
Post-Internet Music: Negotiating Queer Identity in the Digital Era

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My paper investigates an electronic music genre that emerged in the 2010s, in conjunction with the rise of attention to identity politics on mainstream platforms. The genre does not have a definite name; however, attempts have been made by critics (see, for example, Waugh 2017) to categorise it under the umbrella term “post-internet music”. Such a label encompasses different and often competing sub-genres, all of which nonetheless share an imbrication in internet discourse: these range from “Hyperpop”, to “Deconstructed Club”, to “Conceptronica” (Reynolds 2019). As such, the post-internet genre has three distinguishing features: a) many artists operating within it identify both themselves and their music as queer; b) on the sonic side, the genre often comprises complex sound design, loud mixes, a wide stereo field, organic drum samples, pitched-up vocals, and beats that elude conventional time-signatures, so as to sound “deconstructed”; c) the music often makes overt or subtle reference to internet culture, and the digital domain. I seek to place particular attention to the conjuncture between the genre’s sonic properties and its “queerness”, arguing that the genre is both enabled by, but also enables, internet-mediated identity categories. In this sense, I question what it means to be queer in the contemporary neoliberal era, how this might historically differ from previous elaborations of queerness, and to what extent electronic music – a genre so entrenched in masculinist narratives of technology – can act as a vehicle for counter-normative expression.

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Post-Internet Music: Negotiating Queer Identity in the Digital Era

Lucia Affaticati

This paper is a discourse analysis addressing an electronic music genre defined by Michael Waugh as the “post-internet” genre and assessing its cultural status as the contemporary musical declension of queerness.¹ This genre emerged in the early 2010s in correspondence with the increase of press attention to issues of identity politics and is associated with the contemporary queer community due to its artists’ alleged affiliation with it. It is unique in the use of heavy distortion, pitched-up samples, loud, dynamic mixes, and “aggressive, frantic sound design featuring metallic, explosive percussion or samples of glass smashing, gunshots, etc”.² As such, there are two identifiable ways in which the genre can be considered queer. Queer discourse is animated by the artists who subscribe to it. As will become clearer in this article, it also sounds queer in as much as, upon a first listen at least, it redirects senses in different configurations compared to other electronic music genres – mostly from the Electronic Dance Music (henceforth EDM) tradition – which use repetition of loops and beats as their principal formal structure.

Michael Waugh uses “post-internet” as an umbrella term for a discrete set of artists who converge in their political self-positioning and make profuse references to internet culture. This term is in direct dialogue with the post-digital turn, a trend in artistic production that took shape in the early 2010s and which set itself the task of engaging profusely with the affordances of, and philosophical questions that emerge with, digital spaces.³ While the concept of the “post-digital” is mostly addressed in the field of visual arts, little has been written about post-digital – or, better, post-internet – music either in academia or in music journalism. My research reveals that “post-internet” is not employed outside of Waugh’s text, and the genre is either talked about as “deconstructed club” (where “club” is used as a metonym for repetitive rhythmic patterns that the genre seeks to shake), “Conceptronica” (a neologism coined by Simon Reynolds initially to describe the music of Intelligent Dance Music duo Matmos, then repurposed

¹ Michael Waugh, “My Laptop Is an Extension of My Memory and Self”: Post-Internet Identity, Virtual Intimacy and Digital Queering in Online Popular Music’, *Popular Music*, 36.2 (2017).

² *Deconstructed Club*, <<https://rateyourmusic.com/genre/deconstructed-club/>>.

³ See David M. Berry and Michael Dieter, *Postdigital Aesthetic: Art, Computation and Design* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

to explain the music genre in question's dependence on academic or politically elaborate concepts), or "Hyperpop" (a term invented by the founder of PC Music label to describe the sonic palette of the artists working within his label, where heavy use of hyper-inflated samples from pop music is made). While there is a slight difference in the specificities of the three terms, there is also intersection in the labelling of certain artists as belonging to all three categories, mostly because the three terms designate, foremost, a particular approach to sound design, privileging deconstructing rhythmic patterns and distorted sound textures. In the journalistic purview of all three sub-genres, moreover, special attention is placed on their association with queerness.

