too commercially driven by audiences, the brand itself is seen as inauthentic (Holt 2002, 83). This is probably true in some cases: mostly for the more independent music artist and for the ones building their identity on authenticity and the “real.” One independent manager I have interviewed in my research press on the necessity of a real voice:

It’s extremely important that it’s authentic. But you don’t create it, that would make it inauthentic [laugh]. It should be natural, and true to the artist’s personal message. (Interview, May 20, 2016)

If the artist is seen as authentic, it increases the response from the audience and the type of dedication that is created and shown. For a more commercial artist, expectations are different.

The following model (Fig. 8.1) proposes a new way of looking at authenticity in this cultural field. Three key aspects seem to intersect—the level of independence (small independent versus major actor), the level of commercialization (commercial versus more artistically autonomous music artists), and the importance of “real” authenticity or acceptance of created authenticity on social media. Real authenticity refers to an artist using her own voice on social media and stressing artistic

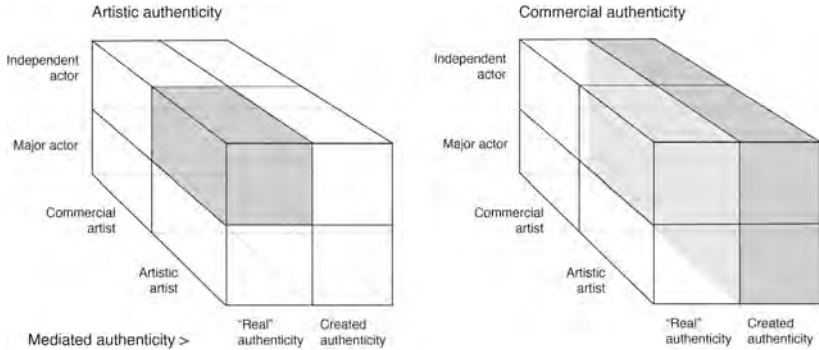


Fig. 8.1 Intersection of the level of independence, the level of commercialization, and real or created authenticity

expression. Created authenticity refers to authenticity being used as a strategic tool, controlled mostly by a manager, marketers, and music companies. On the upper left side of this model, you are most likely an independent artist, represented—if at all—by an independent manager. You are driven by artistic values and have an audience that are attracted to these. In this case, the need for being personal, real and speaking in your own voice on social media is necessary. On the other hand, if you are more commercial, signed to a major music company and have a bigger—and often younger—audience, the authenticity aspect is less important and it does not really matter who is speaking in social media. The model on the left represents artistic authenticity, and the one on the right commercial authenticity (as described by Jones et al. 2005). Commercial authenticity is more diversified, since even more professionalized independent actors tend to work more with created authenticity as part of a strategic and planned communication. Manifested commercial authenticity can be on all scale of the polarities of real–real and fake–fake polarities as described by Gilmore and Pine II (2007). But the more real–real the mediated authenticity, the more successful the branding can be.

CONCLUSIONS

Is it still relevant to discuss authenticity in the music industry, a concept that has long been discussed and categorized? Here I have argued that it is highly relevant and important to look at the changing aspects

of the music industry and how it is consolidated via communication and technology. In an increasingly branded and commercialized music environment, mapping out how authenticity is manifested and even created is important. There is a lot of research on branding and social media, yet relatively little on how authenticity is perceived and created in brand building, and more specifically, social media. There is also little academic writing on the implication of mediated authenticity in the creative fields. This is an attempt to start mapping out the concept as a ground for further research. What role does authenticity play in music brand building on the social web—how do strategists and artists think about and work with authenticity? Is the artist’s “own voice” a necessity and is it important to look at the artist as “true” in social media? There seems to be a difference in how authenticity is defined, manifested, and perceived in relation to one’s level of independence, artistic integrity and professionalism. The audience also seems to have different expectations of different music artist brands, relating to genre and image. Authenticity can be seen as something pure, genuine, and real, or constructed and even false, but is still seen as crucial in branding. This seems to be a paradox: One needs strategic brand building to establish a strong brand, but at the same time it is desirable that the brand is perceived as authentic, and this sometimes collides with the calculated strategy work. Does this strategy focus make authenticity hollow and vulnerable? And how does this affect the world of popular music and the music artists in the long run?

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PART III

Materialities of Music Consumption



Listening to the Scrap: Contested Materialities of Music in 1990s China

Zhongwei Li

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents an empirical case study of the dynamics and interactions between music's entangled dimensions of materialities in a special context: the subculture of the “cut-out generation” in 1990s China. In doing so, it nuances the theoretical debates between music as sound and music as a “thing,” and demonstrates the ways in which the concrete materialities of music can shape, and be shaped by, the media ecosystem in which they take root.

The term “cut-out” is used here as the English translation of “*dakou*” (打口), literally “to give a cut” in Chinese language. The term denotes a special type of music recording product—most commonly cassettes and CDs—named after their physical shape, characterized by a notch-cut on the edge. Ending up as leftovers in their original western market, these

Z. Li (✉)

Department of Media and Communications, London School
of Economics and Political Science, London, UK
e-mail: Z.Li44@lse.ac.uk

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records were dumped by major labels, such as Warner and EMI, and supposed to be physically destroyed by plastic recycling companies. Some nonetheless were able to survive with only partial damage or no damage at all. The story went on into the early 1990s, when cut-out cassettes, and later CDs, began to appear in a rapidly expanding gray market in mainland China, where they were repaired and resold, and eventually constituted a vibrant informal economy. In the two decades that followed, the importation, circulation, and consumption of the cut-out records¹ had developed into a massive wholesale and retail business, helped establish new discourses of western rock and alternative music, and changed the social life of an extensive group of Chinese youth born in the 1970s and early 1980s. The “cut-out generation,” as it became known, was arguably one of the most expansive and vigorous music subcultures in modern Chinese history.

Today, although as concrete materials, cut-outs have long disappeared from the streets, they keep on existing as a mark of history, as a powerful metaphor delivering a particular complex of signals and emotions for Chinese urban life and youth culture in the 1990s. Since the mid-2000s, the cut-outs have received a fair amount of academic analysis, most of which from a symbolic level of analysis (e.g., Ivanova 2009; de Kloet 2005, 2010; Kielman 2018). Few of these studies, however, have paid enough attention to what I regard as the defining feature of the cut-out subculture, that is, the unique complex of materialities of the cut-outs themselves.

As I will argue in this chapter, apart from functioning as signs, the cut-outs are more importantly *things*, which bear a multitude of entangled dimensions of materialities. Moreover, it was the movement of, and the engagement with, the cut-outs—enabled by these very materialities—that facilitated the evolution of the cut-out ecosystem and gave it a unique sense of “profanity” (Willis 1978). In the following, I first outline the theoretical debates concerning music’s status as sound and as a “thing,” before offering a brief introduction to the history and structure of the Chinese cut-out industry. The main part of the chapter demonstrates two dimensions of the cut-outs’ “thing status” as plastic scrap and as (defective) music records. Building on this, it also presents empirical cases where different materialities of the cut-outs confronted each other.

MUSIC AND MATERIALITY

Today, although music is no longer perceived as the transcendent ideal of “musical work,” like in the nineteenth-century Europe (Goehr 1992), scholars like Born (2011, 377) still insist that “there need not be a physical artefact or a visual object or symbol at the centre of the analysis of materiality, mediation and semiosis” in music studies. This stance represents a long-standing tradition of singling out the existence of “music itself” from the concrete, everyday “mediations surrounding and constructing it” (Born 1995, 216). In the modern context, this tradition has given rise to what I may term a *sound-centered* approach to music, which, drawing from the “affective turn” in the humanities and social sciences, emphasizes musical sound’s capacity to create affective coalitions and mediate multiple socialites (e.g. Finnegan 2003; Born 2011; Hesmondhalgh 2013). In this approach, the materiality of sound, which Born (1995, 216) argues to be the “bare core” for “any socio-cultural understanding of music,” is prioritized over the tangible formats in which it is embodied, as Wallach argues:

I had come to the following conclusion: music recordings are neither texts nor performances. Music recordings are music. ... This is because sound, regardless of its source, possesses a material presence that can make its indexical properties of secondary importance. This leads us to the central argument of this essay: Music recordings are cultural objects whose meaningful effects come about primarily through their ability to produce material sonic presences. (Wallach 2003, 35–37)

On the other side stands what I may term the *thing-centered* approach to music which, by contrast, finds insights from the so-called material turn in cultural studies. Drawing attention to the transformations brought by sound recording technology from late nineteenth century on, scholars like Straw argue that the materiality of music has moved “from musical form itself to the objects with which music is made or performed” (Straw 2012, 230). Thus the “material extensions” of music—its physical media of storage in particular—deserve more investigation. Elsewhere, Willis, who speaks similarly about the “use values” of concrete items, has put it in a more blunt way: “In the age of pop music, the only text is the actual record” (Willis 1978, 10).

The argument goes that as we are now living in a world “marked by the sedimentation, circulation and collection of artifacts,” music’s status as a concrete commodity form has become its essential feature, with the possibility that this material form may even overwhelm the sonic content. In this manner, the thing-centered approach stresses the “double mobility” of music in the modern age: Its sonic expression embedded in, and shaped by, its material circulation “from places of commerce to contexts of listening” (Straw 2012, 233). This point on the “thingness” of music leads to Straw’s (2000, 2001, 2012) work on various cases where music exists as what he terms an “exhausted commodity,” for example, unsold records which grow outdated before they are listened to. In his study, Straw demonstrates how the lifecycle of music, as a modern commodity form, eventually heads toward “exhaustion and commercial decay” (Straw 2001, 157). Musical sound and the associated sonic experiences, in this sense, become a kind of “cultural use value,” which may or may not be realized in the very end.

This study follows the path taken by Straw into another distinctive case of exhausted music records in the Chinese context, aiming to bring more nuance to the debate concerning music’s entangled materialities in its modern recorded format. The data used are selected from 72 in-depth interviews collected during my fieldwork in various Chinese cities from September 2017 to May 2018. In my analysis, I also rely on a number of articles and music reviews as textual data.

CUT-OUT: A BRIEF HISTORY

The term “cut-out” was first commonly used by American vinyl diggers to refer to the records they found in the so-called cut-out bins of local record stores. These records consisted mainly of deleted titles or over-pressed copies, they were marked by the labels typically with a notch-cut on the sleeve as a means to indicate their non-returnable² status. With this cut, they were no longer treated as proper stock items, with no artist royalties or sales taxes to be generated. In the 1980s, when major labels gradually ceased to dump their overstocks to the “cut-out bins,” over-produced copies were increasingly disposed as “scrap,” meaning that they were sent out to be processed by recycling companies at a nominal cost. The reality was, however, that most recycling companies in the West were yet another transfer station for the scrap records to their final destinations: developing countries such as China. What the recycling companies did do was justify the “scrap status” of these records with more violent

measures from saw-gashing to laser burning, with the objective of physically damaging, if not destroying, both the cassette tapes or CDs and the music data they stored. Afterward the records were baled and palletized, entering the global market of plastic scrap as standard units of commodity.

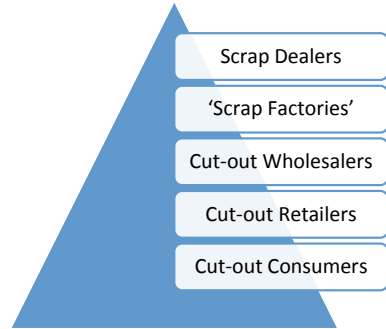
This explains why the cut-out business in China originated as a parasite of the nation's scrap recycling business, which, following Deng Xiaoping's economic reform, grew rapidly in the coastal regions in the 1980s. Thanks to the high demand of scrap as raw material inputs into industrialization and the abundant supply of cheap manual labor in the Pearl River Delta, Chinese dealers were able to outcompete foreign waste processors in the global market of plastic scrap by offering an overtly "aggressive" higher price (NAPCOR 2003). Therefore, prior to their being re-discovered as music records, the first batch of cut-outs arrived in China under the category of so-called "foreign garbage," a term used to denote all kinds of imported solid waste ranging from secondhand clothes to electronic waste.

The birth of the Chinese cut-out business, by contrast, was a more historically contingent event. While no one really knows who the first person was to ever repair a saw-gashed cassette, by the end of the 1980s, the economic value and market potential of the scrap records as playable music albums became gradually recognized and ready to be exploited in big cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou. It quickly became obvious that a ton of these "goods" would generate way more profit sold on the retail market as records than recycled as plastics. In this way, the scrap records given a second life on the Chinese grey market stepped into a similar trajectory to that of their precursors ending up in the western "cut-out bins": They became *dakou*, the Chinese cut-outs.

THE CUT-OUT PYRAMID

As late as 1991, a complete chain of cut-out business had stemmed out of the scrap recycling industry and undergone rapid growth over the next decade. Generally, the structure of the cut-out industry resembles the shape of a pyramid, divided into three main sections from the top down: the scrap recycling business, the cut-out wholesale business, and the cut-out retail business (Fig. 9.1). The first two sections were based around a town named Heping, under Chaoyang District of Shantou, Guangdong Province. Throughout the 1990s, Heping, originally a small town with a population of little over 160 thousand (Wayback Machine 2004), stood

Fig. 9.1 Structure of the cut-out industry
(Source Author)



out as the national wholesale center for the cut-outs, where dozens of so-called scrap factories had been established. Scrap factories were the name given to local waste processing plants in which the scrap records were manually broken into different component parts, a process the local people referred to as “scrap dismantling.” Eventually, the dismantled parts would be granulated into tiny uniform pieces and sold to the plastics manufacturing industry, construction industry, and pulp and paper industry. This constituted the typical value chain in the scrap recycling industry.

Cut-out wholesalers, including both the firsthand Heping dealers and lower-level ones in other cities, comprised the second level of the pyramid. As a standard procedure in 1990s Heping, cut-out wholesalers would first buy a whole batch of “goods”—often directly out of the freight containers—from the scrap factory owners, and, after a series of selection and sorting, sell what they did not want back to the scrap factories for a standard scrap price, a process termed as “scrap returning.” The “goods” then went “downwards,” sold and resold level after level, circulating generally from more cosmopolitan areas to relatively remote, less populated ones where numerous self-employed retailers made up the third section of the cut-out pyramid. During the prime of the cut-out years, the cut-outs could be found on street stalls, in proper record shops, and in huge electronics malls where they were displayed alongside computer spare parts and smuggled hi-fi equipment.

Undeniably, a crucial part of the cut-outs’ materialities rests in the musical sound they hold. At the retail end of the cut-out industry, the “music status” of the cut-outs was seen as almost self-evident by their consumers. One needs to look no further than a cut-out consumer’s own

collection to know how the cut-outs have been labeled and categorized as if they existed only as musical works. However, when I talked to those who used to work in the cut-out business, more often the cut-outs were conceived of and dealt with in ways beyond the music they contained. The following sections present two distinct accounts of the cut-outs' materialities—as plastic scrap and as music records—in which they were labeled using different terms and classified with different criteria.

CUT-OUTS AS SCRAP

For the top-level, firsthand wholesalers, who worked with, or ran their own,³ scrap factories, the cut-outs were first and foremost “*liao*” (料), that is, recyclable raw materials which generated profits in the process of “scrap dismantling.” Typically, the cut-outs were classified into several different types of *liao* each with its own market value and industrial usage. A cut-out CD with packaging, for example, contains four main types of *liao*, three of them plastics: The compact disks are recycled as “PC” (polycarbonate), the transparent jewel cases as “PE” (polyethylene), or “transparent *liao*,” the non-transparent cases as “PP” (polypropylene), and the album inserts and booklets as paper.

The standard process of “scrap dismantling” was one in which workers literally dismantled a CD packaging by hand: They took the disks out of the cases and threw them into one pile, the paper inserts into one pile, and the jewel cases into another. In the cut-out business, this process was commonly described as “cases to cases, discs to discs, papers to papers,” a local variation of the old saying “ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” Materiality here relates only to the body, but not the soul: Named directly after its major type of plastic resin as “PC,” a cut-out CD's value had little to do with the intangible music data it stored but rested only in the raw materials it was made of. Zhang Fei, a cut-out wholesaler and scrap factory owner in post-2000 Heping, gave me a down-to-earth analysis of a compact disk in his perspective:

The disc we call it PC, it is only useful under the following conditions: first, there is a film of lacquer which is useless, so you need to get rid of it with float glass; second, the outer ring of a disc is the rim, also useless and needs to be removed; third, the inner ring is made of a different kind of plastic, you need to squeeze it out and put it aside. Having done all the

above, what's left is the actual usable part of a disc, normally less than half of its size only. (Zhang Fei 2018)

Zhang Fei's judgment on which part of a disk was "useful" makes a good case in point. His account gives full credit to a cut-out CD's various concrete dimensions of "thingness"—its weight, shape, physical and chemical components—but none to the music data it stores. At this level, the materiality of a cut-out is reduced radically to that of its basic physical substance and has little to do with its particular affordance as a cassette or a CD: In the "disassembly line" of a scrap factory, two CDs of different titles bore no difference in nature as they would eventually end up as the same kinds of plastic granules. In this sense, the cut-outs' existence and circulation as *liao* stand out as a disparate layer of materiality in stark contrast to their assumed "music status."

CUT-OUTS AS RECORDS

For dealers running their business at lower levels, however, the cut-outs stood as what they were originally made as *records*, that is, as physical storage media of recorded sound. In this section, I approach this dimension by examining the criteria employed by cut-out dealers to categorize and sort their stock. This system, in short, was characterized by two mutually dependent factors: the "conditions" (品相) and "titles" (品种) of the cut-outs. The latter was easier to understand: In the cut-out period, Chinese consumers had gradually formed a system of musical tastes, treating some titles as treasures and others as dross. What was special here was the fact that the physical defects of the cut-outs also constructed a lively vocabulary which defined their classes and value. In the cassette era, there were three major types of cut-outs: "notch-cut tape," "hole-drilled tape," and "demagnetized tape." The typologies became more complicated when CDs took over. Guan Yu, a wholesaler formerly based in Heping, introduced to me three major types of cut-out CDs apart from the most common notch-cut one:

Laser-burnt discs had intact packaging, but when you opened the case all the discs were left with a big crack burned by laser, making them impossible to play... As for CDs from European companies, BMG for example, they were very likely steamrolled discs, meaning that they had been run over by a steamroller as a means of destruction. However, it was very common that

only the CDs piled on the surface were destroyed but those underneath them were not. ...In addition, there were also loads of hole-drilled discs, although the number of holes to be drilled might vary significantly. Some were drilled three holes, some had five... Some only had one hole, in that case if the hole happened to be drilled through the spindle hole of the disc, you would have a perfect ‘complete disc.’ (Guan Yu 2017)

It quickly became clear that different labels tended to employ different specifications in their notch-cutting processes. Inductively, experienced cut-out dealers could easily deduce the country of origin, sometimes even the record label, of a given cut-out according to the wound it suffered from. Demagnetized tapes, for example, were typically Warner Music releases, and steamrolled disks came almost exclusively from French labels.

The situation was further complicated by the fact that the physical damage to a cut-out might well leave its musical content unaffected. In the cassette era, apart from demagnetized tapes whose sound quality was always incurably ruined, notch-cut and hole-drilled tapes were very likely still playable once the broken ends of the tape were spliced together. If the break occurred in the leader tape part (which was most possibly the case for unplayed cassettes), no musical content would be lost. As for CDs, since a disk plays from the center outwards and most albums lasted considerably shorter than the maximum duration allowed, if the drilled-hole, notch-cut, or laser-burn did not reach the data region, the music content would remain complete. Consequently, cut-out CDs were further divided into three classes on the market which constituted a hierarchy of price: “cut-out with songs ruined,” “cut-out without songs ruined” (or “cut-out complete”), and “complete disc.”

This explains why, as I frequently learnt during the fieldwork, a highly sought after album—Pink Floyd’s *The Wall*, for example—with songs ruined might cost less than a “complete disc” of a less rare title. This hierarchy of value on the cut-out market could be traced back to the sorting and selection of stock items at the wholesale level: Typically, a batch of cut-outs would go through several rounds of selection, first filtered according to their “conditions,” after which the qualified ones would be classified again based on their “titles.” The latter task required more advanced skills: While the sorting of conditions was usually done by locally hired manual workers, the selection of titles would be handled by a more educated group of so-called “technicians” who were able to identify different artists, labels, and genres. Zhao Yun, a “technician” who

worked in Heping for five years, offered an example of this dual selection mechanism:

...that batch was about 400 ton in total, each ton contained around 9000 discs. When the whole batch arrived, technicians like me wouldn't directly go and start selecting, we would first hire about 30 female workers. We trucked the CDs to our factory, eight to ten tons each time, then the female workers started throwing the CDs into different piles. In this round, they didn't pay any attention to the titles but only to the conditions of the discs. For example, if a CD had a very deep notch, like this deep, you would throw it away immediately... After this round of selection, there would be about 10 tons of goods left – 10 out of 400 – and then it was my turn to go and select titles from these 10 tons of CDs. I would get rid of all the rubbish titles, and split the rest into different piles according to their genres: classical, jazz, pop, rock, etc. ... After this round of selection, we would let the workers go through the CDs all over again, disc by disc, they would open the cases and check the discs inside. If it was a 'complete disc,' they would pick it out because those were the most profitable stuff. (Zhao Yun 2017)

The entanglement of materialities was perhaps most evident in the case of the “complete disc” (原盘). The most costly kind on the market, the value of a “complete disc” derived not only from its rarity, but also its promise of both a presentable disk needing no repair and a complete, pleasant listening experience without disruption.⁴ In the late 1990s when the most common type of cut-outs available was “cut-outs with songs ruined,” a complete listening experience was quite a luxury. While most members of the “cut-out generation” learnt to live with it, for a smaller group of perfectionist elites, who held the intactness of a record up high, “complete disc” was the only kind of media competent enough to hold the thing called music. In my interview with Liu Bei, a famous rock radio DJ in China, I was told that he despised the cut-outs so much that he never played a single cut-out on his radio show. However, I was surprised to learn that “complete disc” was regarded by him as something of a different nature:

I always felt very unpleasant [listening to the cut-outs], imagine, you are playing a CD at home, but it's a cut-out! It's simply unbearable to put a CD with a cut into my CD player... but it's completely different when we started having “complete discs” from early 2000 on, I bought loads of

them at that time, because “complete discs” gave me the feeling of buying a secondhand record... (Liu Bei 2018)

Despite coming from exactly the same origin and sold on the same market as other types of cut-outs, the “complete disc” was able to distinguish itself for its physical completeness, which was sufficient, but not necessary for its musical completeness. The dual criteria of “conditions” and “titles” vividly demonstrate how the thingness and musicness were deeply intertwined in the materiality of the cut-outs. Here, a cut-out CD was treated as a music record on its own, rather than as indistinguishable “PC” matter. Not only its sound-mediating capacity, but also its physical appearance was fully recognized. The (in)completeness of music’s “material extensions,” in this way, constructed a distinctive layer of meaning parallel to, and at times interwoven with, the sphere of information concerning the music being stored, both attaching economic and symbolic value to the cut-outs.

CONTESTED MATERIALITIES

In the heydays of the cut-out business, the distinct conceptions of materiality held by individuals occupying different positions in the cut-out pyramid rarely confronted each other. Partly due to the block of access and information, the lack of communication between the scrap origin and the retail end of the business had always been a normality: Few scrap dealers in Heping cared about what genres of music were stored in their warehouses, and few cut-out collectors knew, even though most of them were more than eager to, where the cut-outs they treasured originally came from. Heping, the “cut-out origin,” was the mysterious wonderland where every cut-out collector dreamed of a gold rush, even though most of them did not even know what the town was exactly called. During fieldwork, three of my interviewees mentioned similar teenage stories in which they left home by themselves for a reckless hunt down south, none of them succeeded in finding the cut-out Shangri-La in their imagination in the end. Ma Chao, who reportedly spent more than 40 hours on the hard seat train from Taiyuan to Guangzhou in 1993, recalled: “We knew nothing really back then, no clue at all, we were just feeling the anxiety getting unbearable day by day, so we went.”

A few years after his first journey to Guangzhou, Ma Chao was finally able to travel to Heping with the help of his friend Huang Zhong.

Ma Chao's experience in the cut-out wonderland, however, was full of disappointment, if not disillusion:

I only stepped into one warehouse, where I totally collapsed after digging for a while in the mountains of cut-outs. That was the first time that I realized the true origin of the cut-outs: rubbish. ... in Heping, what I saw was nasty, dunghill-like wreckage of plastics piled all over among faeces of roaches and mice, a large number of cut-outs there were saw-gashed into halves or steamrolled into broken pieces: Beatles, Nirvana, Sex Pistols, you name it... All these albums I dreamed of were just lying totally wrecked on the ground, it was like a mass grave. I asked myself: if I happened to be born as a Hepingner, living day by day in these cut-out mountains, would I still love music like I do now? (Ma Chao 2018)

Other interviewees had also mentioned similar experiences of shock and confusion in their visit to the cut-out warehouses, where, for the first time, the system of categorization employed to sort their music collection at home stopped working. Arguably, what triggered their feelings of loss and distress was not the "truth" behind the cut-out fairytale, but a more immediate shock of materiality: It was the overwhelming and unpleasant material qualities of the cut-outs as scrap, characterized by its dirtiness, brokenness, and massiveness, that forced them to reflect upon their own conception of the cut-outs as music, pushing them to face the irresolvable conflict between the music ideal, deemed pure and noble, and its material extensions, which appeared out of shape and deprived of dignity. For Huang Zhong, one of the first few music lovers who had been to Heping in the early 1990s, this materiality shock had led to a new dimension of moral commitment: Buying and listening to a cut-out record became a ritual of salvation to keep the music it contained from being turned into meaningless plastic scrap. As he told me in the interview:

When I think about all the good music I have missed, I know many of them must have become plastic granules in the end, and made into plastic cups and pots in our daily life. When I think of this I feel a sense of solemnness, maybe the soul of Syd Barrett is buried in a plastic washbasin ... how much music can we save with our effort? (Huang Zhong 2018)

For the common consumers, the ritual of salvation, which transformed a cut-out from scrap to music, was performed in a more practical way: manual repairing. While some retailers offered this as a charged service,

almost all my interviewees reported that they would repair the cut-outs they bought by themselves. The methods of repairing varied, but fell generally into two kinds: For cassettes whose tape was broken, repairing meant opening the cassette shell and splicing the broken ends of the tape together with sellotape cut into suitable shape. For CDs with physical wounds that affected its being read by a laser lens, repairing meant clearing the tiny plastic bits left around the cut and rubbing the surface flat. A self-taught, self-developed set of skills, cut-out repairing had evolved into a kind of specialty in the 1990s, if not a form of art. While technical problems had arisen regarding details such as the opening or restoring of cassette shells sealed without screws, they were all eventually solved with the help of collective intelligence. As Kong Ming told me:

I always repaired the cassettes by myself ... for several times we almost ran a match for cassette repairing, because everyone thought he was the best repairer, you know? Me, I remember ... a tweezer, scissors, and sellotape, these were all I needed! Everyone has their own unique techniques ... We would exchange skills on how to do it, occasionally. For example, later, when hole-drilled CDs appeared, how should you repair a hole-drilled CD? It was not until I came to Beijing that I found out that those guys in Wudaokou were using a more advanced method to repair hole-drilled CDs: they used the drill bit! It was the perfect way because the hardness and size of the drill bit fit the hole quite well, and you only needed to turn it with your hand for a couple of times and it was all done. You wouldn't need a knife or anything like that in this way. (Kong Ming 2017)

Throughout the 1990s, cut-out repairing existed as a crucial component of the practice of music consumption and became closely intertwined with the act of listening. Although many interviewees have described the pleasure of cut-out repairing, I find the most enthusiastic narrative in a piece written by Da Feng published on *Popular Songs*, a local rock zine:

With the love of rock music, I started the work of repairing. First I used the intact shell of a used cassette to accommodate the broken heart, and then I reconnected the broken ends together. After the new shell gets sealed, a new cassette filled with my own careful and painstaking labor is born! Listening to it, the cassette plays just as perfect as a brand new one, how beautiful! It is such a joyful thing to do ... There is a well-known saying in the world of rock: do it yourself. For me, this is exactly the spirit of DIY, and it is from this point when I really understand what DIY means – a

handmade object with the music you love, what a bliss! (Da Feng 2002, 69)

Da Feng's case is but one among many where the material cut excised a symbolic impact, which consciously or unconsciously shaped the cultural consciousness of the "cut-out generation." Kong Ming spoke in a similar way about how the defective materiality of the cut-outs eventually left a trace on him:

Back then the music that was stored in the cut-outs was more important to me, I didn't think too much about the cut itself. Yet after so long time, I find that I always feel the disc actually looks better with a cut, and then I realize that this aspect is actually more meaningful to me ... now I know that this material part, the part that was cut-out, the part which make me think it looks better, was an imperceptible influence from back then. (Kong Ming 2017)

In a way, the imperceptible influence Kong Ming mentioned stood as a form of sensuous meaningfulness, which is generated out of a material object's "profane" use. I would like to conclude with Willis's (2000, 36) argument that it is through people's profane engagement with concrete things that "alternative, liminal, and uncoded" meanings can be "held sensuously and practically and therefore relatively outside and resistant to dominant linguistic meaning." I hope this chapter has drawn a picture which shows how the cut-outs, as a unique music object whose very defect stood as a necessary part of its materiality, played their cultural-making role in 1990s China.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I have presented two special dimensions of materialities of the Chinese cut-outs: one as indistinguishable substances of *liao*, which displayed a down-to-earth quality of "thingness"; the other as the storage media of music records, which was associated with an intricate vocabulary of defectiveness. These two dimensions of the cut-outs, both distinct from the conventionally defined sonic materiality of music, took shape in different phases of the cut-outs' trajectory of circulation, and eventually coexisted, in the same music object, with its "music status." I have also demonstrated two circumstances—the "shock" of materiality in the

cut-out warehouse and the unique practice of cut-out repairing—in which these three dimensions of materiality clashed and interacted with each other. The case study of the Chinese “cut-out generation,” in which a unique music object—whose very defectiveness stood as an essential part of its materiality—played a cultural-making role, contributes to the thesis of music and materiality by calling for a more thing-centered approach.

NOTES

1. In the rest of the chapter, I refer to “cut-out records,” including cut-out cassette tapes, CDs, and all other formats as the “cut-outs,” this is because *dakou* was also commonly used as a noun in Chinese.
2. In the early days, records were sold by the distributors to the retailers on a consignment basis, thus retailers had the right to return any unsold copies for a full refund.
3. After 2000, it became common for one boss to own a whole chain of cut-out business covering all three sections as a means to achieve economy of scope.
4. In a case where the damage affected the data region, a CD could lose from the last song to more than half of the whole album, and, when played, it would perform a sudden ending usually accompanied by a harsh noise.

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Obsolete Technology? The Significance of the Cassette Format in Twenty-First-Century Japan

Benjamin Düster

INTRODUCTION

Cassettes have been called an obsolete technology over the past decade (Guy 2007). Indeed, in the era of digital convenience provided through streaming platforms such as Spotify, the thought of using a low fidelity format prone to degradation and entanglement might appear close to absurd. Nevertheless, cassettes have remained in use in Japan¹ and unlike in the USA or Europe, where they continued to be used due to cars being equipped with tape decks until recent years, radio cassette units called *rajikase* are still produced by manufacturers such as Sony and used in Japanese homes (Sony 2019a). Nonetheless, the so-called revival of the cassette tape, as the press have called it, alongside vinyl records seems to counteract the worldwide triumph of streaming technology in most industrialized nations. But perhaps these dynamics are not inconsistent

B. Düster (✉)
Griffith University, Brisbane, QLD, Australia
e-mail: benjamin.duster@griffithuni.edu.au

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but correlated; especially in Japan, where the music industry remains fundamentally based on revenue through physical formats like the CD, while streaming is just starting to catch up.

The purpose of this chapter is to trace the current status of the cassette tape through unravelling and locating the conditions of its presence within the Japanese music industry and DIY music scenes. The cassette does not merely appear as a retro chic item that has been revived in recent years. It is embedded in a discourse spanning a multitude of different genres in which its usage and significance is ongoingly negotiated. Japan hosts a unique culture of music collecting, and special edition releases limited to its market are still a common sight. Japanese consumer electronics companies such as Sony, TDK, and Maxell were the largest cassette producers in the 1980s and 1990s, and the Sony MiniDisc, introduced in 1992, recorded its highest sales numbers in the Japanese market (Snapshot International 2003). During this time, Japanese home recording artists actively engaged in international tape trading using postal services. These practices of worldwide-networked DIY music production continue to this day. It is thus necessary to investigate the changing significance of cassettes in these particular settings.

The data for this investigation was collected during a four-month fieldwork period that started in October 2018. It covered the cities of Tōkyō, Nagoya, Ōsaka, Kyōto, Nara, Kōbe, and Fukuoka by incorporating participant observation at concerts and in record stores, together with conducting an overall number of 32 interviews with Japanese and international cassette labels and record shop operators, artists, and music collectors. This data underpins a long-term comparative study that uses various music scenes throughout Australia, Japan, and the USA to comprehensively investigate the significance of the cassette tape for music consumption and production in the digital age. In order to introduce the economic background of the Japanese music market, I will first take a look at production statistics compiled by the Recording Industry Association in Japan (RIAJ). Then, after taking recent literature into consideration, I will contextualize this evaluation of the cassette's current status using the case study of Cassette Store Day Japan. I argue that the narrative of the resurrection of the cassette as depicted in manifold media accounts in the last decade (see Chino 2017) is ultimately just one aspect of the multidimensional context that is affecting the presence of cassette tape in twenty-first-century Japan.

DOMESTIC PRODUCTION: CASSETTES BETWEEN THE POLES OF *ENKA* AND PUNK

Regardless of the global move toward streaming platforms as the dominant model of music distribution, the music industry in Japan remains largely structured by the consumption of physical media. The overall revenue composition in 2018 comprised 79% physical recorded music and just 21% digital sales. CDs albums and singles sold in large music retail chainstores like Tower Records or Diskunion remain the main mode of creating revenue for major and independent record labels alike (RIAJ 2019, 1). Nevertheless, statistics provided by the RIAJ indicate that CD production has been decreasing since 2009, with the number of nationally produced CDs falling from two hundred and ten million units to about one hundred thirty million in 2018 (RIAJ 2019, 4). At the same time, vinyl records have experienced a resurgence within the past five years, indicated by growing production numbers from approximately four hundred thousand units in 2014 to one million in 2018 (RIAJ 2019, 11). These tendencies are paralleled by a steadily growing music streaming sector, which in 2018 generated more than fifty percent of all digital music revenue for the first time (RIAJ 2019, 1).

How do cassette tapes fit into this picture? The number of cassettes produced in Japan has seen a continuous downward trend since as early as 1988, the year that the amount of CDs manufactured surpassed cassette production for the first time (RIAJ 2019, 11). Yet, an overall figure of four hundred and forty-one thousand cassettes was produced in Japan in 2018. These units are part of an industry that evolves around the music genre of *enka*, a style of Japanese popular music that developed into its current form after the end of World War II. With its “synthesized electronic sounds, and lush, pop-style orchestration that is very different from any pre-Meiji style of music” (Shamoon 2014, 113), the genre gathers an audience that is mainly constituted by Japan’s aging generation that have been using cassette tapes for the major part of their lives. *Enka* is not particularly popular in Japan; its recordings are mainly sold through dedicated *enka* music stores, while sections for the genre in bigger music retailers, if they exist, are relatively small compared to J-Pop. *Enka*’s musical structure is based on a single or small group of vocal performers usually accompanied by an orchestra using Western-style instruments with occasional appearances of Japanese instruments like the *koto*. Through its lyrics, *enka* seeks to cement the idea of Japan’s cultural uniqueness

while also frequently depicting conservative and nationalistic values of the “good old times” that predate World War II (see Fukuda 2018; Shamoon 2014, 113; Stevens 2008, 45). Visually, the cover artwork for *enka* releases is uniform in most cases with female *enka* singers commonly portrayed wearing traditional kimonos and male singers wearing kimonos or Western-style suits.²

As the persisting existence of flip phones unique to the Japanese market, so-called *Galapagos Keitai* (Akiike and Katsumata 2018; Kazuaki 2015) as well as the slow adaption to music streaming subscription services show, certain established technologies remain in use in Japan, while new modes of consumption take longer to gain traction compared to other countries. With this in mind, it is not surprising that cassettes have been prevailing for decades especially in the context of a conservative genre like *enka*. Interestingly, it is cassette singles that make up the biggest part of production for this particular type of music. One hundred and fifty-five new *enka* singles have been released on cassette in 2018. In comparison, only nine *enka* albums and sixteen domestic pop albums were released on cassette that year (RIAJ 2019, 13). This shows that *enka* marks a special case in the context of the Japanese music industry as a whole, as the album is still the dominant release form in Japanese popular music. When I visited a dedicated *enka* shop in Nakano, Tōkyō in October 2018, I discovered that a fair amount of releases were featured on both CD and cassette. As a new generation of listeners who are more affiliated with digital technology becomes interested in the genre, cassettes are gradually replaced by CDs. This shift, along with the factor of aging cassette production plant operators, production machines, and worldwide decreasing material supply in magnetic tape (see Holman 2018) affects the general cassette production in Japan.

One example of this is the company Yabuki Rokuon Kōbō (Yabuki Audio Recording Workshop), a small cassette producer that was operated by two men in the basement of an apartment building located in Koganei city west of Tōkyō. Running for over 26 years while maintaining a reputation for offering affordable prices, the plant supplied the *enka* industry, but also a group of DIY punk labels. Takashi Kosaka, who operates his DIY punk label Black Hole in Tōkyō, was part of this group. The plant closed in June 2018 after one of its owners became ill and passed away (“My Koganei: Yabuki Rokuon Kōbō” 2019). Kosaka remembers:

Before, I used a plant called Yabuki Rokuon Kōbō. It was two middle aged guys running that place. It was a small company, but unfortunately the manager got ill last year, and it stopped. I used them all the time, they were the cheapest and the guys who ran it were good, but the manager passed away and then I started ordering at Aimoto Kagaku.

The first company was one for enka tapes, but, as Kosaka adds,

from the eighties onwards Japanese hardcore bands made their cassettes there as well. When I went to their office before, they had those bands' stickers stuck everywhere. The two guys made the tapes in the basement of an old apartment building. So, it's sad. (Kosaka 2019)

Through production companies like this, the two spheres of *enka* and DIY music, although culturally completely different in their aspirations, have been conducting their activities in close proximity for decades. This kind of dynamic is enabled through the cassette's hybridity, meaning that the format acts as a canvas for different and even conflicting kinds of cultural adoption. On the one hand, from the conservative perspective of *enka*, the cassette embodies a primitive, sturdy technology for an aging consumer group that is skeptical about new digital formats like MP3s or in some cases even the CD. On the other hand, for a genre like punk, which ideologically understands itself as rooted in transgressive countercultural action, the cassette functions as a format that can be cheaply reproduced on a grassroots level, it exhibits an authentic low fidelity sound, and can be creatively appropriated through recycling thrift-shop cassettes, for example (see Brackett 2002). Here, the materiality of the cassette, more so than the too easily damaged CD or vinyl record, allows for packaging concepts that seek to turn DIY music releases into anti commodities.

This shows that the actual status of cassettes in Japan differs from what the statistics of the music industry association suggest. Self-released cassettes in DIY music scenes nowadays are still in most of the cases not equipped with barcodes and therefore not necessarily registered as cassettes when sold. Furthermore, as more and more Japanese DIY cassette labels are relying on imported cassettes from North America for their releases, the official production numbers of Japanese cassette manufacturers are decreasing, while cassette releases in independent music scenes that act outside of the realm of *enka* and J-Pop have been increasing within

the last decade. One example for this is the noise and experimental music scene in Japan.