I maintain that the most encompassing term used by the press to contextualise the post-internet genre is that of *Conceptronica* – a portmanteau of "concept" and "electronica" – which highlights the conceptual baggage of the genre, of which identitarian questions are part and parcel, but also places the genre in the historical continuum of Electronic Dance Music. As such, it simultaneously highlights the genre's engagement with academic discourse on gender *and* its imbrication in the leisure economy of dance music. This paper argues that the term *Conceptronica* is the closest journalistic approximation to the concept of 'post-internet': while the latter term is born of an academic tradition of placing artistic efforts in the midst of a clear historicity of ideological framing, the former term raises concerns as to the extent to which an EDM genre largely relevant to the leisure economy can indeed sustain its academically-informed position-taking. The paper will thus proceed in the following order: initially, I will give an overview of the state of the field with regards to queerness, electronic music, and the way these are being elaborated today. Then, I will explain how giving this elaboration a sociological dimension – through an analysis of press discourse – can give an indication of the historically specific way queerness is entering and attempting to resist the battlefield of cultural hegemony. I will develop my argument through a comparative analysis of three articles that engage with the notion of *Conceptronica*.

Post-internet music and the journalistic suture

Waugh claims that the post-internet genre differentiates itself from other electronic genres for its heavy referentiality to cyborg and internet culture.⁴ The engagement with virtual space and internet space comes with a new understanding of what it means to

⁴ Waugh, p. 235.

have a body which is traversed by technology.⁵ This has important implications for how gender and identity politics factors into artistry:

[t]he web is now such a critical aspect of everyday lives that 'distinct virtual and analogue spaces have collapsed', meaning that people are 'online all the time' even when not physically staring at a screen [...]. This has changed 'our behaviours [and] even the way we think', leading to art that studies the ramifications for identity in a world that is simultaneously digital and analogue, virtual and physical, cybernetic and organic.⁶

The web affords artists the possibility to take on new identities, without having to submit permanently to any of them. This is in line with some tenets of queer theory.⁷ Here queerness is articulated as the constitutive outside of the hegemonic heterosexual matrix. As heteronormativity is not itself stable, queerness becomes an articulation of identity that is in response and opposition to historically specific enactments of heteronormativity. To Edelman

politics may function as the framework within which we experience social reality, but only insofar as it compels us to experience that reality in the form of a fantasy: the fantasy ... of an order... that assures the stability of our identities as subjects and the coherence of the Imaginary totalizations through which those identities appear to us in recognizable form.⁸

Edelman equates politics with fantasy because the former, as the guarantor of social and linguistic order, rests on the assumption that subjects can be identified through language, that our subjecthood can only be made to cohere when it can signify. Yet this promise of coherence can only ever be realised through *imagining* that we *are* that which we name, that we are either queer or heteronormative, that we are part of the master narrative or that we are not. This still makes identity- whether normative or not – a promise to be fulfilled linguistically and performatively. The convergence of gender identity and of creativity can only be understood, therefore, when looking at how it relates back to conventions, how it reifies them, and whether it creates new norms in its acts of defiance.

⁵ Born and Haworth (2017) maintain that the continuous emergence of new electronic music genres making direct reference to the internet environment is an effect of "new modes of internet-based distribution, circulation, and disintermediation on the music industries; the novel possibilities for internet-based musical performance; and the potential for music recommendation and discovery systems presented by online databases" (601). Ivey (2009) argues that such a shift to internet-based modes of consumption and circulation of music is so monumental, that it calls for a complete restructuring of the discipline of ethnomusicology, so that it may now focus on music produced in the wake of and in direct reference to the "digital revolution" (29).

⁶ Waugh, p. 234.

⁷ For example, of queer theory, see Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter on the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (Abingdon, Oxon ; Routledge, 2011); Margot Weiss, 'ALWAYS AFTER: Desiring Queerness, Desiring Anthropology', *Cultural Anthropology*, 31.4 (2016), 627-38.

⁸ Edelman, p. 7.

The extent to which artistic endeavours and identitarian position-taking defy norms is difficult to assess in a system ruled by capitalist abstraction, where all identities can be subsumed under the law of commodification and can thus be reified as marketable goods. With the advent of what Alain Badiou has called the “world-market” to refer to an economic configuration which “imposes the rule of an abstract homogenization [whereby] Everything that circulate falls under the unity of a count” difference is not necessarily obliterated but is waged by market forces to promote ever-new products and ever new modes of consumption.⁹ Badiou explains how every identity formation

authorizes new products, specialized magazines, improved shopping malls, “free” radio station, targeted advertising networks.... Capital demands a permanent creation of subjective and territorial identities in order for its principle of movement to homogenize its space of action... The capitalist logic of the general equivalent and the identitarian and cultural logic of communities of minorities form an articulated whole.¹⁰

While queerness should reconfigure itself outside of the margin of sellable identities, it falls prey to market dynamics that delineate its structural confines and subsume it to just another marketable identity. Media discourse in this configuration is a type of double-edged sword, as it allows queerness to gain exposure and pierce through the orthodoxy of dominant straight discourse, but at the same time exposes it to the laws of monetary subsumption and reduces it to a commodity among many, producing nameable subjects that do not properly exist outside the dominant social order.

Media discourse is in fact used to delineate the boundaries of what is considered legitimate in artistic forms, and as such it holds the capacity to generate new norms against which successive artistic forms and products are evaluated.¹¹ Critics’ expert status can produce “symbolic profit for artists and other arts professionals in the shape of fame, reputation or legitimacy”.¹² Perhaps echoing Badiou, current research on media discourse suggests that art criticism does not, however, always exist as a pure form of criticism in itself but is also pressured by market forces to adhere to promotional forms.¹³ While criticism aimed solely at appraising the legitimacy of artistic forms still exists, there are also instances where art criticism may function as different types of publicity. In music criticism, this is evident from the fact that reviews of albums and artists are often placed within newspaper

⁹ Badiou, p. 9.

¹⁰ Waugh, p. 10–11.

¹¹ Pierre Bourdieu, and Randall Johnson, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993).

¹² Stéphane Debenedetti, ‘The Role of Media Critics in the Cultural Industries’, *International Journal of Arts Management*, 8.3 (2006), p. 30.

¹³ Ibid.

formats that blend different types of lifestyle journalism and artistic criticism. This allows legitimating practices in music to exist in tandem with other legitimising practices outside of music, forming a discursive continuum between music and lifestyles, and feeding back into the principle of abstract homogenisation. In short, the symbolic and economic power that music journalists hold does not only allow them to legitimise or delegitimise musical products, but also to forge ideologies by creating linguistic and symbolic sutures between music and social and ideological communities, promoting a seemingly fluid and overt connection between political values, lifestyle values, and musical choices.

I chose the media platforms *Pitchfork*, *TinyMixtapes*, and *Mada s* cases for analysis for two reasons. To date, they appear as the only independent, yet influential media platforms to have published long-form articles on *Conceptronica* in the English language. Evidence of this is that their articles have generated a flurry of discussion on online forums and independent blogs. Secondly, the three platforms have different agendas, making them particularly ripe for comparison. *Pitchfork* is a North American online music review magazine considered “a dominant voice in the field of music production, distribution and consumption and, in this way, [one which] has a major influence on how artists and genres are perceived [...] reviews on Pitchfork are deemed highly influential in the making (or breaking) of artists”.¹⁴ *Tiny Mix Tapes* is a liberal online magazine with a primarily Western sphere of influence, like *Pitchfork*.¹⁵ It, however, differs from the latter because of its wider thematic scope. The platform publishes “news, reviews, and features on every single style of music *in existence*”, and its writers are so well-versed in popular culture that they purport to “like films, politics, satire, and irreverence too”.¹⁶ Proof of this is the make-up of the staff, largely composed of authors writing under aliases and all the while flaunting an active participation in the cultural field: as the website states, “in addition to the inordinate amount of Marxists on staff, one of our writers was arrested for a terrorist hoax. Thus, [...] it is [...] a sheer love of cultural critique that keep[s] Tiny Mix Tapes in greased, working order”.¹⁷ Compared to *Pitchfork*, whose concern with music is primarily spurred by a modernist impulse for categorisation, *Tiny Mix Tapes* spells out its legitimacy in terms of the tautology cultural activism as political activism.