CURRENT DISCOURSES ON CASSETTES IN JAPANESE DIY MUSIC SCENES

Stepping into the vast realm of Japanese noise, Thomas Bey William Bailey's book *Unofficial Release* (2012) gives an insight through a brief portrait of Akifumi Nakajima's label G.R.O.S.S., which shows how the scene has been connected to cassette tapes throughout the past decades. Nakajima's project became influential in the 1990s for its experimental cassette releases: "One of Nakajima's most rightfully acclaimed visual works, the design for the Three Temples triple cassette set, is a hexagonal piece of black, corrugated plastic onto which the cassettes held are fastened by black linen rope" (Bailey 2012, 371). These early experimental endeavors aside, Nakajima's focus shifted to mainly releasing CDs in the late 1990s until his death in 2013, which suggests that cassettes did not play an important role for his work recently.

In the years following the introduction of affordable CDR computer drives in the mid-nineties, some Japanese noise artists stopped or paused using cassette tapes for self-releasing as CDs are capable of reproducing high frequencies better than cassettes, meaning that "harsher" sounding recordings were possible. Furthermore, Japanese consumers had already embraced the CD as their main format of choice, meaning that releasing only on cassette would have limited the scope of possible new listeners (see RIAJ 2019). Nevertheless, some contemporary noise cassette labels, like Lust Vessel based in the Kantō area around Tōkyō, use a raw visual aesthetic based on photocopying techniques heavily used in eighties' cassette culture that is reminiscent of Nakajima's work with G.R.O.S.S., which shows that the cultural significance of his—and other—labels subsists into present times. Other contemporary labels, such as the US-based Blossoming Noise, specialize in re-releasing eighties' works of artists like Merzbow, in some cases also on cassette, the same medium the original pieces were released on. In one of the most recent research endeavors examining the Japanese noise scenes, David Novak's book *Japanoise* (2013) features a dedicated chapter on the role of cassettes within the international noise community. However, in his investigation Novak does not focus on the significance of cassette tapes for the structure of the Japanese scenes, but rather shows how the format used as a "calling card"

enables face-to-face interaction and dissemination of recorded material within the North American noise scenes in the late 2000s (Novak 2013, 223).

Cassettes are conceptualized here based on a historical analysis of the ties to DIY music production between Japan and North America, enabled through tape trading culture in the 1980s and 1990s, and how these practices have been replaced in the new millennium by social platforms on the Internet, such as dedicated forums for noise fans and cassette review Web sites such as *Cassette Gods* (Novak 2013, 213). Nevertheless, cassettes do occur in manifold contexts throughout the current spectrum of Japanese independent music and are embedded within a complex context of online and offline discourses. An example for this is the blog *Dirty Dirt* written by Toda Takeshi, an avid music collector, who has amassed more than one and a half thousand releases on cassette in the last decade. Takeshi co-hosts the Buy Nowers Club talk events together with Yusuke Tatewaki, who himself was an employee for five years in Kyōto's renowned Ambient and New Age record shop *Meditations*, which has been active since 2003. Takeshi has kept an analytic eye on the emerging trends surrounding cassette cultures in Japan. In a retrospective post from 2016, he addresses the problem of nostalgia that has accompanied the practice of releasing new music on cassette since the increase of the format's popularity in Japanese music scenes:

The cassette has become a common fad, in Japan as well, but I do wonder if this has died down a bit now. No, it's because not everyone is keeping up with the current ones, or introduces them. Listening to cassettes has a new value. If it looks like the cassette has a warm sound, I believe that is missing the point. But I think, to not continue with the premise that music released on cassette now is new and fun would mean that they are only nostalgic things after all, and I would immediately become tired of them. (Takeshi 2016)³

The aspect of nostalgia that inevitably surrounds the cassette, even if the format is intended as a new alternative for releasing highly abstract digitally produced electronic music by independent music labels such as the Tōkyō based *Solitude Solutions*, remains an important factor for the current discourse on music distribution practices.

This issue is also addressed in the work of *The Japan Times* music journalist and critic Ian F. Martin. Martin, who has been based in Japan since

the early 2000s, runs his own independent music label called Call and Response Records in Tōkyō. His journalistic research projects have been tracing the scope of activities in local independent music scenes throughout the country. Besides his book *Quit Your Band!* (2016), he wrote the extensive blog *Burn Your Hometown: Travels in Japanese Underground Music* (Martin 2018), based on his experience traveling through each prefecture of the country by bicycle and investigating local independent music scenes. Conversations and thoughts on the role of cassette tapes in this context are a reoccurring pattern in his entries. A conversation with the Ōsaka-based artist Suhara, who has been running his label Gyuune Cassette since the mid-nineties, shows a facet of skepticism against the revivalism of the cassette. As a long-time actor in the Japanese music underground, Suhara himself switched to CD and vinyl releases shortly after a few cassette-runs:

He seems a little cynical about the tentative revival of the cassette medium nowadays, and when I suggest to him that a number of label and record shop people I've spoken to on my travels are wary of the cassette format's potential, he agrees that while some bands might think they're cool, 'The guys who have to actually make them think they're a waste of time.' (Martin 2016)

Regardless of being a “waste of time” for label operators, the cultural significance of cassette tapes is not limited to their economic viability, as exemplified through the labels VLZ Produkt from Tōkyō and Duenn from Fukuoka. Their operators Akira Matsuoka and Tomohito Hiratsura use cassettes as audio formats in their own rights for their releases and refuse to attach digital download codes to them. In other words, these cassettes exist outside a circuit of practice that in the contemporary music landscape in many cases ties physical audio formats to digital and streamable music. For VLZ Produkt and Duenn, the cassette is not an additional hence secondary merchandise article, but still a serious audio format.

For domestic cassette production in Japan, new cassette duplication companies such as Corner Printing, run by members of the Tōkyō DIY and punk scene or Cassette Express, the company behind the Cassette Store Day Japan event, have emerged in recent years. However, these companies are not producers of cassette tapes, instead they import their stock from North American businesses like Duplication.ca based in Canada or National Audio Company in the USA. The language barrier

between English and Japanese can be identified as one reason why these middleman companies come into play for some cassette labels. In contrast, companies like *Aimoto Kagaku* (Aimoto Science) stopped importing cassettes from North America in 2018, as this practice presumably proved not to be financially viable in the end, indicating that cassettes have not merely been booming in recent years, but rather that the relation of supply and demand for them is complex.

Nevertheless, when comparing information on the Web site [discogs.com](https://www.discogs.com), it becomes evident that there has been an increase of independent music releases and dedicated cassette labels within various genres such as electronic music, noise, and punk since around the year 2010. Here, a new generation of artists and labels became active in producing and distributing music and saw the cassette as an affordable alternative both to the now common digital music releases and the increasingly expensive vinyl record. In effect, this dynamic relativizes the sinking production numbers within Japan and shows that the ties between the *enka* industry and independent music labels using the same cassette production plants have been cut within the last decade. In order to investigate how the notion of a general cassette resurgence has been established in mainstream media circulation, the following chapters will use the case study of the annual Cassette Store Day Japan event.

“IT LOOKS VERY NEW; IT LOOKS VERY CUTE”: CASSETTE STORE DAY JAPAN AND THE VISUAL TURN IN CASSETTE CONSUMPTION

My first personal experience with Cassette Store Day (CSD) took place in 2015 in Germany, when my friend Thomas Radam and I took part in a cassette market event in Berlin with our label Gravity’s Rainbow Tapes. Because we, as well as the other participating labels, only sold a handful of cassettes over the course of eight hours, the event left us more puzzled than before regarding the cassette revival that newspapers were talking about at that time. We came to the conclusion that CSD and its organizers had not built a connection to the Berlin-based noise and punk scenes we were active in. People that might have been interested in our releases did not attend the event, as the notion of celebrating the cassette format seemed redundant from the viewpoint of a scene in which cassettes had been a common sight for years (see Düster and Nowak 2018). However,

as CSD was instantiated by DIY independent labels in the UK in 2013 with the aim of “re-legitimizing” the cassette as a viable format for the releasing of music (see Long 2013), I started to wonder if the event had closer ties to local scenes in other countries.

The first CSD in Japan took place in 2016 and has been organized since then by the company Vinyl Star International (VSI), an importer and producer for vinyl records and cassettes. Under the name Cassette Express, the company has been obtaining cassettes from the Canada-based company Duplication.ca, to sell them to Japanese independent labels and artists so that they can produce their own releases. In an interview that I conducted with the CEO Takamasa Endo shortly before CSD in October 2018, he explained the reason for importing cassette tapes from North America instead of relying on production in Japan:

There are two or three cassette plants in Japan, but they have only white coloured ones, because these plants are only for the enka industry. So, they don't care about the colour or design of the cassettes, they just need the hardware, that's why they only produce the white shell colour. But in the US and Europe, there are many different plants using many different colours. In the US, they have 25 different colour options, in Canada, it is more than 50 colours. So, we are using this plant to produce cassettes. (Endo 2018)

CSD Japan functions as a marketing instrument for advertising the services of VSI. Endo made it clear that the event aims at introducing cassette tapes as a specifically new way of music consumption to a young generation of listeners that had grown up using MP3s and streaming. As a physical format, the cassette is first and foremost marketed because of its visual appeal, and in this sense because of the available color options that can be utilized for various packaging concepts. As Endo says,

[w]e copied Record Store Day. Record Store Day is very famous in the world, even in Japan. But the cassette is still... the younger generation doesn't know what a cassette is. (sic) They know records though. So, we try to promote the cassette using the Cassette Store Day in Japan. For the artist, the cassette is... the hardware including the software. It looks very new, it looks very cute, and they can sell the cassettes at live venues or festival as a kind of – not music data but as a kind of novelty thing. You can see there are many different colour options for cassettes, so if for example a girl's band consists of four people, they can use different colours

for the four members or motifs as well. Also, the cost is not very expensive compared with pressing records. Cassettes are still cheaper than records. So, for the label side it's very easy to release cassettes. (Endo 2018)

Endo's approach illustrates the visual turn that cassettes have been subject to within the last decade. When comparing DIY cassette releases from the eighties with their current counterparts, the latter appears to be more sterile and stylish in a fashionable sense; monochrome gray Maxell tapes decorated with black and white stickers are not common anymore. However, tapes now come in various different colors and J-card inserts are often designed using professional software such as Adobe Illustrator. As cassette players are increasingly hard to find, it is now common to attach a download code on a piece of paper to cassette releases. Cassettes themselves then become physical artifacts of concerts, something affordable compared to vinyl record releases for fans to express their support of an artist (see Nowak 2014a, 153).

In order to establish a point of reference for young people to identify themselves with the cassette format, VSI utilizes so-called ambassadors. The first one in 2017 was the virtual anime-character mascot of the Vocaloid software Hatsune Miku, a voice-synthesizing program which is used in current music production (see Yamada 2017). Miku, portrayed as a scrawny teenage girl with long blue hair, has developed a cult status in anime fan circles with adaptations in fanfiction and art. In 2018, VSI chose the all-female independent rock band Scandal. Interestingly, the band had no experience releasing cassettes prior to the event and then just released a Walkman-style portable cassette player with an in-built USB port and a Scandal logo printed on the lid. The players themselves come from a factory in China that produces them under various nondescript brand names like Retround, Reshow, or Ikedon and they can be found labeled as "cassette converters" intended for digitizing cassettes on Web sites such as Amazon or Ebay. As cassette converters, these players are marketed with aging music consumers in mind, who want to listen to old cassettes on their digital devices. Mostly cheap plastic parts are used for the production of these players, resulting in a low build quality. Instead of the targeted middle-aged consumer group of the cassette converter, CSD Japan used the USB compatibility of their Scandal player as a trendy and timely opportunity for young consumers to bridge the gap between analogue and digital technologies. Nevertheless, cassette converters alongside expensive refurbished old cassette decks and rare thrift-shop finds

remain the only options for cassette consumers nowadays to get hold of hardware.

It is noteworthy to emphasize at this point that VSI chose all-female ambassadors in 2017 and 2018. Also taking up on Endo's mentioning of different colored cassettes for members in a girl band leads to the conclusion that CSD Japan aims at a predominantly female consumer group with their marketing scheme. Cassettes promoted as small multi-color collectable toys tie into the same concept of *kawaii* (cute) that has been exploited by the Japanese fashion and merchandise industry for decades. Female cuteness is an aesthetic and consequentially a social norm in Japan; girls and women identify as cute by displaying their consumption of cute looking goods (see Marcus et al. 2017, 56). Comparing this with the way vinyl records have been advertised in recent years, audio formats appear as gender-segregated: While cassettes through their small size and multi-colored designs are marketed as cute collectable toys for girls and women, vinyl records remain stylized as the high quality and therefore serious music format meant for the male music aficionado (see Sony 2019b).

It remains to be understood whether CSD Japan manages to establish a connection to local and cassette-affiliated independent music scenes. The first event started off in this manner, offering local artists and labels the opportunity to have their releases displayed in larger chain music retail shops such as HMV and Diskunion during the event. Nonetheless, with the introduction of their ambassadors and the aim of introducing cassettes into the popular music mainstream, the event drove members of the local DIY music scenes away. I spoke to Sean McGee and Shingo Nakagawa in Tōkyō, who both took part in the first two CSD events releasing cassettes with their band Tropical Death and Sean's solo project Sharkk. Nakagawa recalled:

The second cassette store day, I thought that was kinda interesting, like a lot of bands were like, oh cool, maybe it will be a thing next. You know, maybe cool bands will release. Last year we didn't do it, because I already thought like there is no point in doing that. I mean, whatever you saw on the website is like shit. It was very corporate because it was to sell the label that was functioning for Cassette Store Day and they were not doing a good job of it. They were not doing a good job curating bands and they were not doing a good job finding new artists that... like the best thing about the first release was we were able to get in Tower Records and HMV without a distributor. I think that was the coolest thing. (Nakagawa 2019)

A majority of record shop and cassette label operators, artists, and fans I spoke to throughout Japan did not see a relation between CSD and their scene or their projects, like Toda Takeshi of the Buy Nowers Club:

In Japan, normal people that usually have nothing to do with cassettes all of a sudden take part. It's nothing for people that buy cassettes on a day-to-day basis, I mean, only things get released there that don't have a relation to us. It's idols; old Japanese pop and nowadays pop music that they put out. People that release cassettes listen to them and buy them but with this it's only people that usually don't listen and buy them so, what's the point? (Takeshi 2018)

Regardless of the opposition from local music scenes, CSD took place again in October 2019 for the fourth time. Taking its lack of connection to independent music into consideration, the event does not appear as a platform for artists and independent labels but as a marketing scheme for establishing the cassette tape in mainstream consumerism. By taking up the cassette tape as an artifact embodying the cultural connotation of “cool” underground music in Japan, CSD tries to turn this quality into economic profit by turning the cassette into a visually fetishized collectable merchandise item, whose affordance as an audio format is merely secondary if important at all (see Nowak 2014b). In the context of DIY music scenes the cassette can however remain as an audio format in its own right, especially as some independent labels like Duenn from Fukuoka and VLZ Produkt in Tōkyō refused to attach download codes to their releases. These aspects clarify that the notion of increasing cassette releases in recent years merely being a nostalgic temporarily fad does not prevail in contemporary Japan. When coming across cassettes in whatever form in a contemporary time frame, it has to be taken into account that there is more to them than just being obsolete pieces of technology hailing from a lost time in music history.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has provided an introduction and overview of the cassette tape's status in contemporary Japan. Through analyzing the correlation of decreasing production numbers of Japanese cassette companies that serve the *enka* industry, I have sought to point out that the increase of cassettes in independent music scenes, which is often interpreted as national

cassette revival in mainstream media, is actually based on the supply of production companies located in North America. The manufacturing of cassettes in Japan in the past linked culturally discordant genres like *enka* and punk, as their labels and artists in some cases shared the same cassette production facilities. As the example of the company Yabuki Rokuon Kōbō shows, this connection is increasingly vanishing, since either *enka*-cassette manufacturers are shutting down, or independent cassette labels are turning to importing companies such as VSI's Cassette Express or North American companies such as Duplication.ca for their color options and convenient production process that includes the printing of cover artwork and assemblage. My point is that the cassette in its current state has to be understood as a cultural and economic hybrid, which, despite the common claim of its mainstream revival, still subsists within a multitude of opposing niches. Taking the example of CSD Japan, the cassette is appropriated as a “cool” artifact stemming from the Japanese independent music scenes, marketed as a cute and colorful collectable aimed at a mainly female consumer group. Yet review blogs such as Toda Takeshi's *Dirty Dirt* or the Buy Nowers Club event continue to treat the cassette as a legitimate audio format for releasing electronic and experimental music. Understanding how the cassette functions within the contemporary Japanese music industry means having to take each of these specific contexts into consideration. Newspaper reports that use the increase in sales and CSD as the prime example of why cassettes are “resurrected from the dead” are overly simplified and shows merely a partial aspect of the full spectrum of how cassettes are situated. Nevertheless, besides their nostalgic traits, cassettes are prevailing and their increasing contextualization within online culture through music platforms such as Bandcamp shows that they do not exist in conflict with digital technologies but in correlation with them.

NOTES

1. All Japanese words and names follow the modified Hepburn Romanization system. Long vowels are generally indicated by a macron such as ‘ō’ in ‘Tōkyō’ and are pronounced about twice as long as a standard vowel in English. Names are written following the Western convention of the given name first and then the surname.

2. A noteworthy exemption is the American and Japanese *enka* singer Jerome Charles White Jr. commonly known by his stage name Jero, who became famous for performing *enka* while wearing hip-hop-style clothing.
3. All interview extracts where the interviews had not been conducted in English were translated by the author from Japanese into English.

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PART IV

Scenes and the Uses and Discourses of Social
Media



“Do You Have a Moment to Talk About Vaporwave?” Technology, Memory, and Critique in the Writing on an Online Music Scene

Andrew Whelan

INTRODUCTION

Vaporwave is a genre of sample-based music, which first surfaced online in the early 2010s. It is a kind of distributed creative experiment. Producers source and sample “new” (i.e., not yet exhaustively sampled) audio and visual material that fits the aesthetic, and thereby advances that aesthetic. Most releases are pseudonymous and available for free or at low cost. Vektroid (under the pseudonym Macintosh Plus), James Ferraro, and Oneohtrix Point Never (as Chuck Person) are considered founding producers of this genre.

A. Whelan (✉)

School of Humanities and Social Inquiry, University of Wollongong,
Wollongong, NSW, Australia
e-mail: awhelan@uow.edu.au

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The names of these other noted artists give a sense of the tropes of vaporwave: Death's Dynamic Shroud.wmv, ECO VIRTUAL, Infinity Frequencies, INTERNET CLUB, Luxury Elite, MACROSS 82-99, Nyetscape, Saint Pepsi, Telepathic Data Storage, Waterfront Dining, and Windows 98 \mathcal{O} . Visually, vaporwave is "retro futuristic." Album covers routinely feature 1980s style or early digital graphic design and fonts, pastel colors, VHS static and digital glitch, urban nightscapes, 1970s and 1980s sports cars, corporate workspaces, and (usually empty) malls. While the genre is wide-ranging and diverse, vaporwave can be characterized by a disconcerting and deadpan play with commercial music from the past: especially the 1980s and 1990s. Samples, from mainstream hits of that time, but also from Muzak, easy listening, "infomercial" soundtracks and suchlike, are routinely looped, slowed down, and subjected to reverb and other "spacey" effects.

Vaporwave is remarkable as an essentially virtual scene, which has also achieved an unusual degree of longevity. While North America is well-represented, the scene has no geographical center. Vaporwave was popularized and consolidated on discussion forums such as Reddit, and received significant uptake and engagement among music critics, journalists, and academics. As with other genres, investigating vaporwave entails reading (and for scene participants, writing and talking) about it. The writing about vaporwave carries the genre: accounting for its relevance, expanding its audience, enhancing its appeal, and ascribing a specific political value to that appeal.

This chapter directs attention to this writing as a kind of discourse. The intention is to show how this political value is ascribed and provide sufficient context for its evaluation. Writing about music is sociologically consequential; it invariably conjures political and social realities to justify the evaluations of music it makes (Whelan 2014; Nowak and Whelan 2016). In contemporary online ecologies, writing about music has consequences for music scenes which warrant attention. Analyzing this writing thus also serves to highlight the significance of its role. Drawing on approaches in discourse analysis (Gee and Handford 2012; Johnstone 2018) and membership categorization analysis (Hester and Eglin 1997; Jayyusi 2014), I describe the interpretive logic which culminates in descriptions of vaporwave as a kind of political critique, and show how critical status is ascribed to vaporwave in a self-limiting way.