¹⁴ Stijn Daenekindt, and Julian Schaap. 2022. “Using Word Embedding Models to Capture Changing Media Discourses: A Study on the Role of Legitimacy, Gender and Genre in 24,000 Music Reviews, 1999–2021.” *Journal of Computational Social Science* 5 (2), p. 1621.

¹⁵ Note that the platform has been on hiatus since January 2020.

¹⁶ *Tiny Mix Tapes Homepage*. <<https://www.tinymixtapes.com/about>> [accessed 03 April 2024].

¹⁷ *Tiny Mix Tapes Homepage*.

Finally, *Mada Masr* is an Egyptian independent online newspaper with a fraught political history. Its staff reports about Egypt in both English and Arabic, and its aim is that of “producing intelligent and engaging journalism, and more generally in re-examining the role of media in relation to its public”.¹⁸ The platform prides itself in having been born of the work of mostly women but is now composed of “about half men and half women”.¹⁹ Similar to *Tiny Mix Tapes*, *Mada Masr* also declares itself to be highly committed to politics. Its website reads: “Mada is the Arabic word for span or scope, which is the field of coverage we want to construct and reconstruct. It is also an old word for the groove holding the stone of a gem in its setting — a symbol of the act of taking a position”.²⁰ The website was banned in Egypt in 2017, accused by the Egyptian government to have been founded by the “Muslim Brotherhood”, a now disbanded terrorist group, with the express intent of spreading fake news.²¹ It is clear that the three platforms under examination have three very different places in the arena of popular culture. While *Mada Masr* is committed to providing “intelligent news” to the world despite, or perhaps because of, its censure in Egypt, *Tiny Mix Tapes* can delight in quippy remarks on its editorial staff’s political activism. All the while, *Pitchfork’s* bird’s eye view on the music industry exempts it from any overt political position-taking, if not from afar. As my analysis will attempt to show, the three angles taken on Conceptronica in these platforms will reveal that the term “politics” has very different significations in the Western and the non-Western sphere.

Conceptronica and the issue of queerness

Simon Reynolds, writing for Pitchfork, begins his inquiry into genre by arguing that it does not have a distinctive sound, but that it exists as a congregation of artists sharing a distinctive political vision.²² He explains:

at some point during the 2010s it seemed like a steady stream of press releases started arriving in my inbox that read like the text at the entrance of a museum exhibit. I also noticed that the way I would engage with these releases actually resembled a visit to a museum or gallery: often listening just once, while reading reviews and interviews with the artist that could

¹⁸ *About Us*. <<https://www.madamasr.com/en/about-us/>> [accessed 01 April 2024].

¹⁹ *About Us*. <<https://www.madamasr.com/en/about-us/>> [accessed 01 April 2024].

²⁰ *About Us*. <<https://www.madamasr.com/en/about-us/>> [accessed 01 April 2024].

²¹ See “Egypt’s prosecution says news website Mada Masr founded by banned Muslim Brotherhood” <<https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/356614/Egypt/Politics-/Egypst-prosecution-says-news-website-Mada-Masr-fou.aspx>>.

²² Simon Reynolds, “The Rise of Conceptronica Electronic Music” <<https://pitchfork.com/features/article/2010s-rise-of-conceptronica-electronic-music/>> [accessed 18 November 2023].

be as forbiddingly theoretical as a vintage essay from *Artforum*. These conceptual works rarely seemed like records to live alongside in a casual, repeat-play way. They were statements to encounter and assimilate [...] Their framing worked as a pitch to the browsing consumer, not so much to buy the release but to buy *into* it.²³

According to Reynolds, the genre does not have legitimacy simply as music, but only acquires meaning when translated into written text and, sometimes, audio-visual text. The first standing feature of Conceptoronica, then, is that it is trans-medial. He takes the work of queer artist Chino Amobi as exemplary of such efforts of translation and trans-mediality: his 2017 album *Paradiso* comprises a surfeit of allusions to literary works (such as Dante's *Inferno* and *The Odyssey*) and video-games (e.g: *Final Fantasy*), and is set to become "a film, a graphic novel, a play, an art exhibition, even garment production". Reynolds then illustrates how the perceived difficulty upon a first listen of the genre derives from the vision that the artists operating within it seek to construct. Borrowing a term from video-game discourse, he defines the ambition of these artists as one of "world-building". The argument goes thus: stuck in a world of surveillance and consumer capitalism, these artists attempt to dislodge the current structures of power by forging new sonic, visual, and literary worlds in which listeners can immerse themselves. By attempting to encapsulate the zeitgeist of our time into their music and then tweaking it to sound uncanny, the artists create lateral pathways towards new futures to be imagined.

Similarly, writing for Tinymixtapes, Matthew Phillips calls this way of making music "neofuturist".²⁴ While electronic music has always been associated with the future because "Our aliens, our robots, our hoverboards all sound like synthesizers", this genre is *neo-* because of the dialogue that its artists openly establish with the concepts of 'present and future'.²⁵ He explains:

In 2015's musical landscape, a stream of music seemed to flow from the future, utilizing digital technologies like granular synthesis, processor-intensive DAW plugins, and musical programming languages such as MaxMSP to construct new images of the future through the lens of the present.²⁶

²³ Simon Reynolds, "The Rise of Conceptoronica Electronic Music".

²⁴ Matthew Phillips, "2015: The Neofuturist Aesthetic", <https://www.tinymixtapes.com/features/2015-neofuturist-aesthetic> [accessed 18 November 2023].

²⁵ Ken McLeod (2003) explains how the linkage created in popular culture between space-related imagery and 'futuristic' music has been historically propelled by a fascination with the unknown (337). This coupling of music with alien/robot imagery has its roots in the rock-and-roll genre but extends to "the glam rock of George Clinton's funk stylings, the astro-jazz of Sun Ra, the reggae-dub mixes of Lee Perry, [...] the urban genres of hip hop and techno dance music" (340). McLeod further explains how "space and alien themes are [particularly] integral to a musical stream of Afro-futurism in which artists project empowering images of black power through futuristic imagery and control of technology." (*ibid.*)

²⁶ Matthew Phillips, "2015: The Neofuturist Aesthetic".

According to Phillips, the neo-futurist genre is innovative because its artists push technology to the foreground of their tracks, obliging their listeners to listen to music and to the social implications of technology at once.²⁷ Such a harnessing of technology for compositional purposes is not new and finds its main precedent in the late 1990s phenomenon of “glitch music”, a genre where the sound of technological error and malfunctioning was used for rhythmic purposes in order to place attention onto the technological ubiquity that shapes our everyday lives.²⁸ Nonetheless, Phillips contends, Conceptionica distinguishes itself for the importance it places on the utopian capacity that an engagement with technology holds: no longer content with just representing its centrality to modern life, artists operating with Conceptionica seek to imagine ways in which technology can be repurposed towards more sustainable goals than the ones hegemonically endorsed.

Thereafter, both Reynolds and Phillips identify three main standing features of the genre, providing it with an articulation that consecrates it as a legitimate genre with definite characteristics: a) the fact that it is politically-informed and politically-driven; b) the fact that it offers itself as a sort of ‘antidote’ to the issues it tries to address; c) the fact that it proposes itself as an antidote because it is ‘futuristic’ and innovative.²⁹ Reynolds suggests that the genre differentiates itself from previous electronic dance music genres (such as House) which created a sense of political resistance through the liberating physical responses that they evoked in their listeners. On the other hand, Conceptionica evokes political arousal only when considered from the standpoint of the ideologies that its artists attempt to push. As a consequence,

Conceptual electronic music still draws sustenance from dance music at its most mental and mindless-beats purpose-built for druggy all-night bacchanals. But although it uses the rhythmic tools of body music, it doesn’t primarily aim to elicit a physical response. It’s music to contemplate with your ears, to think about and think with.³⁰

This instantiates a quandary as to whether this music can offer the liberatory pathways it aims for, given that most artists subscribing to it identify as queer. Queerness exists as a sort of negative by-product of straight, hegemonic identity. As such, it resists articulation

²⁷ Matthew Phillips, “2015: The Neofuturist Aesthetic”.