Using examples from 2011 to 2018, I discuss three themes which feature consistently across descriptions of vaporwave. The first one is the role of technology in vaporwave, at a representational level (the level addressed in the writing about the genre), and, in contrast, at the mundane level (of the production, distribution, consumption, and discussion of the genre). The second is the cultural politics the genre is said to express around the relationships between technology and memory. The third theme is the use of cultural theory in this writing as a warrant for the formulation of “critique” as such. The selection and ordering of this material here reflect the thematic consistency encountered through virtual ethnographic immersion in the scene (Bennett and Guerra 2018; Xiao 2018).

DESCRIBING VAPORWAVE

As Jason Toynbee has observed, efforts to define the parameters of genres can be unsatisfying:

increasing the amount of detail in order to specify [the genre] ... only makes the definition more difficult. For as the number of required traits increases so the number of texts which conform to the resulting composite of genre attributes will decline. (Toynbee 2000, 105)

At the risk of generalizing a rich and diverse body of work, the compulsive “hook” for vaporwave arises originally from the aforementioned relation between specific audio manipulation techniques (looping, slowing or pitch-shifting down, and reverb), and the sorts of audio samples these techniques are applied to (easy listening, Muzak, and so on). It is this combination that gives rise to the application of the term “critical” in writing about vaporwave. Vaporwave is said to be an ambivalent, satirical critique of the corporate cultures of capitalism. Thus: “Vaporwave is a micro-genre of electronic music that draws on the corporate sonic ephemera of the 80s and 90s – such as lift muzak, ad soundtracks, ‘hold’ music and cocktail jazz – to satirise the emptiness of a hyper-capitalist society” (Ward 2014). In the academic journal *Popular Music*, we learn that

through references to the worlds of shopping, business and late 20th-century digital technology, recalling the early days of personal computers and Internet connectivity ... each vaporwave release, normally little more than a zip file or a free download from Bandcamp or Soundcloud, is presented as if it were an upbeat and almost propagandistic aid to technocapitalist living. (Harper 2017, 93)

The aesthetics of the genre—the sound and the associated visual tropes—appear “tethered” semiotically and rendered critical in the description. In *Babbling Corpse*, the only book-length treatment of the genre to date, we learn that

Vaporwave engages in an act of reframing, not necessarily to parody the ceaseless soft rock of shopping malls or the mood music of waiting rooms ... but instead to remind listeners of its omnipresence and, therefore, to wake us up to the corporatist society in which we are trapped. Vaporwave takes the fit, smiling, white-teethed mask off Muzak and replaces it with a more sinister face – the dead stare of unfettered capitalism. (Tanner 2016, 41)

There are various forms of evaluation in these examples, mobilizing hierarchies of aesthetic judgment—which are at the same time political—and asserting social forms vaporwave is to be understood as “pointing at.” A tacit understanding of how the world is now—more precisely, what is “wrong” with it—is assumed to be shared, and exhibited by, gestures to the emptiness of hyper-capitalist society, technocapitalist living, corporatist society, and so on.

These examples provide an introduction to how vaporwave is written about. These descriptions bundle themes in the genre, which are best drawn out for proper discussion. Vaporwave is critical of late capitalism (or however one would wish to describe the present conjuncture). It conducts this critique by raising questions about the relations between consumer culture, as instantiated in (older) consumer technology and soundtracks to consumption, and cultural memory (or nostalgia). Vaporwave is thus said to point at how the dreams we were sold about a technologically liberated utopia did not come to pass, and that, by implication, some of what is wrong now requires anatomizing our collective incapacity to imagine (let alone realize) alternative futures.

TECHNOLOGY AND MEMORY

Consumer technology and memory are enmeshed in this line of thinking. Let us first attend to the role played by consumer technology. In this context, attention is routinely drawn to the word “vaporwave” itself, a portmanteau adding the “-wave” suffix, beloved of popular music criticism, to “vaporware.” The latter term refers to software products advertised to stimulate desire and brand recognition, but never actually released.

Discussing the famous vaporwave album *Chuck Person’s Eccojams Vol. I*, critic Simon Reynolds suggests that “the conceptual framework ... relates to cultural memory and the buried utopianism within capitalist commodities, especially those related to consumer technology in the computing and audio/video entertainment area” (2011, 81). Vaporwave exhibits a preoccupation with obsolete media technologies from a specific period of time:

VHS, cassette tapes, outdated video game consoles like the Sony PlayStation, Nintendo Game Boy, and of course, the Windows 95 operating system ... harken the listener back to a time immediately preceding the completion of the entrance into the postmodern moment in which the promises of technological sublimity and global connectivity in a late capitalist utopia were still vaguely believable. (Koc 2017, 57)

We can attend now to the model of critique being attributed to vaporwave here. Most immediately, critique is described as a representational practice first and foremost. Some older technologies are denaturalized and rendered means to “make strange.” Other technologies—the ones in use in the scene—become invisible and are not attended to. They become media in the way air is a medium: essential, but unnoticed (until it degrades). There is rarely much empirical attention to what technologies are used to produce, distribute, consume, or discuss vaporwave, beyond the cursory point that it is “internet music” (or even “post-internet music”), and that it developed and circulates on particular online platforms (Turntable.fm, Bandcamp, and so on). Several implications follow from this.

Insofar as the writing is a feature of the genre, what it describes is a “nonreflexive” critique. The significance of obsolete media technology is highlighted, but there is silence on the technology by which vaporwave is produced, distributed, and consumed—who owns that technology, how revenue flows around it, or what kinds of rules govern its use, for example. The political economy underlying vaporwave as a set of actual material

sociotechnical practices, the platform politics of the genre, are passed over without comment.

Analogously, the communicative and discursive forms around the genre—such as the style of writing about the genre—are also rendered peripheral. In terms of platform affordance, interactional style, and so on, these forms may or may not be conducive to participation from particular embodied social positions. Who is involved—their gender, location, language, ethnicity, or social class for example—and who is not, does not receive attention.

The result is something of a missed opportunity. The question about whether vaporwave—like, say, punk, or rave—involves experiments with alternative forms of social organization is not broached. It is therefore difficult to evaluate to what extent the politics of vaporwave are merely symbolic. Whether alternative forms of organization are possible is also not pursued. The critique, so to speak, is never shown to have hands. More concretely, the actual development of the scene as an online accomplishment is unexplored. The empirical history of the genre and its coalescing is rendered in formulaic terms of “influences,” alongside an origin narrative involving a few seminal albums. What could be learnt from how the vaporwave scene uses and relates to the Internet thus remains in this writing an unanswered question.

Consider an example of this. Any active listener, in researching vaporwave, is likely to stumble on the two large archives of freely available material hosted on MEGA: the *Vaporwave Essentials Guide—Ultra Edition*, and *Nu Edition*. The *Ultra Edition* (12.2 GB in size, containing 166 albums and 2384 files) covers the period 2010–2014. The *Nu Edition* (8.88 GBs, 100 albums, 1656 files) covers 2014–2016. These massive, freely available archives are evidence of a kind of impulse to canon. Their existence highlights the relative scarcity of gestational time for contemporary scenes: how they can be barred from disappearing into obscurity. Put differently, they demonstrate the speed with which such scenes, now networked, consolidate.

Such archives play a role in shaping the understanding of the genre for listeners, for people who write (in whatever way) about the music, and for incoming music producers. They also play a social role in bringing scene members together, and evidencing the scene to others, and in this sense raise important sociological questions about contemporary genre development. What are the exclusion criteria by which releases are *not* on these lists? Why are the releases organized within these archives by

the particular subgenres they are organized by, how did they come to be classified in this way, and how are the parameters of those subgenres defined and expressed? Most pertinently to a conversation about the role of technology in vaporwave, how were these guides organized logistically?

The history of these archives is in part retrievable. The guides were put together by members of the r/Vaporwave “subreddit,” with input solicited and received from members of several other forums. The formalities of selection were conducted in Google Docs spreadsheets. Vaporwave canon formation thus looks much like distributed workplace practice and involves the hierarchical forms of labor and technologies one encounters in such practice—in the kinds of corporate cultures vaporwave would presumably be critical of. Yet, just as the writing on vaporwave as critique does not attend to this, so the “info + thx.txt” document within the *Ultra Edition* reiterates the central argument of that writing:

Although there’s much diversity and ambiguity in its attitude and message, vaporwave often serves as both a critique and parody of consumerist society, ’80s yuppie culture, and New Age music, while sonically and aesthetically showcasing a curious fascination with their nostalgic artifacts. (Stockmusic 2014)

The writing about vaporwave thus laminates or “rolls with” the genre in such a way as to be coextensive with it. The interpretive discourse which frames the genre is reproduced with a curious blind spot as to how that very reproduction requires infrastructures, technologies, and practices of just the sort the critique is said to be addressing. Perhaps more significantly, the critique is imputed exclusively to representational practice or aesthetics in the writing about the genre. Even in academic writing on the genre, the extent to which the scene as a kind of network assemblage of persons, technologies, semiotic artifacts, and techniques can be understood as a critical practice is seldom considered (Glitsos 2018; Killeen 2018; McLeod 2018). The model of critique is bracketed.

The fetishistic fixation on obsolete consumer technology tends to obscure current media practices within the scene, situating the transformative potential of media technology in the past, and depoliticizing the contemporary media environment. This returns us to the relations between technology and memory. As the examples above indicate, the writing about vaporwave stresses the evocation of nostalgia and memory in the genre. Consider the following review posted to Bandcamp:

THE album to give you flashbacks to the 80's and 90's! ... I imagine a Coca Cola commercial, vintage resolution video snippets following the beat. Sunsets, teens breakdancing in the street, business colleagues giving high five, funky dawgs driving Cadillacs, kids playing basketball, the sun is shining, everyone's got a coke, living the good life. It's the synth, the vocal, and definitely the beat! This album is art! ✨♥️😊 (Shink 2013)

The “flashback” is associated here with an imagining of an advertisement for Coca-Cola. References to memory in writing about vaporwave are often spectral or doubled in this way: a strange nostalgia for a dream of happy times, that was actually just an ad. But here there is not even a real ad: Vaporwave is instead “triggering” an imagining of what such an ad might well have been.

Vaporwave thus deals in displaced or fractured memories: hazy memories of things that did not actually happen, or at least did not happen to us. There is another facet to this, alongside the observation that our cultural memory of what happiness or utopia were or might have been is derived from advertising. This is the possibility that somehow our recollection is perturbed. What we have (sort of) forgotten and what we (sort of) remember are colored by the numbing horror of recent history: the constant and radical reorganization of the economy and the state under late neoliberalism, the chronic threat and fatigue of violence and increasing social instability, the ramifications of ecological devastation. We are haunted in the present by a past we are unable to deal with. Here vaporwave's play with memory and temporality is such as to make it a “soundtrack for the emptiness of an innocence destroyed, one that cannot be ‘made sense of’ ... a moment in the articulation of repression and the trauma associated with loss” (Glitsos 2018, 108).

Thus one uncanny thing about this memory of what did not happen is the possibility that it is a cover or proxy for a memory of something unresolved and unspeakable. Vaporwave signals our arrival at an impasse. From here it is palpable: A better future has become unimaginable.

It's the soundtrack to a hypnagogic reverie of a future that never happened. And at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, maybe with the aid of Sprite and codeine, an album like *Floral Shoppe* by Macintosh Plus might sound like it's broadcasting the coordinates to the exact location where 20th-century utopian aspirations collapse into a burned-out nostalgia. (Beauchamp 2017)

The future is no longer possible. Just the same, vaporwave, perhaps with a sardonic wink, shows that we know and mourn this fact, and (perhaps naïvely) hold on to hope in our grief for something better. The implication is that vaporwave sounds the way it does because it is a cultural expression of trauma, ennui, and exhaustion, an indictment of the broader cultural and political terrain. It dramatizes our fixation on the better days of the past, which in turn highlights the impossibility of the future.

The writing on vaporwave suggests that it exposes how we are haunted: by obsolete media forms; by desires generated by consumer culture, advertising, and the technological sublime; and by utopian futures which we now know will never be realized. We are trapped in a permanent present. As the Sex Pistols put it, in 1977: "No future."

Perhaps something is indeed repressed or forgotten here. The writing on vaporwave follows a particular intellectual lineage. Consequently, it does not engage thoroughly with earlier writing about music, particularly, about sample-based genres predating vaporwave. As the writing about vaporwave is not connected effectively with its own history, it unwittingly reproduces stances readily identifiable from this history. For example, in 1995, the experiments in temporality of hip-hop group Public Enemy were described as follows:

Flavor Flav's gargantuan timepieces, like Dali's wilted watches, mark a surreal incursion, a time radically at odds with the modernist world ... Hip-hop's time is post-apocalyptic, and its landscape is the Society of the Spectacle, in which the ultimate commodity form is that of the spectacularized image. Rather than, as most modernist texts would do, reject such a society and yearn for a return to a world made whole by art, hip-hop aims for a world made hole, aporic, fracturing the fragmented, graffiti on the graffiti. (Potter 1995, 7)

Sample-based music has long been useful for evaluations which double as explanations of the legacy of poststructuralist thought, in which the death of the author is announced, teleological "grand narratives" are on the decline, and so on. Thirty-two years ago, contemporary music was also indicating that modernist time had stopped:

pop ideology is increasingly dominated by a sense that the future has now arrived, for good. Pop's sounds and visions appear to be caught in a stasis that is both aesthetic and political ... notions of pop's historical movement as "progress" have withered and died. (Goodwin 1998, 34)

A case can thus be made that the writing on vaporwave shows how we are haunted by “static” critical discourses on contemporary music, which continue to reiterate the same observations despite the actual dynamism of musical development over time. This is also legible as a missed opportunity.

Despite its emphasis on the role of technology, history, and memory in the genre, the writing about vaporwave is also silent on the history of the audio manipulation techniques characterizing the genre. If there is any reference to musical history, it is usually along the following lines:

At its most basic – which is also to say at its most radical – vaporwave consists of nothing more than an act of reframing, normally of some chintzy piece of forgotten muzak dredged up from the depths of the web. Sometimes, admittedly, this is accompanied by a bit of artful chopping and screwing, but such techniques are also democratic in the sense that they are available to anyone with Ableton and a computer. (Parker and Croggon 2014)

“Chopping and screwing” is a reference to a style of DJing first emerging on the South Side of Houston, Texas, in the 1990s. In this style, the same (45 rpm) record is played on two turntables, at 33 rpm (“screwed”), with a beat delay between them, such that adroit use of crossfade gives the appearance of repetition (“chopped”). Houston chopped and screwed is occasionally given a nod like this, but there is little interest in the specificities of the technique or what the precise means of accomplishing it are. There is also little interest in tracing any other antecedents, or working out how particular techniques have moved across communities and scenes over time. Vaporwave is thus musically decontextualized.

Such a history would certainly flesh out an engagement with the actual sound of vaporwave, the technical means by which it generates its effects, and how those effects have come to be culturally intelligible and compelling. In August of 2010, the same month that *Chuck Person’s Eccojams Vol. 1* was released, there was a brief YouTube craze for “800% slower,” where pop hits from Justin Bieber, Lady Gaga, and the like were time-stretched 800%, with engaging ambient consequences. In the mid-2000s, artists like DJ Lovechoad and Aids-3D were releasing slowed and time-stretched versions of entire songs, usually chart and commercial dance music. It is difficult to reflect on sampling, repetition, and cultural memory without getting from disco and hip-hop to the electronic dance music

scenes from the 1980s on, and their commitments to breakbeat samples and specific bass drum sounds (e.g., those of the Roland TR-808 drum machine). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, disco DJs in Lazise, Manerbio, and other towns in northern Italy played in a style known as “cosmic disco,” layering multiple tracks simultaneously from diverse genres, and routinely playing 45 records at 33. This is to say nothing of Jean-Michel Jarre’s *Music for Supermarkets* (1983), Brian Eno’s *Music for Airports* (1978), the preoccupations with temporal dilation and nostalgia in British 1960s psychedelic rock, or Erik Satie’s “furniture music,” composed in 1917.

These histories—some of which, like the Houston scene, involve massively influential cultural innovation from otherwise marginalized communities—are ordinarily absent from the writing on vaporwave. This evacuation of history paradoxically makes vaporwave seem musically newer and more radical than it actually is. Just as the reader is not given much anthropological insight into how the online scene works, she is also not provided with any sense of the long musical traditions in which vaporwave is situated. Instead, vaporwave is framed as a critique, or rather used as a platform to mount a critique.

CRITIQUE

This critique is informed by references to cultural theory, deployed in the writing on vaporwave in a kind of “elite” way, as though “outside of” or “above” the phenomena they comment on. These references are presented as though in isolation from and not of the cultural contexts in which they are circulating: the same contexts as the actual music.

The depth and complexity of a muddled and incompatible group of authors are condensed (in a rather postmodern way) into a shorthand surface network, dubbed “accelerationism.” The basic tenet of accelerationism is that the way past capitalism is through it: “the only radical political response to capitalism is not to protest, disrupt, or critique, nor to await its demise at the hands of its own contradictions, but to accelerate its uprooting, alienating, decoding, abstractive tendencies” (Mackay and Avanesian 2014, 4). The theory marshaled under the sign of accelerationism is, oddly enough, also mostly from the 1980s and 1990s. Like the samples vaporwave is produced from, there is a kind of glossy blur around this theory. It is worth presenting an example of this in full flight:

even though the Barthesian “authorial intent” has not explicitly manifested this kind of analysis (see: Foucault), the listener is in any case compelled to force-apply discourses of hyperrealism and post-Marxist accelerationism as an implicit function of our current social reality at-this-particular-moment-in-the-historical-stage-of-material-development (Baudrillard/Deleuze has the most significant work on this) ... In effect, it is the virtual-democratisation (or not) of the “production” of art (in the deluge [overload? – Adorno] of information in the post-digital/“post-internet” age, art interpretation and art criticism being the most important art-production-in-itself (and this not necessarily being a very positive thing in itself /the death of democracy?) since the mass proliferation of the means of communication/publication ... the blurring of dichotomistic ways of thought between “music” and “muzak” is more and more apparent in objective material society than ever and so on realising this one performs the drastic critical act of ontologically departing from “music-as-muzak” towards “muzak-as-music.” This is the so-called speculative realism of nihilistic destruction, we can no longer “sit” still in the fecund state of hyperstition, modernism has crashed to a halt and we need a hero to rescue us. Those are just the kind of themes I’ve been picking up from this music. I have also been revisiting the work of Nick Land and one gets the impression that he has long anticipated an art movement such as this in his framework. (sevenpointfour 2012)

It is not clear whether vaporwave is being discussed as though it is actually going to hasten the collapse of capitalism, and if so, how it is going to do that. Perhaps descriptions of accelerationism are also best understood as ambivalent and satirical sampling strategies. It seems implausible that the end of capitalism (whatever that is) will be accelerated by oblique home-made sample music on the Internet. This writing on vaporwave instantiates a mode of criticism which, in its haste to assume a “radical” intellectual posture, departs altogether from the cultural product under consideration. References to the work of “the father of accelerationism,” Nick Land, a reactionary admired by the alt-right (Goldhill 2017; SDDL50 2017; Beckett 2017), are in this context indicative. Land’s misanthropic accelerationism is an abnegation and apology for the real nihilism of the resurgent political right.

Accelerationism functions in the writing on vaporwave as an interpretive narrative. The arguments presented in this writing are seductive ones; this is part of what warrants them the attention they receive in this chapter. One side effect of the writing, in terms of how it advances itself, is that it obscures the scene. Even if we restrict ourselves to “a conversation

about the music,” vaporwave is more varied, poignant, and absurd than these interpretations give it credence for. The often quite subtle effects, forms, and techniques developed in the scene get lost in the mix. The writing is not very helpful empirically as an account of vaporwave, and as a kind of political advocacy it is self-restrictive (for the reasons outlined above regarding the paucity of detail about the social organization of the scene). But neither of these are really what the writing sets out to accomplish.