²⁸ See Kim Cascone, ‘The Aesthetics of Failure: “Post-Digital” Tendencies in Contemporary Computer Music’, *Computer Music Journal*, 24.4 (2000), 12–18.

²⁹ David Brackett calls this process of genre articulation a “meaning-producing relationship [which] extends beyond what occurs between a text and a listener and depends on a feedback loop in which ideas and assumptions about genre circulate among music producers (musicians and music-industry workers), audience members, and critics”.

³⁰ Simon Reynolds, “The Rise of Conceptionica Electronic Music”.

or necessitates continuous rearticulation. With *Conceptronica*, this resistance to articulation is found within the character of the music itself. Phillips explains that the trademark sound employed by *Conceptronica* artists largely consists of a deconstruction of established musical patterns:

Electronic music often moves along a fixed path set by the sequencer, the autocratic clock that organizes all of its notes. This phenomenon is perhaps most important in club music, where synchronized rhythms define the motions of bodies in space... By contrast, the neofuturist works from this year exhibit a sense of motion and arrest that is often built directly into the rhythmic structure of the track. Moments of arrest receive a sonic weight that is equal to that of the motion forward. In this way, stillness checks the acceleration of speed, complicating the symbol of forward progress with images of crisis.³¹

Queerness, in this sense, is built inside the music through deconstructed beats, shifts in motion, and a rhythm that mutates so often it is difficult for the body to track. In this way, the music offers no resolution, mirroring the anti-dialectical historicity of queerness. For example, Lotic's track "Trauma" features a simple melody and a beat composed of heavily distorted drum and vocal samples. The four-note melody is repeated continuously until halfway through the track, giving no sense of melodic progression.³² The beat is also initially repeated, but each time, a new element is either added to it, or a new beat structure is introduced. As a result, the track keeps mutating rhythm, with the melody and the beat going into seemingly disparate directions. The beat progressively takes up more and more space to the point that, halfway through the track, the melody is obliterated altogether. At this point, the beat has become so cacophonous, polyrhythmic, and intense, that the listener can no longer detect any traces of its initial structure. Towards the end of the track, a chord progression violently superimposes itself onto the beat, causing it to slowly deconstruct, until only small samples of it can be heard. This is to the effect that the track does not follow a teleological structure. The only stability it assumes is in the intensity with which its different sounds coalesce.

At the same time, queerness is also built in the music through the emphasis that the artists place on staging and performance, and especially on their "artistic voice".³³ Reynolds explains how many *Conceptronica* artists "use their voices, they feature in artwork and in videos, and live, there is often a theatrical staging of the artist as a physical

³¹ Matthew Phillips, "2015: The Neofuturist Aesthetic".

³² Lotic. *Trauma*. (Janus: Berlin, 2015) [on CD].

³³ See Catherine Laws and others, *Voices, Bodies, Practices: Performing Musical Subjectivities* (Leuven (Belgium): Leuven University Press, 2019).

being”.³⁴ The self-staging of artists mitigates the sense of acousmatic all-pervasiveness of the music by directing back attention to its source: the performer’s body. Concurrently, this emphasis on physicality allows the artists to place into question traditional notions of selfhood. Reynolds takes the case of queer artist SOPHIE to explain how the technology and the aesthetic used by Conceptronica artists allows them to experiment with their voices and bodies.