It is better understood as a contemporary variant of a form of boundary policing or authenticity talk around the genre: a border discourse which formulates vaporwave as unitary and comprehensible in an alluring—if polarizing—way. Vaporwave, encountered online as a kind of multimodal assemblage, is enveloped within this critical accounting. As discursive framing, this writing is a key element in the intelligibility and “legibility” of the musical form as a mode of moral and social expression and imagination.

CONCLUSION

The writing about vaporwave is not just a more or less adequate, *ex post facto* description or interpretation of it. It is an integral, albeit distinct and contrapuntal feature of the genre. Given how music circulates (and especially “internet music” like vaporwave), writing about it “rolls with” it. Investigating any genre involves reading about it online, in an effort to learn about it and find more of it. This writing is a porous paratextual bubble around the vaporwave scene (analogous to that around other contemporary music genres). It often expresses positions different from those of the musicians and listeners involved, and it is in some respects discursively “louder” than the music. Such writing is “of” the genre, and yet aims to be able to “speak of” it from a kind of meta position.

One implication here is that online scenes must be understood holistically: They involve practices of making, moving, and listening to music, and this music is traceable as digital artifacts (.mp3 files, .zip folders, .jpg album covers and so on). They also involve forms of discursive labor: collaborative processes of sense-making. These processes render frameworks in which the genre and its place and role in the world can be understood, and which can serve as the grounds of social contestation (both in terms of developing interpretive schemes and in terms of practices of group formation and cohesion).

This latter form of work also produces and is manifested in artifacts, in the form of texts or writing. The overarching argument in this writing has been subjected to a critical analysis here, on the grounds that it obfuscates rather than bolsters some of the most consequential features of the vaporwave scene (including its diversity and range), and at any rate does not effectively support the political sensibility the writing ostensibly aims to cultivate. This can be attributed largely to the overdetermined and politically problematic theoretical resources brought to bear on the “meaning” of the music in this writing. The routine references to “high” cultural theory in writing about vaporwave are thereby indicative of a more “flat” cultural terrain, warranting closer empirical attention to how online spaces aggregate and circulate interpretive dynamics such as these.

All of this highlights the essential role of interpretive engagements (from within and without specific scenes), especially those which seek out and validate artistic forms that are then read as in accordance with *au courant* pop radical politics. It also invites us to reflect more regularly on how writing about music is often a lot “closer” to the musical form (as a kind of bundled inter-constitutive network of semiotic, aesthetic, and discursive elements) than those doing the writing might care to admit, and on what that entails for our engagement with music online.

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Discovering Music at Sofar Sounds: Surprise, Attachment, and the Fan–Artist Relationship

Loïc Riom

INTRODUCTION

That’s why Sofar Sounds was created, because we don’t have time. Everyone is too fast, we don’t have time to sit down and listen to an entire album. It’s zapping all the time. Discovery is not a real discovery. It’s a disposable discovery. We forget what we have discovered because it’s not really in our heads, it’s in our laptops or elsewhere. (James 2018)

This is how James (Pseudonym. The names of the interviewees were anonymized) (the leader of Sofar Paris) explained the importance of discovery for Sofar Sounds. Sofar Sounds is a start-up founded in 2009 in London by three friends who had become disappointed by the lack of attention to music at concerts they attended. They wanted to “put

L. Riom (✉)
Centre de Sociologie de l’Innovation, MINES ParisTech, PSL University, Paris,
France
e-mail: loic.riom@mines-paristech.fr

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music back at the center.” They started to organize concerts in their living room. Ten years later, Sofar Sounds produces about 500 events per month in more than 400 cities around the world. During these “listening” events—as James likes to describe them—spectators discover artists without knowing their names in advance. According to James, this setting allows greater attention to music and a better discovery in an era where streaming and the Internet offer only “zapping” and “disposable” discoveries.

Discovery has recently become a central issue in debates across the music industry (Kjus 2016; McCourt and Zuberi 2016; Prey 2018; Eriksson et al. 2019; Morgan 2020). Online streaming platforms—such as Spotify—claim to bring out more new talent than the old recorded music industry (AWAL 2019; Peters 2019; Spotify 2019). In an open letter published in February 2018, Daniel Ek (co-founder and CEO of Spotify) argued:

With access to unprecedented amounts of data and insights, we’re building audiences for every kind of artist at every level of fame and exposing fans to a universe of songs. In this new world, music has no borders. Spotify enables someone in Miami to discover sounds from Madrid. It links immigrants in Boston to songs back home in Bangkok. (Fagan 2018)

In return, some commentators criticize these same platforms for promoting already well-known names and reinforcing inequalities between artists. In a May 2019 blog post, Midia (2019) suggests that “streaming took the most valuable music buyers and turned them into radio listeners.” In a recent article, Lee Marshall (2019) argues that streaming demonstrates that most people see little value in recorded music, contrary to what the CD era might have suggested. For Marshall, this devaluation of music corresponds to the mode of listening—“lean back” and distracted—that platforms enact. In a way, James agrees when he criticizes the “disposable” discoveries provided by streaming platforms.

At the heart of the debate is the promise that the Internet would allow more artists to reach an audience. The challenge is in how to do so in a landscape that has been completely transformed by the end of the CD era. Sofar Sounds claims to offer artists the opportunity to develop their careers and be discovered. In this chapter, I would like to consider, with James and Sofar Sounds, what it means to discover music. What is “a real

discovery,” according to Sofar Sounds? And how do these questions shape Sofar Sounds’ way of organizing concerts?

A SOCIOLOGY OF MUSIC DISCOVERY?

While discovery is now a central issue for the music industry, this question is still largely ignored by the sociology of culture. Traditionally, sociologists have been more interested in tastes. Classic authors such as Pierre Bourdieu (1984) or Richard Peterson (Peterson and Kern 1996) use statistics to study taste stratification across social groups. In their work, the question of how music is discovered is completely absent. Statistical analysis freezes tastes (Hennion 2003). There is no discovery. Or, as in Peterson’s omnivore theory, it is reduced to an attitude. Other authors, borrowing Howard Becker’s (2008) concept of career, focus more on taste formation. These works describe how music amateurs begin to listen to music, how they learn to do so and identify moments of discovery, which successively shape their career (e.g., Djakouane 2011; Nowak 2016a; Turbé 2017). However, here, discovery is not considered for its own sake, but as a step in the “learning of music” (Ribac 2010), at the risk of reducing discovery to a question of freedom of choice of music consumption (Hanrahan 2016; Lindsay 2016; Beuscart et al. 2019).

In this chapter, I would like to go further and really focus on music discovery itself. Raphaël Nowak (2016b) rightly asks: What makes a discovery? He emphasizes its experiential and phenomenological dimensions. Discovery, in his understanding, comes at particular moments of “epiphanies,” which constitute some sort of a peak experience. In these moments, amateurs can rediscover music they have forgotten about, or stop on a song they have already heard several times. In a similar vein, Sophie Maisonneuve (2019) reports the practices of music amateurs, which bring about such moments and “maximize the chances of discovery.” She gives a very detailed account of the practices that make discoveries happen. Music amateurs use different recommendations to find new music: friends, music teachers, radio, the music press, or streaming platforms’ algorithms. In other words, discovering music is not only a matter of listening to a song for the first time, but also a practice of connecting with music.

In his work on classical music amateurs, Antoine Hennion (Hennion et al. 2000; Hennion 2001; Hennion 2017b) describes how they develop certain “protocols,” “ceremonies,” objects, and devices that assist them

in paying attention to music, in making the differences between two interpretations of the same composition count, and in testing their ears. These tests allow them to experience their taste, to challenge themselves and music. In certain genres of experimental music, surprise is systematized and placed at the heart of the pleasure of listening. Basile Zimmermann (2015) explains that the whole setting, including the instruments, is designed to produce surprise and unexpected experiments. Experimental music or classical music amateurs teach us that discovery and surprise are therefore not only a matter of practices, but also a matter of devices and objects.

Nicolas Auray (2017) points out that exploration and discovery are central in the design of digital platforms. For instance, the evolution of Spotify's interface has been shaped by a concern for discovery. From a platform enabling its users to search for the music they wanted to listen to, it has become a tool to explore and discover new music, organized around playlists and personalized recommendations (Eriksson et al. 2019). For streaming platforms, such as Spotify, discovery has become a way to capture and retain the users' attention. Their business model, based on subscriptions and advertising, depends on attentional devices (Morgan 2020; Siles et al. 2019; marketing has theorized attention [Cochoy 2004], which has become central to economic theory since the 1990s [Kessous et al. 2010; Citton 2017]). Nevertheless, maintaining the attention of users is not that simple. Dominique Boullier (2009) details tensions within this "attention economy." He emphasizes the difficulty of reconciling alertness and loyalty, stimulating and capturing attention, discovery and attachment. In other words, discovery is foremost a practical question for the actors themselves: How do you make "real discovery" happen? How do you capture the attention of potential listeners?

Sofar Sounds offers a fruitful observation site, because discovery is at the heart of the company's project. As an article published on Sofar Sounds' Website points out: "We all have something in common at Sofar: we love discovering new artists, exploring unfamiliar genres and experiencing live music together that we otherwise wouldn't have sought" (Sofar Sounds 2018). For the past ten years, Sofar Sounds has been organizing secret concerts in unusual spaces: apartments, offices, shops, and other similar places. While the company is now present in 80 countries, its activity is mainly concentrated in the UK and the United States. Its events are designed to put "music at the center." Spectators are asked to leave their phones aside, to refrain from talking during the concerts

and to focus on the live performances. Each Sofar evening features three artists, and each performs for about twenty minutes, without a headliner. The lineup tends to be eclectic and to bring together artists from “different musical worlds,” as James explains. More importantly, the spectators do not know in advance the names of the artists who will perform. Discovery therefore occurs blindly and the spectators are invited to remain open-minded.

This chapter is based on multi-sited ethnography. I attended twenty Sofar Sounds events in London, Paris, Geneva, and Lausanne. In addition, I conducted about 60 interviews with musicians, volunteers, and employees of Sofar Sounds and other informants based in Switzerland, France, Turkey, Brazil, the United States, and the UK. Furthermore, I carried out an extensive documentary research of the press, the Sofar Sounds Website and the company’s documents. The data were processed in a logic of continuous analysis of my materials. This way I identified key topics to Sofar Sounds in order to deepen my investigation and organize my writing. Discovery is one of these topics.

“ALL ABOUT MUSIC”: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE ARTISTS’ NAMES DISAPPEAR?

When visiting Sofar Sounds’ Website, spectators can apply for one of the available dates (the number varies considerably between cities). A few days before the event, they will know if they are included on the guest list or not. At this stage, there is no trace of the artists’ names. The available information only includes the date, time, and an indication of the neighborhood. It may seem a strange choice to go to a concert without knowing who you are going to see perform—but spectators need to trust Sofar Sounds. In an interview for online cultural magazine *Based Istanbul*, Sofar Istanbul leader explains how this trust shapes the organization’s relationship with its audience:

What kind of interaction is born out of this situation where the audience doesn’t know the performer until the last moment? Now there is a perception that whoever it is, they will make good music, we get this feedback from the audience. Since we built this trust, I don’t think they come with a question of listening to good or bad music; yet that obscurity is magical, guessing what kind of music it is, if it is a woman or a man, Turkish lyrics or not; you know nothing. This kind of experience is rare. (Bengi 2016)

Since its creation, the organization has succeeded in creating a trustful relationship with its audience. As a result, guests come, whatever the music may be. This way, names—at least initially—disappear in favor of the discovery. Therefore, the artists can perform in front of an unusual audience and possibly connect with new fans. Sofar Sounds is a good opportunity to play without having to solicit your “fan base,” as Marie, a manager based in Paris—several of whose bands played at Sofar’s events—explains:

Whereas I would say no to playing three or four times a year in the same venue in Paris, what’s interesting with Sofar is that you don’t need to bring people. You don’t need to promote the show. [...] The rest of the time, you are constantly asking your audience to like this, to come to a concert, to pay 10 euros, to help do that, etc. With Sofar, that’s not the case. You’re not on your fan base and you open yourself up to a different audience. It’s very interesting as an artist. (Marie 2018)

Many of the musicians I met see Sofar Sounds as a good way to introduce their music to a new audience, without having to make any promotional efforts, which is often difficult and time-consuming. This is how most of my informants justify playing these concerts, despite little to no pay. For spectators, choosing to go to a concert without knowing the artists means that they have to trust the person who booked the lineup, as Sandro, a regular of Sofar London, explains: “I found it was a very cool idea. Even the fact that you’re somehow putting yourself in line with someone else’s music taste. You know, I am very picky with music usually, but I started thinking it was a cool idea to trust someone else’s taste” (Sandro 2018). The trust that spectators place in Sofar Sounds seems to change booking. It is not about convincing people to come, but about making them discover, experiment new music, as Elizabeth, a Sofar Sounds employee, tells me:

When I’m not doing Sofar, I run a club night monthly with an all-female line-up and I have to curate those line-ups so differently than I do for Sofar because I have to worry about filling the room. I have to have a big enough line-up with enough names that’s going to bring enough people to fill this room and make sure that I can cover the cost. When at Sofar, because people don’t know who they’re coming to see, we don’t have to worry about whether the line-up would bring enough people. (Elizabeth 2019)

This freedom makes it possible to put the spectators in situations they have not chosen and to create surprise, as explained by Mathieu, Sofar Geneva's booker:

Unlike clubs and venues, Sofar will not seek to highlight the quality of the line-up to attract people. In fact, people go to Sofar for Sofar, for the concept. And so they are necessarily in situations of surprise and discovery. It forces the audience to be open. I think it's beautiful. (Mathieu 2018)

Free from the lineup pressure, Sofar bookers can consider differently what artists are capable of offering to spectators. It allows them to think of the booking in terms of experience and in particular of surprise effect. As one journalist points out in an article in which he recounts his experience of a Sofar evening: "it was their music that spoke to me rather than their names" (Priyadarshani 2018). This changes the very experience of the concert, as we will see in the next section.

A BLIND DISCOVERY: AN ART OF BEING SURPRISED

Sofar Sounds' setting produces a very specific effect by putting the spectator in a position where they do not know what they are going to listen to. Thus, the experience consists in letting oneself be surprised and carry along. As Alina, a spectator I met in Geneva, explains, Sofar Sounds enables her to test her tastes and explore something different from the music she typically listens to:

I'm very open-minded and just curious to listen to different types of music and when I'm there [at Sofar Sounds] I'm always surprised that I can listen to music that I wouldn't usually listen to, or I was never exposed to. And sometimes I'm super excited and thrilled and I love the music, and other times I think it's a bit weird and not really my taste, but it's okay. I still listen to it. It's like of these different types and genres that you have the chance to listen to somehow open up the world of music that you know because you pick certain types that you know that you'd like to listen and others that you never connect to, or you're never exposed to. [...] At Sofar I listened for the first time to some French rap. I was really listening and looking at the people. I didn't understand the thing, but I thought it was super cool. And then after that I will keep listening to it and try to understand the lyrics. And this is something I wouldn't have done before. (Alina 2019)

Alina listened to some French rap for the first time at a Sofar Sounds event. While it is something she would never have listened to on her own initiative, this first contact pushed her to keep listening to French rap and make an attempt to understand the lyrics (she had recently arrived in Geneva and was learning French). Thus, she could explore a form of music that at first seemed strange to her.

Sofar Sounds' setting invites spectators to give a moment in which they have to pay attention to the music of an artist they do not know. The audience is usually about 50 to 70 people. The majority of my interlocutors emphasized how this intimate atmosphere contributes to the experience of the discovery (This intimacy is also noted by Janotti Jr. and Pires [2018]). Sofar teams take care to create such an atmosphere. The liveness of the performance, the co-presence, and the intimacy of the setting all contribute to a feeling of proximity between the artists and the audience. As Sandro explains, this reinforces music discovery:

It does justice to the music itself and to the possibility of discovering the music, especially in an area where music is consumed at a very, very fast pace through multimedia platforms. I think [Sofar Sounds] is a very good alternative to that [...] I think projects like that make you take time off. You know like when you go to a museum and you watch music but also – there is a lot of contemplation in that. (Sandro 2018)

Like James, Sandro calls for a slower, more contemplative way to consume music. At Sofar Sounds events, there is no possibility to “zap,” to move on to something else. The setting forces the audience to pay attention to the music. The spectators are just in front of the musician during his performance and, therefore, have to make themselves available to his music. One journalist recalls his first Sofar Sounds:

My experience of this ‘Sofar Sounds’ gig did teach me more about, and to an extent broaden, my music taste. But what I learned most from being in this intimate setting was the value in choosing to dedicate yourself to really listening to a live performance. With no distractions, the relationship between performer and audience felt more sustained and also more dynamic, and the music itself, in turn, gained from this. I felt like in a small flat outside the center of Oxford I rediscovered the significance, and also the joy, of live music. (Griffiths 2018)

The audience thus discovers not only new music, but also their own taste. Similarly to classical music lovers (Hennion 2001, 2017b), spectators explore, test, and experience what they enjoy. As such, discovery is not necessarily a question of loving, but a reflexive practice. It is about experiencing the process of valuing, arousing of curiosity, and succumbing to music. Sofar Sounds' setting aims to enable such an art of being surprised and discovering music. But what does the discovery become after the concert? I discuss this in the last section of this chapter.

A REAL DISCOVERY? SOFAR SOUNDS AND THE ISSUE OF THE FAN–ARTIST RELATIONSHIP

One question remains unanswered: What remains of the discovery after the performance? Does Sofar Sounds enable a “real” discovery of artists? Some of the people in my research question this. Many of the informants admit that they do not often remember the names of artists they had seen playing. As Sandro explains, what matters is enjoying the music in the moment. With rare exceptions, he does not want to listen to the artists he has seen performing at Sofar Sounds again. One of my informants points out that if people pay attention to their music, at the end of the concert, they do not really know who the artists really are.

Sometimes, even remembering the names can require a small investigation. Spectators develop their own strategies accordingly. For example, Alina always purchases or keeps the evening's poster:

I would always buy [the poster] and it reminds me of that feeling and something new that I would listen to. I'm trying to remember that one band. There was one band I saw in Geneva for the first time. Then a couple weeks ago, I listen to my favorite radio station in Berlin and they were playing that song of this Geneva band. Oh my God, but now I can't remember their name. Arggh I got that poster. I'll find out.

To my comment, that it is not always easy to remember the names, she added:

Yeah because they are not that famous. And that's why I like to buy the poster, to keep them in mind to remember their names. (Alina 2019)

Sofar local teams generally create posters for each event, which are of a rather particular kind. Unlike the ones used to promote conventional gigs, they are not posted outside of the venue, but inside, and inform the audiences about the artists performing. Another spectator, Malika, told me that the first thing she does when she arrives at a Sofar Sounds event is to look up the names on the posters on the Internet, so that she can learn more about the artists. The posters—and the names of the artists—enable spectators to connect with the artists and follow their activity beyond the event through streaming platforms, social networks, newsletters, and so forth.

Posters, however, are not the only strategy for trying to retain the audience’s attention beyond the evening. Sofar Sounds staff regularly invite the audience to support the artists by “following” them on different platforms. The artists themselves actively work to connect with the audience. They repeat their names several times during their performance, taking care to spell them out to avoid misunderstandings. Some give business cards, flyers, or a mailing list. Others specify that the song they just played is available on YouTube or other streaming platforms. When a video is shot during the evening and published a few months later, it offers a great way to keep track of the artist. Merchandizing also plays an important role. Many artists sell T-shirts, hats, stickers, and records. The return on the investment they make by agreeing to play a concert without really being paid depends on these efforts to stay in touch with this new audience.

For many of the musicians I talked to, social networks are a fruitful means to build, develop, and maintain a connection with their audience (on the “relation work” of musicians on social media see Baym [2018]). As Adrian explains, it is on social networks that he sees the impact of the Sofar Sounds shows he played:

I measure it on social networking sites, Instagram and Facebook. There, you see every “like,” that there are more people, and more people who answer to my stories not in French. That’s why I post my stories in English. Everyone thinks it’s because I am overdoing it, but it’s because half of my followers don’t speak French. I have to talk to them. (Adrian 2019)

Adrian works to accumulate “likes” and “followers.” He uses different tools such as hyperlinks and posts to create connections between platforms—so that, for instance, a follower on Facebook would go to

YouTube to watch his new video. As Adrian explains, you have to remind the spectators of your existence and “address them” in order to maintain the relationship beyond the concert. This audience can then be monetized, or help to find new gigs, or a record deal.

Sofar Sounds also integrates the question of the fan–artist relationship into the development of its own platform. Artists are offered a page on the Sofar Sounds’ Web site with links to their own social network profiles and webpages. In addition, a few days after the event, spectators receive an e-mail listing the artists they had seen perform. After their complete invisibility before the event, the artists must be visibilized once the surprise effect is gone. Sofar Sounds has to ensure exposure for artists, considering that musicians agree to play without being paid in money. In an article reporting the project of a new platform for Sofar Sounds, UX (user experience) designers explain that their main objective was to create “more meaningful connections” by allowing spectators to be more involved in the relationship with artists and help them to better support their work (Kagaoan 2019). They suggest facilitating access to the artists’ content and webpages, and the implementation of a tipping system. Such efforts aim to make the discovery last beyond the event and to help artists toward living from their music. In other words, if the notion of discovery organizes the Sofar Sounds setting, it also engages the different parties—spectators, promoters, and artists—in a certain way. Discovery requires them to deploy an important infrastructure to connect with each other so that spectators can discover new music and artists their audience.

CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I have described the ways in which the notion of discovery shapes the organization, proceedings, and setting of Sofar Sounds’ events. On the one hand, Sofar concerts are an opportunity for musicians to play in front of a new audience. On the other hand, spectators go to the events in order to be surprised, to test their musical tastes, and to give themselves time to listen to music they are not used to. However, this blind discovery makes the fan–artist relationship fragile, and all actors need to deploy important efforts to make it last beyond the concert.

Sofar Sounds teaches us a few things about musical discovery. Firstly, as emphasized by Dominique Boullier (2009), Sofar Sounds experiences the tension between alertness and loyalty. Sofar Sounds has succeeded in creating an audience that is ready to come to its events without knowing

the lineup. However, these spectators, like Alina or Sandro, are attached to the experience of discovery during the event and do not always listen to the artists after the concert. Is it still a “true discovery”? The challenge for Sofar Sounds is to find a way to develop its own audience, while providing a platform for artists to promote their music. Or, to put it in a slightly different way, Sofar Sounds has to make artists benefit from this loyalty, without losing it. In a situation where Sofar Sounds’ audience partly creates its own brand and value, the issue is not simple. Such issue arises for all discovery-driven platforms, as the fan–artist relation is gradually becoming a central debate for the music industry.

Secondly, discovery not only corresponds to a particular experience, as noted in Nowak (2016b), but it also requires the deployment of a wide network for it to happen and to be maintained. It is not enough to place an artist in front of new spectators. Despite all of Sofar Sounds’ talent, when it comes to producing the atmosphere of its events, the discovery needs Websites, practice, objects, talks, hyperlinks, and platforms in order to last. In other words, music discovery needs an infrastructure. And this infrastructure requires care; otherwise, discovery disappears. It is remarkable how Sofar Sounds, musicians, and spectators are all engaged in building and maintaining their connections between various sites, both online and offline.

Thirdly, all of these tools, devices, settings, practices, and strategies constitute what can be called an art of attachment. In this context, the term should probably be understood in the sense of both Antoine Hennion (Gomart and Hennion 1999; Hennion 2017a) and Michel Callon (2017; see also Cochoy et al. 2017). Sofar Sounds teaches us that in order to make discovery happen, spectators, musicians, and organizers put the music to the test and invent new devices of attachment. As such, discovery does not concern itself with the question of what constitutes a real discovery, nor with socialization, but rather with an inquiry into how to listen to music, how to be attached to it, as well as how to sell it.

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Delicate Balances: The Roles of Amateur Concert Videos in the Galician Underground Scene

Cibrán Tenreiro Uzal

INTRODUCTION: VIDEOS AND UNDERGROUND MUSIC SCENES

Underground music scenes tend to be kind of elusive. It is not always by choice, but almost anyone who has been more or less involved in these types of communities has seen a band that never released a record or a great concert that was not filmed nor covered by the press. Once an artist goes mainstream, anything that happens around him or her is often documented by the label, the media, or the fans. There are more money and more people involved; hence, there is a more extensive documentation.

Since the emergence of digital technology, that documentation has become more and more intense, and today, for instance, we can find out how many times Wilco have covered “I Wanna Be Your Dog,”¹ or watch footage on YouTube from any of Beyoncé’s and Jay-Z’s 2018 European shows. But that trend is common to both mainstream and underground

C. Tenreiro Uzal (✉)
University of Santiago de Compostela, Santiago de Compostela, Spain

contexts, as videos have become an essential element when it comes to recording the activity of local or translocal music scenes. In recent years, I have observed, as a member of the audience, how some people have regularly been filming concerts and other events in the Galician underground scene. They have been creating videos for a quite small number of people and with no money involved. These amateur concert videos, and these filmmakers, probably exist in most underground scenes around the world,² expanding a tradition of documenting scenes that includes films, but also fanzines, sound recordings or photographs.

Why does this happen? Who makes these videos? Are they similar or different to mainstream music videos and films? What is their influence on the scenes they document? In this chapter, I will propose some answers to these questions by studying this practice through videos recorded in the Galician underground scene. For this purpose, I will combine film analysis with the description of the general features of the community and interviews with eight filmmakers of that scene: Gael Carballo, Flaco Fláquez, Sara Roca, Carlos Peñalver, Mar Catarina, Álvaro Larriba, David Tombilla, and Ángel Santos. This selection includes people relevant because of their connection to important collective projects within the scene (such as venues and associations), because of the amount of videos they have published, or because of their artistic career.

Besides, with the purpose of understanding this phenomenon, and given the general lack of studies on the topic, I used the work of authors from different fields to build a framework, with two main influences: on the one hand, studies on scenes, such as Sara Cohen's (1991), Barry Shank's (1994), or Amadeo Varela's (2011) work on the Galician underground and on the other hand, texts that deal with the relation between technology and (amateur) media, such as James M. Moran's (2002) book on home videos or Bourdieu's (2003) research on amateur photography. However, before starting to discuss those clips, I would like to place them in the context of music documentaries and explain the general features of the Galician underground scene.

SCENE FILMS: FROM STARS TO COMMUNITIES

In the broad field of music documentary, most of the classics revolve around the personality of charismatic people, even if they approach this in varying ways. Some of them, especially those that reconstruct hazardous lives, clash them dramatically with the present, as it happens with

Chet Baker in *Let's Get Lost* (Weber 1988) or in *The Devil and Daniel Johnston* (Feuerzeig 2005). On other occasions, they portray the personalities in revealing moments, like the Rolling Stones overwhelmed by the chaos at Altamont in *Gimme Shelter* (Maysles et al. 1970). Not even concert films, where the focus could instead be placed on performance and staging, are able to escape that centrality of stars.

This tendency makes sense, because pop is, as Simon Reynolds has defined it, “an audiovisual phenomenon, a hybrid art form in which lyrics and personality are as important as music” (Reynolds 2010, 224). Music is almost impossible to dissociate from the people who make it, and hence films about music tend to be films about musicians. The films I mentioned in the previous paragraph were placed among the ten first titles of the “Top 100 Music Documentaries” list created by Barcelona’s In-Edit Film Festival (Pons 2011). For this reason, it does not seem an exaggeration to consider this star-centrality a canonical feature of music documentary.

Nevertheless, and beyond experimental works, a whole group of films exist that show a more collective and broad documentation of musical experience. The best-known examples are those linked to festivals and their kind of mass communion, such as *Woodstock* (Wadleigh 1970) or *All Tomorrow's Parties* (Caouette 2009). Yet there is also a film and video culture associated with local music scenes, where (mostly) casual filmmakers capture the community. These people are usually members of the audience with precarious equipment, who also take part in the scene making music, writing, photography, programming, or whatever suits them. Using film and video, they assume a documentation task, which is close to the making of home movies.

For example, when they were recording the New York punk scene at CBGBs in what would end up being *The Blank Generation* (1976), Ivan Kral (who also played guitar for the Patti Smith Group) and Amos Poe (filmmaker and critic at *New York Rocker* magazine) were filming their friends and acquaintances in happy and celebratory events, using the camera to film concerts in a way that was not very different from the ways in which parents would document their children’s birthdays. During 1981 and 1982, Dave Markey (also the author of the fanzine *We Got Power* and drummer at Sin 34) filmed *The Slog Movie*. A good part of that film is composed of concerts from the Los Angeles hardcore scene, but there are many moments in which members of this community do other things: Ted Nugent impersonations, walking around town, eating and drinking, and so forth. As in the case of someone showing us a video of his or

her family reunion, we would have to ask the people involved if we want to name the dozens of faces that Markey films. These are people that are not usually listed in books written afterward, but they are part of the reality of these communities and appear in the audiovisual and photographic documents that remain of them.

Therefore, within scenes, the centrality of bands is balanced with other activities that may be artistic or not, but are essential to these communities too, as we can see by taking a look at seminal works in the field. Some examples of this are Cohen's (1991), Shank's (1994), or Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson's (2004): Besides the common elements that scenes share in music styles, these books emphasize the defining character of elements such as concert behavior and dancing, style of dress, drug consumption, political positioning, gossip, and, in general, any action or attitude that can be used as a sign of knowledge of group codes and give cohesion to the community. This complexity is left out of most music documentaries, but appears in "scene films" like the ones mentioned above, or *The Punk Rock Movie* (Letts 1978). The non-hierarchical feel and chaotic nature of these films can be found today on YouTube or social media videos made by scene filmmakers, like those who are part of the Galician underground.

THE GALICIAN UNDERGROUND SCENE

First of all, a few notes about the Galician underground scene. Galicia is an "autonomous community," a region of Spain placed in the North-West corner of the Iberian Peninsula. It is one of the three "historical nations" of Spain, and it has a strong cultural tradition with its own language, Galician, which is used by about half of its population of 2.7 million people. A large part of that population (around 1 million people) are concentrated in the areas around the two main cities, Vigo and A Coruña, but, as Amadeo Varela Lourenzo has pointed out in his study about the scene, neither of these zones are big enough to attract the musical activity of the region (Varela 2011, 8). Also, Galicia is in a peripheral position within Spain, which keeps its cultural activity pretty self-centered.

Through the last decade, a number of self-managed venues and artistic collectives emerged in Galicia, in connection with the huge youth unemployment figures.³ They brought together a scene that does not follow one particular music style, with artists ranging from electronic pop to psych-rock or hip hop. At the same time, they gave way to the kind of

“overproductive signifying community” that Shank (1994, 121) observed in his work on the Austin scene, where bands, magazines, record labels, or movies emerged because of the general will to adopt an active creative role by the participants of the scene. The interviews I conducted show a clear correspondence with Shank’s remarks, as illustrated by the words of Gael Carballo, who made videos as part of an extinct cultural collective, PORNO:

The main feature of this scene is that it seems that everyone is *someone*. [...] Everyone devotes him- or herself to some kind of communication medium or art form. You have a group, or you design posters, or you make videos like me... but I’d like to think that you are part of the scene just by being part of the audience. (Carballo 2017)

Videos of the Galician underground scene prove the existence of that “overproductive signifying community” by showing how people turn from musicians into photographers, sound technicians, filmmakers, or plain members of the audience. However, they do not explain by themselves the elements that distinguish this scene from different scenes that exist within Galicia. The vision of some participants casts a light on the issue and gives way to a fairly consensual definition. Flaco Fláquez, for example, talks about a reaction against commercial venues by different musicians, which gave way to the establishing of self-managed spaces like Liceo Mutante (Pontevedra) or Casa Tomada (later Nave 1839) (A Coruña). Carlos Peñalver mentions a “cultural void” that all these agents try to fill by themselves, and identifies DIY production as a fundamental feature which would indicate the reaction the scene leads against the mainstream, using the term “underground” to characterize that opposition.

That same term was used indeed by Varela Lourenzo to refer to the scene in his work. This makes sense if we look at the character of the scene, but it should be pointed out that this is not the only Galician scene opposed to the mainstream (that featured is shared by scenes connected to the squatter movement or nationalist activism). However, Varela (2011, 28) underlines a crucial factor: Participants in this scene identify themselves with the word “underground,” using the 1980s’ American hardcore scene and its DIY ideology as a key referent. With all that, both Sara Roca and Gael Carballo note that the scene is also characterized by a “neutral” or “non-ideological” nature, more focused on artistic issues

as opposed to communities in which discourse revolves around veganism and animal liberation, anti-sexism, class struggle, or the defense of Galician language. Carballo's statements point to that difference:

All these festivals like Castañazo Rock, the Ourenrock [...], I think they try to be kind of heirs to *rock bravú*⁴, that left-wing ideology, of class struggle, of ska [...] I think this scene has the will to be politically relevant and [ours] is just the opposite, like youth that avoids taking a political stance, that is proud of their cynicism... [...] The way in which the scene decides to organize and manage itself, the way in which they manage their concerts and their records, shows a political stance. But it never becomes explicit. (Carballo 2017)

Besides this criticism, Sara Roca indicates an excessive centrality of music within the scene because of a centrality “of the event,” which tends to marginalize different creative activities which are also relevant, such as illustration or photography, hiding the wide-ranging nature of the community (something all the interviewees agree with). To sum up, this Galician underground scene can be characterized as a community mainly constructed around self-managed venues and collectives, a kind of organization that implies a reaction against institutional and commercial culture, but, at the same time, generally does not have an explicit political position. The features of the scene are very closely linked to the main features of the videos that document it.

A REACTION AGAINST PROFESSIONAL AESTHETICS

If the scene claims to be opposed to the mainstream, the videos made within their activities are opposed to professional standards of concert films. As it is usual in subcultural movements, this happens in part because of an explicit will and in part because of necessity. Most of the clips associated with this scene are sequence shots that show the point of view of a given person, with the imperfections that come from being positioned within the audience (clashes and vibrations, elements blocking the frame, restricted movement). It is just the opposite of the frantic editing and spectacular camera moves used in the documenting of massive events, a way of filming music that both Carballo and Fláquez, who work in television, reject. Fláquez says:

...they want to show it all and at the same time nothing comes of it. Some things I made on TV were like that; you can't enjoy the performance (as a spectator). They want to stick so many visual impacts through your eyes ... (Fláquez 2017)

This sometimes gives these videos a very restrained character (such as the clips Sara Roca made at the Nave 1839, which tended to be fixed shots) and sometimes an excitement close to the experience of the audience. This can be transmitted because there is no need to follow conventions: In a video of Unicornibot playing at the Liceo (Fláquez 2012), Fláquez gets up and bends down, turns left to see somebody passing over the heads of the audience, and turns right to find people who look at the camera and raises their glass or their hands. This unpredictable variation, this “go with the flow” chaotic nature, reflects the greater freedom of these clips if we compare them with professional concert films, but it is not the only example. In another video, in which he films a concert by Cuchillo de Fuego, Fláquez even dares to leave the camera over an amp and join the mosh pit in the first row (Fláquez 2014).

Therefore, there is a knowledge of professional codes and a conscious resolution to ignore them, keeping in mind that many of these filmmakers have some kind of audiovisual training or job that allows them to make that difference. David Tombilla says that when he works as a photographer for music festivals, he usually hands over “pictures which are ‘clear,’ that is, pictures that reflect reality, without flashes and with very few *arty* features” (Tombilla 2017). Carballo compares these two ways of working:

[in a professional video] you film a close-up or a medium shot of the singer during a complete song, save the audio and then use the following songs to film open shots, details and resource s... and then you edit it all as if you were filming just one song with, I don't know, twenty-three different camera angles. [...] In PORNO what I did was avoiding all that. [...] If there is a camera and if I'm going to show a bit of the concert, I'm not making cuts. Let people see the mistakes if I move, if somebody crosses the frame ... I think it is important to show that more primitive “being there.” And make a virtue of your lack of means. (Carballo 2017)

This idea of making a virtue of your lack of means connects with the DIY attitude present within the scene and shows the limits of digital democratization: There is extensive access to precarious equipment. Lack of light

makes it difficult to film the audience, which is usually in the dark, and forces filmmakers to push the cameras to their limit. Sound is often unintelligible, although the interviewees note solutions like using an external recorder, asking for soundboard sound or simply moving away from the speakers. When a more expensive piece of equipment is available and these conditions can be improved, the freedom to climb up chairs or joining the mosh pit disappears because of the fear of ruining the camera.

HOME MOVIES FOR A BALANCED REPRESENTATION

This opposition to professional concert films is also evident in the will on the part of these filmmakers to balance the representation of the events. Bands are understood in a democratic way, as Fláquez notes when explaining his choices: “I try to make everyone visible to avoid giving prominence to anyone. I always think that concert videos give too much prominence to singers” (Fláquez 2017). It is an intention that Roca also mentions when talking about her photographic work, and it reveals an important feature of scenes: Hierarchies fade away, and the distance and mystery in which the idol–fan dynamics are based fade away too. This can be seen in moments when the difference between band and audience disappears, like the ones we see in “La noche del fin del mundo” (Peñalver 2013) or “¡Pelea!” (Carballo 2015), where some members of the audience can jump on stage to shake the drummer’s hand or to carry the guitar player on their shoulders. The best example is “MULLET” (Tombilla 2013), where it is difficult to distinguish who is and who is not part of the band. There could be somebody drinking a beer before the guitar player, and any random person could take the mic and sing.

Besides this, this kind of horizontal representation can be found in the attention given to actions that happen off-stage. The filmmakers of the Galician underground scene (and many other people) appear in some of these videos filming, or taking pictures, or dancing, or even having an ice-cream. That happens because the camera can, despite technical difficulties, ignore the bands. The first video in Tombilla’s YouTube channel shows this: It is about the opening party of the Liceo Mutante and it shows people drinking, taking information about new members or lighting a fire (Tombilla 2011).

Events related to different art forms are also captured, such as self-publishing fanzine fairs like Grapo Grapo (at the Liceo Mutante) or No Tengo Mamá (in Vigo, organized by Seara Records). Often, videos exceed

the documentation of the event to enter the field of home movies. Alberto Díaz and Ángel Santos made a film during the first of these fairs, and in it we see beautiful portraits of people who pose or play for the camera (Díaz and Santos 2013). This can remind us of Jem Cohen's work with music on films like *Instrument* (1999), but it also has aspects clearly in common with the idealizing way in which we film important intimate events where everyone seems happy. That can also be seen in "PORNO" (Carballo 2014) or "Saumede 2017" (Carballo 2017), where some people appear riding bumper cars, celebrating a birthday, playing with a plastic ball or sightseeing, myself among them.

It is necessary to mention this to indicate the personal nature of these films, and also to apologize in case the text is like a photographic slide show. Pierre Bourdieu (2003, 78) stated that such screenings tended to be very boring, because images were dominated, both in their extension and their aesthetics, by external functions. In home movies, content takes precedence over aesthetics and technique: Some blurry images with little action (or concert videos in which we can barely make out the music) are enough to trigger memories and emotions for people who are aware of their private codes. Sometimes this happens through watching oneself, and sometimes through the impression of a substitute of one's actual presence within the scene. This is something that Carlos Peñalver, who does not live in Galicia any more, points out:

Scene videos have a kind of powerful aspect, especially watching them from Barcelona [...]. It gives you the creeps, you think "man, I would really love to be there." However, if you simply watch a video of a band you like (without them being your friends or anything), you just hear the song in a different way. (Peñalver 2017)

Like home movies, these films are documenting actions that can look irrelevant from the outside, but can be very important for the people involved, as they offer "an important tool for tracing common roots no longer nourished only by blood" in an era of "families we choose," as home video theorist James M. Moran has explained (2002, 60). This relation with home movies is, hence, perceived by the people who create and watch these works, endowing scene videos with the kind of power to bring together a community that home movies have (Odin 2010, 45). Sara Roca's remarks underline this parallel:

It's like when you move abroad to study, and they send you a picture of your mother's birthday, and you feel close to them and you say "oh, my brother has had his hair cut," isn't it? So, from that point of view, I think these audiovisual documents can be used to create community. If you share them, of course. If you keep them at home, they can't. (Roca 2017)

SCENE VIDEOS AS PROMOTIONAL TOOLS

Both Fláquez, Peñalver and Carballo declare they have a lot of footage that exceeds the subject of concerts, footage that they usually revise and treat like a diary. Álvaro Larriba, another filmmaker of the scene, used a similar method and gathered six months' worth of recordings at the Liceo Mutante for his film *Mutantes* (2018). He also had the intention to move beyond concerts and show "what's behind the Liceo, that is, the people [...] who make it possible to exist" (Tenreiro 2018).