SOPHIE’s “Faceshopping” is a striking example of the producer stepping forward to front her music. The 2018 song and video works simultaneously as a critique and a celebration of the idea of self-as-brand, drawing inspiration equally from 21st century social media and from the tradition of flamboyant display in ballroom and drag. A digital simulacrum of SOPHIE’s face- already a stylized mask of makeup- is shattered and reconstituted using computer-animation effects.³⁵

This celebration of physicality notwithstanding, there remains a paradox in the fact that Conceptronica does not offer the type of physical or mental liberation that one would expect from a genre (a) so deeply steeped in posthuman queer theory and (b) derivative of EDM. As Reynolds notes, this music is not affective enough to evoke a bodily response, and instead requires an attentive mental listening in order not just to be appreciated, but also understood.³⁶

Similarly, to Phillips, the harshness and complexity of the sounds stymies the music from concretely providing listeners with possible futures to imagine – thereby allowing a bodily release and a sense of relief from the nihilism of contemporary capitalism – and rather envelopes the listener into incessantly violent sonic textures which, being in a constant state of battle over each other, provide no catharsis. In effect, Phillips questions the futurism of the genre when considering how eerily similar it sounds to the everyday conditions its listeners are trying to escape.³⁷ Hence, the sound’s codification as utopian and queer does not, on the other side, decode as liberatory. While Phillip is quick to explain how Conceptronica artists “seek[...] refuge from shattering events” by building a “space [which] operates both within the matrix of technology but also beyond it, in spaces that technology struggles to imitate and infiltrate [...] the human body”, the conceptual complexity of their musical output struggles to find a place outside the mind of its listeners.³⁸ Nevertheless, Phillip closes his article by consecrating the genre due

³⁴ Simon Reynolds, “The Rise of Conceptronica Electronic Music”.

³⁵ Simon Reynolds, “The Rise of Conceptronica Electronic Music”.

³⁶ Simon Reynolds, “The Rise of Conceptronica Electronic Music”.

³⁷ Matthew Phillips, “2015: The Neofuturist Aesthetic”.

³⁸ Matthew Phillips, “2015: The Neofuturist Aesthetic”.

to its capacity to push “a set of shared values that, in their aim toward the future as becoming, manifest an ultimate intention toward liberation”.³⁹ To the contrary, Reynolds maintains that the genre “rarely provided that sense of release or abandon that you got with ‘90s rave or even from [...] trap, whose commodity-fetishism and sexual politics are counter-revolutionary but which sonically brings the bliss”.⁴⁰

In a direct response to Reynold’s article, Rami Abadir, writing for the Egyptian online newspaper *Mada Masr*, provides a further layer of criticism to the genre.⁴¹ Initially, he attacks its “elitism”: the academic jargon with which the genre is imbued, as well as the overtheorization used “in an attempt to create a sense of legitimacy or depth”, allow it to easily fall into the trap of representation, one which Reynolds had also identified when speaking of the genre’s reliance on trans-mediality to gets its political agenda across. While every musical genre comes with a set of, sometimes competing, political values and attendant political movements, Abadir takes issue at Conceptronica artists’ specific pretence to “favor[...] narrative over music, metaphor over aesthetic, and the literary over the technical”, in this way feeding into the logocentrism that their political program seems to so vehemently attack.⁴² At the same time, Abadir praises the genre for the queer stance many of its artists take and is adamant to explain that it is in this facet of the genre that a real conception of liberation is formulated. He explains how

The personal plays a social and a political role here, as evident in the numerous collaborative projects undertaken by the artists who create this work, which subsequently resonates with audiences going through similar experiences, allowing them to be more open with their sexuality.⁴³

This contrasts with the music itself, which appears to be so laden with discursive signifiers that, as also maintained by Reynolds, the revolution it advocates can only ever be imagined or projected, rather than fulfilled.

Contra Reynolds and Phillips, Abadir is in fact significantly more hesitant about the genre’s ambition to be world-building, even and in spite of its affiliation with queer communities. He explains that “although conceptronica artists deal with urgent and far-reaching issues, one does not find in their work an intention to change the industry and bring about real political transformation” because they depend on the very structures of

³⁹ Matthew Phillips, “2015: The Neofuturist Aesthetic”.