Mutantes is, as of today, the only feature-length documentary of the scene, probably because usually the more diary-like material is the kind that stays at home, whereas the one that does circulate is—despite all the elements previously mentioned—still centered on events and music performances. Even if these filmmakers are motivated by their will to keep a personal diary, these clips are commonly used as a promotional tool by bands or collectives that appear in them. As a matter of fact, many of the clips are shared via the online channels belonging these projects and not the personal channels of those who create them. The idea of employing scene videos for promotion can lead to some kind of styling.

The most evident example of this is Peñalver's work. Before relocating to Barcelona, he made several videos of Seara Records events in collaboration with some other people (Blanca Aldán, Iago Seoane, Cristina Balboa...), using multi-camera settings and a more thoughtful sound recording. When asked about his clips, he says that they are "pretty neutral" and that they follow an "institutional" scheme:

If somebody asks me [to make a video], there are several rules [...]. Film songs in full, film from a general perspective [...]. If I just have my camera with me and I go to a concert I don't care about it. In organized concerts there are some logistics that you need to respect because if you don't, in the end there will be no use for what you do. (Peñalver 2017)

These rules, obviously influenced by professional live music videos, imply a notion of correctness, of quality, which serves to compensate for the

home movie character of these clips, and turn them into a product more suitable for consumption by people who are outsiders to the context. The “use” Peñalver talks about also shows the influence social media have on the activity of this scene. These filmmakers usually assume the task of documenting the activities of a collective project they are, or feel, part of. They are driven to assume an active role because of that overproductive nature of the community. Peñalver states:

Many times you feel burned up, because you are in one of these projects, with horizontal structures, and you don’t know what to do... Where can I help? Everyone is doing their thing... and in my case it was perfectly clear: my task is this [making videos]. (Peñalver 2017)

Hence, usually videos end up being understood as an important aspect—documentation and promotion—of a joint effort: the organization of an event or the management of a space. This logic explains the fact that many of these filmmakers do not care about stating the authorship of their work, with many of them avoiding to identify themselves as artists.

However, some clips show a more *auteur* tendency through features that break common expectations about concert videos. This can be seen in the work of people like Borja Vilas in “Terremoto Antes,” a short film about the preparation of a concert by the band Terremoto Sí: when the concert starts, he cuts to a title that says, “[f]rom now on I don’t know what to do, man, the recording of the gig is shit and the sound too,” and the video ends (Vilas 2014). Also, in “Discos Forno – Concierto Swass 19/4/2013,” Gael Carballo superimposes images from experimental films like Storm de Hirsch’s *Peyote Queen* (1965) and Mary Ellen Bute, Norman McLaren and Ted Nemeth’s *Spook Sport* (1939) onto footage from the gig (Carballo 2013).

Another feature that breaks expectations is the fragmentation of actions, as well as songs that authors like Virginia De (who filmed at the Nave 1839) or Mar Catarina use. An example such as Catarina’s “re-xistro|1| volve a canción protesta” illustrates this clearly through its playful editing: The bass player and singer from Ataque Escampe seem to be part of Atrás Tigre, and many of the musicians appear to be playing during a speech from Oh Ayatollah’s singer. The overt dissociation of sound and image chronology is quite uncommon in concert videos and implies the perspective of an artist, but the will to document the scene is still present. This video is the first of a project called Prenom Archivo,⁵ an open archive

that essentially collects moments from the scene. Catarina sees the project, and the task of documenting the scene, in a pretty political way that adds a different perspective to the phenomenon:

This has to do with the democratization of images, that idea they sell you [...] They say there is more and more democracy, but the images, or at least the images that make up the history of a nation, are owned by institutions. And so institutions spread them, manipulate them, use them to create [...] a history that is determining our perception of reality. Hence, when you make an archive, you're in some way resisting, or subverting that institutional archive. (Catarina 2018)

CONCLUSIONS

The whole of these scene videos seems to contribute, within the freedom of action made possible by extensive access to cameras, to the creation of a delicate balance between different tendencies. There is room for videos that break the usual modes of representation of music—those more close to the home mode and the more artistic ones. There is also room for videos that follow a notion of quality based on the standards of music documentary—those linked to promotional intentions. This tension is common to the nature of the scene, which is seemingly opposed to the mainstream, but shares with it the use of social media as the main communicative tool. In this way, the current cultural dynamic, in which everybody becomes a content producer, appears to be ousting the traditional mode of chronicling a scene, which is the fanzine. Fláquez and Roca, born in 1981 and 1980, have enough perspective to make a claim to that effect:

I was living in Bilbao and I loved the music and the scene from Barcelona, but there were no videos at all [...]. Maybe you made up for that by reading people's fanzines, which may talk about the argument they had with their mother that morning. Now it is the opposite: you have so much information about concerts, about the clothes people wear, what they drink, what they do outside and inside, what the place is like... maybe that's why people don't miss the other thing so much. (Roca 2017)

Hence, there is a general and immediate access to a wide chronicle of the various activities we found at the beginning as essential to the scene, but that has a negative consequence. Carballo sums it up: “I think there is too much visual evidence, too many people taking photographs, making videos like me... but I think they are a less reflexive proof than the written one.” This relatively impulsive and unthoughtful character can be connected to the scene’s political neutrality, but it also matches the global trend Michael Renov (2004, 215) sees in recent decades: a shift from individual self-expression through written media to a culture of audiovisual self-presentation. Therefore, these scene videos are a democratizing tool within the modes of the representation of music, but they also share an important risk relating to the current public sphere, as Dominique Mehl (2005, 93) has pointed out: the abandon of debate for a simple comparison of experiences.

NOTES

1. The Web site Wilco Setlists compiles data about the band’s live performances, as the project WilcoBase did before. According to the site, they covered “I Wanna Be Your Dog” five times: <http://wilcosetlists.com/> (Last retrieved May 27, 2019).
2. Some examples of people who film underground concerts regularly in Spain are El Arranzio in Barcelona (<https://www.youtube.com/user/ElArranzio>), Canal Y Punto in Madrid (<https://www.youtube.com/user/canalypunto>) or marcOS in Valencia (<https://www.youtube.com/user/MrLonicerus/>) (Last retrieved May 28, 2019).
3. Youth unemployment rate in Galicia was above 50% at some point of 2013 and 2014 (EPdata 2018).
4. *Rock bravú* was one of the main cultural movements in Galicia in the 1990s, combining influences from punk rock, ska or heavy metal with the vindication of Galician culture. This movement was led by bands that came mainly from rural areas. The political stances of *bravú* bands can be seen in songs like Rastreros’ “Tratorada” (about the struggle of Galician farmers) or the connection with anti-globalization artists like Manu Chao.
5. Prenom is a creative project formed by Catarina and Rubén Domínguez. They function as a record label and as a music video and design studio. Their open archive is available at: <https://prenomarquivo.tumblr.com/> (Last retrieved March 14, 2019).

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Cassetteboy: Music, Social Media, and the Political Comedy Mash-up

James Williams

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the role of music in the overlapping space between viral social media, online culture, comedy entertainment, and politics. Since the advent of video hosting-and-sharing Web sites such as Vimeo and YouTube (2004 and 2005 respectively), audiovisual culture has continually been reshaped by cyberspace and its online “Generation M” demographic (standing for “Generation Media”; Thompson 2010). The analysis in this chapter focuses specifically on the case study of Cassetteboy, a London-based electronic music-parody duo, who often work with media and news material by cutting and splicing, reworking and editing—*mashing-up*—adding popular music backing tracks, and publishing online. Here, I explore the creative process behind, and the potential impacts of, three works released by Cassetteboy between 2014 and 2016: firstly, “Cameron’s Conference Rap” (published 1 October 2014 and featuring “Lose Yourself,” Eminem 2002); secondly, “vs. Jeremy Hunt” (published

J. Williams (✉)
University of Derby, Derby, UK
e-mail: j.williams@derby.ac.uk

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27 April 2016 and featuring “YMCA,” Village People 1978); and thirdly “vs. The Snoopers’ Charter” (published 8 April 2016 and featuring “Every Breath You Take,” The Police 1983).

Since their mash-up of Alan Sugar clips from the BBC’s *The Apprentice* in 2009 (YouTube), renowned within the UK, Cassetteboy have had a prominent online media profile, with YouTube video views in excess of 44 million (as of February 2019) and over 50,000 Twitter followers. In terms of online popular culture consumption, these numbers are, however, actually quite modest. Ever since South Korean artist Psy broke through the 1-billion view landmark on YouTube (21 December 2012), artists such as Luis Fonsi (6.01 billion), Ed Sheeran (4.1 billion), and Mark Ronson (3.48 billion) have also achieved—exceeding Psy—extraordinarily high view-counts. What is vital to note, though, is that today, over half of the global population have Internet access. When Cassetteboy published “Cassetteboy vs The Bloody Apprentice” in 2009, highly watched videos such as Susan Boyle’s X Factor performance of “I Dreamed a Dream” (*Les Misérables*)—the most watched video in 2009—were reaching only 120 million views. Yet even in spite of the quantitative changes in Internet usage over the past decade, and the difficulty of monitoring this *qualitatively*, Cassetteboy’s substantial followers and views—both presently and in the past¹—are evidence of a prominent online profile.

Since their 2009 success with Alan Sugar edits, they have diverted a substantial portion of their attention toward politically themed outputs: Three of these sit at the crux of this chapter’s analysis. The analyses will explore how music functions creatively and socio(cyber)-culturally in the videos with regard to three national political issues: firstly, David Cameron’s Conservative Party (2010–2016) in the run up to the 2015 General Election; secondly, Jeremy Hunt’s NHS Junior Doctors’ contract (2016); and finally Theresa May’s Draft Communications Data Bill. Discussions around these three videos are underpinned by a combination of two one-hour firsthand primary interviews with “Mike from Cassetteboy” (one half of the duo) on the creative process and his political stances or agendas, alongside Internet discourse analysis of audience responses in the YouTube feeds of each video. The aim of this chapter is to identify the role music plays in politically orientated social commentary and to theorize the way it functions as political propaganda masquerading as comedy entertainment.

MASH-UPS, MUSIC, AND POLITICS ONLINE

Patrycja Rozbicka uses the 2017 General Election as an example to explore the link between music and politics, arguing for “why we should start using music as a form of engagement with politics, not merely of political expression” (2017, 1). According to her,

[m]usicians were [...] deployed to seek the popular vote ahead of the 2017 election, and Labour were definitely the ones to have exploited music for political communication most effectively. [...] With celebrity endorsements known to have a significant impact on young people’s decision to vote, [music-based propaganda is] a new form of recruiting voters who engaged because their idols did. This kind of politically-charged information was also able to reach hundreds of young adults across nearly the country through social media. So, 2017 made us witness music’s potential as a political force in the UK. (Rozbicka 2017, 1)

“Music-based propaganda” online is indeed a relatively new form of recruiting voters, and social media is an incredibly powerful and engaging tool. Beyond Rozbicka’s point, however, it is not just the hype—the quantity—of “music and politics” that is accessible through social media, but it is also the *quality* of it—in other words, it can have serious impact on an audience’s political compass. Music is artistic rhetoric, and when combined with key points of information as entertaining media, the question of the “real” and the “unreal,” the “truths” and the “lies,” facts and fiction(s) become disorientated in an “infotainment-edutainment” nightmare of what to believe and what not to believe: “if it is entertaining, I’ll watch it.” For young adults, politics might not be entertaining—but music might. Additionally, Rozbicka notes that in politics, music can be used as a powerful tool to work *against*, as well as *for*, political arguments, here making specific reference to Cassetteboy:

There is also a lack of celebrity artists who could be directly identified as Conservative supporters, meaning that the party simply lacks the base to reach from. Instead, the response from artists is rather negative. Cassette[]Boy, South London comedy and music duo, made “Mo’May Mo’Problems’ [Cassetteboy vs Theresa May 2017] reaching over a million hits. (Rozbicka 2017, 1)

If we look at this example's commentary feed online, the anti-Conservative, pro-Labour user responses (anonymized) are evident:

YouTube User: For the many, not the few...

YouTube User: I think is fake due to the fact that Theresa May spoke the truth in this video

YouTube User: "Only trust the Conservatives if you don't rely on public services." What a line! Biggie would be proud.

YouTube User: Vote Labour for the MAJORITY not the well of minority!!!

These comments represent four of almost 3500 (many of which have multiple responses) on a video which has 43,000 "likes." Significantly, the vast majority of these comments are politically orientated. Of the four selected here, one uses the Labour Party's tagline "For the Many, not the Few," one cites fake versus truth, another makes a musical reference (to "Biggie"—The Notorious B.I.G. and the song "Mo Money Mo Problems," [1997] based on Diana Ross's "I'm Coming Out" [1979]), and another which explicitly states "Vote Labour."

Rozbicka recognizes that of the 72% of young voters (aged 18–29), between 63 and 66% supported Labour, with only between 19 and 23% supporting Conservatives. Although a conclusive statement cannot be made here regarding the impact of music on young voters, it is nevertheless clear that in this instance, young voters substantially favored Labour. We need interrogate further the political music scene to see what media might be impactful on "Generation M." In other media coverage of Cassetboy's work, Bernadette McNulty (2017) writes, "[Cassetboy] skewered David Cameron in the 2015 race with *Emperor's New Clothes*." Yet this video (Cassetboy 2015) is a "skewering" of not just David Cameron, but also of George Osborne (former Chancellor of the Exchequer), and Nigel Farage (former UK Independence Party Leader) with a 2.3-million-strong audience watching. Thus, this particular example is not an attack of right-wing or left-wing, but rather an attack on the political climate. Rozbicka's example (cited above) may lead viewers to a political choice on a political compass; however, this video is more of a political "rant" where all political parties and politicians suffer at the creative hand(s) of Cassetboy. But again, the comments thread mostly concerns politics, with some concerning the issue of true versus false, and factual versus fake, and only a few referring to the humor and cleverness of the editing. Furthermore, this example is also attached to political

activism, directing people toward the comedian Russell Brand’s nation-wide screening of sesquipedalian, political jargon titled “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” and attached with a #ThingsCanChange Twitter hashtag. This is not the only video which is explicitly activist: Both “vs. Jeremy Hunt”/“YMCA” and “vs. The Snoopers’ Charter”/“Every Breath You Take” have activist components in the form of social media campaigns, which I discuss in more detail later.

Beyond viewing music as a “form” of engagement with political discourse, what we really need to do is to monitor such engagement, examining what impact these types of political mash-up videos are having on their viewers. Political music parodies by the likes of Cassetteboy—and through other channels such as Super Deluxe and Epic Rap Battles (ERB)—cater to an audience interested in comedy. But they are not selling comedy dressed as comedy; they are selling politics dressed as comedy, and music is an excellent carrier for this sale.

The mash-up structure allows a reworking and rewording of speech into a different meaning, and so in politics, where language, communication, and semantics are the tools of success, the mash-up can be an extremely powerful carrier of words. David Weir specifically uses the term “*political* mash-up” when discussing the use of the mash-up form in political media. He describes it as

a post-9/11 form of oppositional music that incorporates sampled political speech into composed musical settings. Mass mediated political speech is captured, digitally manipulated, and set to music to form alternative narratives. (Weir 2010, ii)

These “alternative narratives” are the narratives that the viewers listen to, see, and as I argue in this chapter, can be influenced by. Isaac Vayo describes Cassetteboy as “tape-collage artists,” evaluating their song “Fly Me to New York” (2006)—a piece which “narrates the events of 9/11 from the perspective of one of the pilot-hackers” (2011, 69). This example (Cassetteboy and Cartel Commique/“cartelmike” 2006) is published by the user “cartelmike” in collaboration with Cartel Commique, who produced a range of other mash-up videos in the mid-to-late 2000s, and again hosted through YouTube. Vayo recognizes this specific output from Cassetteboy as “the best example of rubble music arising from 9/11,” exploring the impacts which creative splicing and citation can have on a nation. Here, I intend to contribute not only to the wider discussion on

online culture and politics, but also to the growing body of specific dialogue centering on the work of Casetteboy: I recognize the examples in the forthcoming analyses to be “the best example(s)” of political mash-ups arising from the 2010–present Conservative government (initially the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition administration).

The subsequent discussion presented in this chapter rests on three core approaches: firstly, a combination of transcripts from two individual one-hour interview conversations with “Mike” from Casetteboy, conducted by the author in the summer of 2016 and 2018; secondly, media-based analyses of the music and lyrics in the three Casetteboy videos referred to in the Introduction (“Cameron’s Conference Rap” 2014; “Casetteboy vs. The Snooper’s Charter” 2016b; and “vs Jeremy Hunt” 2016a); and thirdly, observations of cybercultural dialogue through user comments (through YouTube), focusing specifically on political discourse to explore and consider the impacts these videos are having on the online demographic. The interviews were semi-structured discussions with one half of Casetteboy, who wishes to be known and referred to as “Mike from Casetteboy” to uphold his anonymity. In the interview, “Mike” explains that the anonymity itself is not necessarily as significant as used to be, and they merely maintain their pseudonyms for artistic purposes (discovering who Casetteboy really requires minimal online searching). He reveals that they were “scared of being sued,” because prior to YouTube, “almost every single second of their album releases were infringing someone’s copyright: Madonna; Frank Sinatra; The Rolling Stones; Jamie Olivier; The Beatles.” He says: “we stole seconds. But now the law has changed that threat has diminished.” These issues are discussed further in Vicky Baker’s (2014) interview with the same half of Casetteboy. They are also tackled by Miller (2011) in a section on “mash-ups” and the crisis of authorship in digital culture:

What is significant about mash-ups, and what is perhaps symbolic about them in light of discussions about the music industry in digital culture, is that the genre by nature confounds notions of intellectual property and authorship. [...] The products of mash-ups are also problematic. They are in many senses original works of collage made up of other original works, but they complicate the notion of originality and authorship, as mash-up artists themselves cannot lay claim to “authorship” of their product as an intellectual property. (Miller 2011, 91)

The two one-hour interviews were conducted over the telephone (negotiated through Cassetteboy's London Agency), with the first based around eight core questions, and second based around a further twelve questions in response to the first set of answers. Evaluation of the three YouTube examples rests on viewing the videos, lyrical analysis (facilitated by Cassetteboy providing a transcript of the lyrics through their video posts), and considerations of the musical references made by Cassetteboy by looking at the original music tracks. Finally, "trawling," term-searching, and screengrabbing YouTube user comments underpin and contextualize the discussion on political impact.

DISCUSSION: CASSETTEBOY AND BRITISH POLITICAL MEDIA

"Cassetteboy" had actually been producing work ten years prior to becoming an Internet YouTube phenomenon. Their name gives it away: The anonymous duo started working together in 1995 making compilation cassette tapes for friends, embedding snippets of talking between the music. "Mike" explained to me in the initial interview that "gradually the talking overtook the compilation music" and it developed from there, "mutating into several different formats." Their outputs were humorous mixtapes. But as web 2.0 arrived at the turn of the twenty-first century, user-generated content (UGC) through platforms such as YouTube allowed artist to propel their work into the online realm. The mash-up format was an early example of the types of media that would be shared (Lindgren 2017, 28).

I am less-concerned with the "YouTubification of politics" regarding *amateur production* of UGC and the impact on future government, but rather more concerned with the impact of *professional production* of political media on YouTube and its *consumption* by YouTube users. This is because much of Cassetteboy's recent work is paid or funded by (or via) media and journalism companies such as the BBC and *The Guardian*, and I was interested in what Cassetteboy's political agendas might be.

"Cameron's Conference Rap" was published on YouTube in October 2014 (about 7 months prior to the 2015 General Election). The video, which has 6.8 million views (as of February 2019), uses clips from a number of Conservative Party Speeches given by David Cameron. "Cassetteboy vs. The Snooper's Charter" was released in early April 2016 and tackles Theresa May's Draft Communications Bill—a bill now passed in the

UK, where online activity can be legally traced. They released “vs Jeremy Hunt” in late April 2016, to exploit the issues surrounding Jeremy Hunt’s (Health Secretary, 2012—incumbent) 7-day Health Service (toward privatization), and the subsequent NHS Junior Doctor’s Strike that arose. For reference purposes, Table 14.1 illustrates the reworked words (into lyrical social commentary) for the three videos. Highlighting of themes offers a general indication of the language used, from comedic to political. All material belongs to Casetteboy (within the ironic authorship–copyright quagmire).

The first worthy point of discussion regarding “Cameron’s Conference Rap” concerns the musical component: Eminem’s “Lose Yourself” (2002). For youth culture, the reference here is extremely accessible—this is a well-known song, reaching No. 1 in many national music charts (including UK and USA), and the flagstone track to Curtis Hanson’s *8 Mile* (2002). The sociocultural juxtaposition is evident within Casetteboy’s video. Rap’s strong cultural background has immediate associations with a type of class or demographic, echoing the hip-hop uprising from the Bronx in the eighties. This, indeed, has also become an online viral trend with music and comedy. (The juxtaposition of this is not too dissimilar to the resurgence of 1980s and 1990s hip-hop into online viral “thug life” memes: The juxtaposition of the likely with the unlikely—“mick-taking” of political figures through music—has become trendy; Jeffries 2011.) However, Casetteboy’s forté is within the scene-setting and lyrical reworking. There are a number of parallels with the original context of “Lose Yourself”: firstly, the similar idea of Cameron and Eminem both standing and speaking or rapping out about political or social issues; and secondly, Casetteboy’s reworking of the “Thank you, Thank you” at the beginning of the clip—maybe a more subtle reference to Jay-Z’s remix “Encore” (2004) of Linkin’ Park’s “Numb” (2003), and another cultural and geographical reference to New York’s suburbs or boroughs (on this occasion Brooklyn, as opposed to the Bronx). Although these juxtapositions and citations are indeed humorous, the humor is reinforced by many of the lyrics, as seen in Table 14.1—it is the juxtaposition of the likely with the unlikely. Casetteboy rework David Cameron to say things he is unlikely to say—“I’m hardcore and I know the score,” “so let the beat drop”—these are the comedic elements set among the mashed-up words politically driven content. Despite some of the extreme political social commentary (referring to poverty, war, and slavery), the majority of the reworking in this example is playful and comedic. However, in

Table 14.1 Reworked lyrics for “Cameron’s Conference Rap,” “Cassetteboy vs The Snooper’s Charter,” and “vs. Jeremy Hunt”

<i>Cameron’s Conference Rap (2014)</i>	<i>Cassetteboy vs. The Snooper’s Charter (2016b)</i>	<i>vs. Jeremy Hunt (2016a)</i>
<i>I’m hardcore and I know the score</i>	A new law is here	Young doctor, you have to go on strike
<u>And I am disgusted by the poor</u>	That causes decent people to live in fear	I said Young doctor,
<u>And my chums matter more</u>	A new power that allows us to get	If there’s something you don’t like
<u>Because we are the law,</u>	Your browsing history from the internet	<u>The British people want the doctors</u>
<u>And I’ve made sure</u>	But let’s not forget this will affect everybody	<u>To give this government a beating</u>
<u>We’re ready for class war</u>	And it will protect nobody	<u>Cos the Health Secretary refused to grant them</u>
<u>Taking money from the man who works long hours</u>	But I can inspect anybody who disagrees with me	<u>Even one meeting</u>
<u>Giving power to the tycoons in the glass towers</u>	That’s why I want to spy	<i>I remember when I did a shit in an A&E last year</i>
That is why I can look you in the eye, And say	On everyone all the time	<i>I looked up at the doctors and said</i>
<i>This is the party of the motherfuckers</i>	Some people say that’s fine	I hope my policy is clear
<i>We don’t care about them other suckers</i>	But every time you go online	<u>Keeping people fit isn’t really the idea</u>
<i>Because this is the party of the motherfuckers</i>	Every email you sign I’ll be watching you	It’s called Privatisation
<i>And no, I don’t think that’s a dirty word</i>	And my message to the haters I want your communications data	And I want that to happen here
<i>So let the beat drop</i>	As our power will extend	My NHS
<i>I come here with flows right from the top</i>	Politicians and their friends	<u>There’s under-funding in my NHS</u>
Everybody knows if you work in a shop	Can manipulate it for their own ends	<u>Doctors should be working less</u>
We won’t help you, and do you know what?	Every text you send	<u>Not more, but I ignore</u>
People rising from the bottom to the top	Every Facebook friend	
Has got to stop	I’ll be watching you	
	<i>Can’t you see?</i>	
	<i>Your mobile phones will all belong to me</i>	
	Everyone you call, anyone at all	
	Every day, in every way	
	Theresa May and I will be watching you	
	<i>We will look after you</i>	

(continued)

Table 14.1 (continued)

<i>Cameron's Conference Rap (2014)</i>	<i>Cassetteboy vs. The Snooper's Charter (2016b)</i>	<i>vs. Jeremy Hunt (2016a)</i>
<p><u>We have the bravery, To bring back slavery</u> Working in a supermarket, Is just the start of it My friends, <u>There is no job at the end of it</u> You will be working for your benefits, Forever Let me get this off my chest Saying yes, <u>We are selling the NHS</u> And <u>we'll give you less</u> And that is just for starters Even after privatising sticking plasters <u>It is a social disaster</u> That makes our hearts beat faster Now, I am your master The last thing this country needs is Us, the Conservatives Worse than the alternative We don't care if you're driven to despair Don't you dare say <u>It's not fair</u> <i>I'm not saying it's not funny</i> <i>It is for me, I've got loads of money</i> <i>This is the party of the motherfuckers</i> <i>The country is run for me and my muckers</i> <i>This is the party of the motherfuckers</i> <i>We just don't care about them other suckers</i></p>	<p>Wherever you turn, we will be right behind you We will not let you live in private We will use everything at our disposal to find out about you, and your family And we will never forget what we found This is my position, I don't need reasonable suspicion But if you <u>sign online petitions, expect the Spanish Inquisition</u> Think of your own smart phone It's no longer a no-go zone It's under attack, because we will hack All the technology you own All the technology you own What can I see with these new abilities? For me the answer is straightforward It's your supermarket rewards and your National Health Service records It's all the information you give to any corporation Every conversation, in every situation, every communication Every website you use, everything you do Every day, in every way, Theresa May and I will be watching you</p>	<p>The opposition to the contract imposition Running down the NHS is One of my successes My NHS <u>I'm not telling the truth about my NHS</u> <u>Yes I seek to trick the public</u> <i>But I'll tell you if you didn't know before</i> <i>Nightmare Health Secretary</i> <i>Is what NHS stands for</i></p>

KEY: *Comedic Satire/Irony* **Extreme Political Commentary** **Strong Political Commentary** Mild Political Commentary

Source Cassetteboy (2014, 2016a, b)

the forthcoming discussions on “Cassetteboy vs. The Snooper’s Charter” and “vs. Jeremy Hunt,” I suggest this humor (albeit clever editing) is substituted for activist propaganda, where the videos become increasingly political and less lyrically comedic. In interview, Cassetteboy say:

I hesitate to use the word “message,” but there is a political stance that’s being expressed through our videos, that reflect our political outlook. [...] The idea of making a coherent rap, with words that make sense, in a rhythm, and that rhymed, was pretty ambitious. With Party Conference Speeches you’ve got an hour of one person on a stage talking about a wide range of subjects: health; foreign policy; education etc., so you can juxtapose all the vocabulary from those different subjects. You’ve got an hour of someone talking very bombastically, very forcefully [...] and most importantly, you can get the full text of the speech online, which makes it possible to do as an ambitious mash-up as we did. (Interview 1 with *Mike from Cassetteboy* 2016)

With regards to the song choice and lyrics, Mike says:

Song choice is partly what we can find – is an instrumental version of the track released or later leaked online? That’s an essential part of it. With Eminem there’s no direct link with David Cameron, and lyrically, there’s no kind of crossover. But it’s a very well-known instrumental (with rap speech) so all the attention goes on the words and the editing. [...] I think the music definitely makes the videos more shareable. It wraps it all up in a neat package that you can listen to again and again. It’s probably why our political rap songs are more effective than our other videos. (Interview 1 with *Mike from Cassetteboy* 2016)

Cassetteboy’s use of the words “probably” and “effective” here leads to a third point: Does “effective” mean gaining laughs (online) from their comedic lines, or does it mean communication and exposure of the political issue? In “Cassetteboy vs. The Snooper’s Charter” and “vs. Jeremy Hunt,” we see examples of Cassetteboy prompting their online viewers to visit political campaign Web sites and directing their audience toward signing petitions. A further issue, especially with regard to “probably,” is, how successful are these promotions, and who (if anyone) is monitoring this? Regarding the outreach to the online audience, Baker’s paper correctly notes that at the time of the 2015 General Election, “Cameron’s Conference Rap” “racked up over four million views on YouTube, while

Cameron’s real speech only reached around 50,000” (2014, 134). Furthermore, a glimpse can be gained by considering the comments attached to Cassetteboy’s videos. Cassetteboy’s typical videos, which are driven by comedy, such as “The Apprentice,” have comedy-driven comments, and comments praising how clever the mash-ups are. These types of comments continue with Cassetteboy’s increasingly politically driven videos; however, there is a clear increase in the politically driven comments (and comments between users) on how accurate the editing is:

YouTube User: I’m not impressed. All you did was take a tory speech and put a beat in the background.

YouTube User: Why did you just upload a David Cameron Speech? You could have done some editing at least!

YouTube User: First time I heard this I thought it was funny, but after having actually listened to the lyrics of it, I realize how everything being said is true and relatable to Cameron. I’m not sure whether to laugh, or be angry.

YouTube User: Cassetteboy is a genius, the lyrics are well chosen and finally Cameron is telling the truth.

With “Cameron’s Conference Rap,” Cassetteboy’s reworking of speeches aims to ridicule the Conservative policies in a humorous way. However, in “vs. Jeremy Hunt” (Table 14.1), Cassetteboy are comparatively more one-sided, with an aim to expose the issues surrounding the NHS: Cassetteboy are obviously “pro”-Junior Doctors. This is reinforced by their accompanying commentary to the video: “Jeremy hunt should stop telling us how reckless and dangerous the Junior Doctor’s strikes are, because trained medical professional clearly feel his policies are for more reckless and dangerous.” This is undoubtedly political commentary, and a contrast to their typical work—especially when considering that their YouTube fame was founded on entirely comedic content. However here, the political issue is quite clear, as Mike from Cassetteboy explains:

There was a lot of news coverage on the strike, and the politicians were allowed to frame the debate in a way that the Junior Doctors didn’t like. Politicians were allowed to say that the Junior Doctors were being lazy, or being greedy, or that a 7-day NHS would be safer – although the stats didn’t bear that out. And the junior doctors were saying “hang on – it’s about making it safer for patients and it’s about saving the creeping

privatization of the NHS.” And that point of view didn’t get expressed. [...] So with that one we had a very clear point that we wanted to do something that would spread that message, and help! I was very much on the side of the Junior Doctors, and we wanted to help – and it seemed like that was the message they were trying to get out. (Interview 1 with *Mike from Cassetteboy* 2016)

It seems obvious that Mike from Cassetteboy recognizes that their work is political commentary. However, the crux of the issue is with regard to the impact of such political and social commentary. In the same interview, he says: “I followed a lot of junior doctors on Twitter and they were tweeting interviews where they *had* managed to say a lot – so I just wanted to amplify that message a little bit” (Interview 1 with *Mike from Cassetteboy* 2016). The issue I presented Cassetteboy with was the proposal that it is online media like this that can actually amplify things *a lot* rather than “a little bit.”

Cassetteboy, as has been stated, have millions of followers and have been prominent in the media: They have even been interviewed by BBC News. At the close of the “vs. Jeremy Hunt” video, Cassetteboy show a screen reading “Junior Doctors are striking to protect patient safety and the future of the NHS,” with the attached Twitter hashtag #isupportjuniorDoctors. There is very little argument for this video being anything other than a political message dressed as humor. Indeed, there are comedic elements to it—it is the usual Cassetteboy, “clever” and entertaining, but this seems merely a veil over a strong, political undercurrent, or even agenda. This is reflected by YouTube comments: Themes of comedy and creativity (e.g., of using The Village People’s “YMCA”) are still there, but much of the focus of the online discussion is political messages from users continuing to attack Hunt. Cassetteboy are using YouTube not only to host their work, but also to allow online users to engage in political discussion(s) (see YouTube comments below). This latter point may be arguably unintentional on Cassetteboy’s part, however, there is a strong sense activism in their work, albeit wrapped up as showbiz.

YouTube User: Absolutely brilliant. Hunt has been destroying the NHS for years by stealth and continues to use my local hospital as a political stick to beat it with. The man is an odious, hypocritical liar. The junior doctors deserve all the support they can get against being vilified and demonized by Hunt and his cronies in Whitehall and the right-wing

media. They've certainly got mine. And this video nails him to the wall. Well done.

YouTube User: Glorious, unlike the Tories' treatment of our beloved NHS ☹️

YouTube User: Absolutely brilliant video as always cassetteboy. Thank you for the support. Doctors in England simply want to look after patients in a safe environment. Hunt's contract will discriminate against women, it will reduce weekday cover and weaken the hours monitoring that currently exists. It'll lead to doctors working even more unpaid hours, exhaustion and a higher risk of making mistakes. As a young doctor I and many others I know will leave the country if this unsafe contract is imposed but before that I will fight to protect our NHS. Lastly we do not want a pay rise, if we were back on our old contract and imposition was removed, there would be no further strikes.

YouTube User: Fantastic work and bang on the money politically! Kudos to you Cassetteboy! And let's all support our junior doctors and our NHS before this muppet destroys our greatest institution.

These themes are evermore noticeable and arguable in their video “vs. The Snoopers' Charter” (2016b). This particular video, which uses The Police's “Every Breath You Take” (1983), is political activism against the Communications Data Bill. “Mike” supports this claim: “this was developed in conjunction with the Privacy International charity – the whole point of that video was to drive people towards that, to the petition for that campaign” (interview with *Mike from Cassetteboy* 2016). Cassetteboy are approaching their online fan base of comedy and entertainment, and projecting political propaganda, where they invite their viewers to join the campaign:

If you're not worried about the Investigatory Powers Bill (aka the Snoopers' Charter), you don't know enough about it.

Visit <https://www.privacyinternational.org> and join the campaign against new Government snooping powers. (“The Snoopers' Charter” 2016b)

Additionally, user comments support the notion that this work is more for political purpose than for comedic value: There are trails of online political discussion not just attached to these videos, but inspired by these videos.

YouTube User: Politicians in the UK just get worse and worse, there's no one fighting for the right thing anymore!, it's all about power and money!

YouTube User: This comes into law before the New Year. But it will change nothing, fairly sure the terrorists don't use twitter to plan attacks. I will be working on nuclear decay encryption, let's see how much it costs them to find out I spend 90% of my life on boring YouTube moaning about lmao.

YouTube User: "The War on Terror" is NOT about fighting terrorism—the government is arming and supporting terrorists in Syria to try and overthrow Assad and install a U.S. puppet leader, which will give the U.S. more control over the Middle East. But it also risks putting terrorists in control of Syria. Assad is no threat to the U.S., but he U.S. & U.K. are prepared to kill 90% of the Syrian population if necessary to get what they want, so it's not about saving lives either. Destroying Iraq gave us ISIS. They're increasing terrorism, NOT fighting it!

YouTube User: Also worth noting that not only are they gathering this data on every UK citizen (except MPs) they are giving free rein of that information to tens of thousands of people (including the gambling regular and food safety regulator). It will be a leak of information like none we have ever seen.

YouTube User: "they are gathering data on every UK citizen **except MPs**" yes, the real criminals are protecting their communications.

YouTube User: Well the petition that gathered 130,000 signatures in 6 days was responded to today, with basically 'no we feel we did a great job here'.

These videos, resting on musical reference, are encouraging online dialogue and discourse on politics off the back of commission work by charities, and when questioned on this, "Mike" was extremely open with his viewpoint:

I would not be happy to make things if they're not what I personally agree with. We wouldn't make a video for UKIP or for the Tories – we would hesitate to make a video for Labour even, I'd imagine. We've done three videos like that: we did a video for Amnesty International; we did a video for Greenpeace (an anti-fracking video); and we've done the Privacy International one. Essentially, we have only done commission work that has been from charities, and they've all been things that we have had opinions on: we're against the arms trade; we're against fracking; and we're against the Snooper's Charter. Certainly with the Snooper's Charter,

through working with Privacy International, we learnt a lot more about it, and we learnt a lot more reasons to be against it, but we wouldn't create a video that went directly against our beliefs. (Interview 1 with *Mike from Cassetteboy* 2016)

CONCLUSIONS

There is no doubt that *Cassetteboy* are tackling political topics: This is evident. But I question the extent to which this has become political propaganda, and if so, the extent to which this is noticeable to the everyday YouTuber. I wanted to address this with Cassetteboy and posed to him the following question: “[g]iven the amount of online followers you have, and the trails of online discussion on policies that feature in your videos do you feel or at least recognize that you have the capacity to influence the online culture’s political views through your mash-up music videos?” Seemingly answering the question quite cautiously, “Mike” replied:

No. Actually, I don't know. Actually, I don't really want to think about it. I don't want to feel like we should be responsible for putting out political messages because at some point we will want to be just silly again. Satirists and comedians hopefully don't have all the answers, otherwise they'd be politicians and trying to enact those answers. At the end of the day, we want to make entertaining content – and when that spreads a message that we believe in and that we feel is important, then so much the better, but people should not be relying on us to put across a well-argued or balanced case. – they shouldn't make up their minds about anything important based on one of our mash-ups. (Interview 1 with *Mike from Cassetteboy* 2016)

However, my proposition is that even if Cassetteboy do not want to think about their impact, it needs thinking about, particularly since their videos are engaging and accessible to certain demographics—notably Generation M. The mundane and sometimes intimidating field of politics, to some, can be easily accessed through music, humor, and entertainment, through the likes of Cassetteboy videos. I followed this up again with Mike from Cassetteboy in my second interview with him.

Question: The last time we spoke, I made suggestions about your work becoming increasingly political, and that there is a sense of political

advertising posing as comedy. It's great to see that you still producing videos like the BBC's *Football Pundits* ("Cassetteboy Vs World Cup Pundits" 2018b), and indeed comedy with political figures too such as the "Cassetteboy vs Piers Morgan vs. Trump" (2018a) video. But do you still maintain that "Cassetteboy" is first and foremost comedy entertainment? Or, if not, how would you term the work that you do?

Answer: I don't know. I guess I would say, the political ones—you'd maybe equate them more with like a political cartoon that you'd see in a newspaper—they rarely make you laugh, but they do make a political comment by creating something ludicrous and distorted. It's certainly not serious political journalism, and it's also not necessarily hilariously funny, but it's entertaining and has something to say as well (Interview 2 with *Mike from Cassetteboy* 2018).

Thus we need explore the impacts of these videos further, and I will close this chapter by querying how we can do this. The discipline of ethnomusicology rests on its method: going to cultures, observing behaviors, evaluating music in society, using photography and film to video and document what is happening (*etic*), or embedding ourselves within the culture (*emic*). How can such a geographical, physical method develop to cater for our online, virtual spaces—in other words, how can we rework an ethnomusicological model toward a better "cyberethnomusicology" (Williams 2018)? How can the fields of Internet ethnography, and digital sociology and anthropology expand to allow further exploration and monitoring of the online sociopolitical behaviors arising from music mash-up videos? Marketing textbooks have demonstrated the extent to which viral music vines and memes can influence consumers to buy into their product, yet we need to explore such musical influences with regard to politics and online demographics.

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NOTE

1. Cassetteboy now publish online. However, in the late 1980s and 1990s, they published their mashup work on cassette, as detailed below.

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