⁴⁰ Simon Reynolds, “The Rise of Conceptronica Electronic Music”.

⁴¹ Rami Abadir, “Conceptronica: On the elitism of contemporary electronic music”, <<https://www.madamasr.com/en/2020/10/26/feature/culture/conceptronica-on-the-elitism-of-contemporary-electronic-music/>> [Accessed 2nd April 2024].

⁴² Rami Abadir, “Conceptronica: On the elitism of contemporary electronic music”.

⁴³ Rami Abadir, “Conceptronica: On the elitism of contemporary electronic music”.

the music industry as well as on academic institutions in order to receive consecration.⁴⁴ Being limited and shaped by the agenda of these institutions, Conceptronica artists cannot but stoop to the watered-down version of their revolutionary political manifestos, which are ultimately delivered in the form of expensive festival tickets. This poses an issue to Abadir's consecration of the queer artists working within Conceptronica.

While he maintains that this dimension is liberating particularly because artists are able to balance their personal experience with a more encompassing political message, it is evident from his criticism of Conceptronica's reliance on hegemonic structures that the "honesty" found in the works of these queer artists is itself shaped by a regime of visibility that organises what political causes and discourses can and cannot be tackled. As artistic institutions (and in particular the music festivals industry) are currently pushing for conversations on what he calls "safe causes" such as "pluralism/diversity, issues of public space and climate change", hegemonically supported and marketed queerness is given a platform while other equally urgent matters are left in the dark. In theory, this allows for at least some kind of liberation, but in practice this means that the queerness performed by these artists is already constrained within the symbolic parameters set by the cultural hegemony of what queerness may sound and look like. Having passed the threshold imposed by the dominant culture on what counts as legible and illegible, legitimate and illegitimate, nomadic or hegemonic, queerness now possesses a definite face and sound from which it will, in future, have to disentangle in order to maintain its liberatory potential.

Conclusion

When talking about Conceptronica, Abadir comments that the genre falls short of living up to the political messages it attempts to invoke, insulating itself to a very selective language of resistance that does little, in practice, to change the system it is caught up in. This cycle points back to what Badiou terms abstract homogenization, referring to a mechanism of proliferation of capital that subsumes difference and transforms it into exchange value.⁴⁵ It is a system that feeds on the very acts of resistance of individuals trying to live outside of it: any attempt to escape the logic of the market provides fertile grounds for the market to expand.⁴⁶ The situation is particularly dire for music as, with

⁴⁴ Rami Abadir, "Conceptronica: On the elitism of contemporary electronic music".

⁴⁵ Badiou, p. 9-10; p. 13.

⁴⁶ Kyle Gingerich Hiebert, 'Capitalism and Catholicity: Ecclesiological Reflections on Alain Badiou's Pauline Universalism', *New Blackfriars*, 92.1041 (2011), 574-90.

the advent of streaming platforms as immaterial intermediaries of visibility, artists must negotiate their claims to authenticity with the knowledge that all areas of their music production are already largely dependent on a global mechanism of capital flow that does not have space nor time for them. In such a system, identity differences are only a matter of marketing value, and queerness is just the new fad among many to erupt into consumer consciousness and to provide a fictive avenue through which consumers can feel a sense that they are unique, different, or outside the logic of the market.

Conceptronica is a perfect metaphor for this process: far from being the music of queerness, it serves to remind its listeners that there is no longer any life outside the internet, that new music is only ever a remix of music that we thought had served its course. The aesthetics has shifted, but the spectre of the commodity form remains intact even in these supposed acts of queer resistance. At the end of his monograph, Badiou made the claim that “every particularity is a conformation, a conformism. It is a question of maintaining a nonconformity with regard to that which is always conforming us”.⁴⁷ This paper argued, if tentatively, that today, even those musics and identities which are nonconformist at heart cannot escape being serialised into commodity forms driven by market considerations above their political messages. How to establish a true nonconformity, whether musical, identitarian, or both, remains an open question.

⁴⁷ Badiou, p. 110.

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