HUMAN EXCESS
Aesthetics Of Post-Internet Electronic Music

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ABSTRACT
There exists a tenacious dichotomy between the ‘organic’ and the ‘synthetic’ in electronic music. In spite of immediate opposing qualities, they instill sensations of each other in practice: Acoustic sounds are subject to artificial mimicry while algorithmic music can present an imitation of human creativity. This presents a post-human aesthetic that questions if there are echoes of life in the machine. This paper investigates how sonic aesthetics in the borders between electronic avant-garde, pop and club music have changed after 2010. I approach these aesthetics through Brian Massumi’s notions of ‘semblance’ and ‘animateness’ as abstract monikers to assist in the tracing of meta-aesthetic experiences of machine-life, genre, musical structure and the listening to known-unknown noise. The idea of a post-Internet society acts as framework for the intimate relation between pop and avant-garde in contemporary electronic music. This relation is a result of a sonic contextualization of late-capitalist society via the Internet. Finally I discuss how pop is the noise in the avant-garde and how the human in a post-Internet era presents itself through synthetic plasticity.

1. INTRODUCTION
On music community website Bandcamp.com artist James Ferraro introduces his 2016 album “Human Story 3” [1] as follows:

“a musing on hyper individualism and the marketability of neotenous plastics We’ve seen the invention of the latte, yoga, cloud computing, we’ve seen our selves in a plethora of unnatural places and commercial simulacra, crisis and human achievement in perpetual twilight. where will the 21st century human story go next?” (sic)

On prior music releases, in particular 2011’s “Far Side Virtual” [2], Ferraro has regarded his “Rubbery plastic symphony for global warming” as a musical “PIXAR meme” [3]. But on “Human Story 3” he seems to actualize the dialectic of post-Internet aesthetics: “Human Story 3 actualizes this dilemma scenario placing humans at the crossroad of technological innovation and human dispos-sion in musical commentary.” [1] For Ferraro, a paradoxical aporia appears in the juxtaposition of hyperreal iterations of aliveness and lifelessness; organicness and the synthetic. It is the feeling of otherness and unity, manyness and oneness [4], that gives rise to an aesthetic commentary on the political economy of music because of the associations the sounds of “neotenous plastics” [1] invoke. This paper discusses how some contemporary experimental electronic music posts-2010 seem to be moving towards the hyperreal – “[…] the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” [5] – in both sonic materiality and cultural reference. From the 90’s IDM-moniker name change to Internet Dance Music [6] and its offspring known as Electronic Dance Music (EDM) turned commodity by the US music industry as a re-brand of the rave culture [7] to the recent ‘resurgence’ of the modular synthesizer [8], it is evident how nostalgia feeds the political economy of electronic music [9].

Recent years have introduced a new type of experimentalism in electronic music club and dance scenes that nods to music previously belonging to intellectuals, academics or more secluded sub-cultures. On this matter, media artist and composer Holly Herndon asks: “Now that experimental music is in the club, what does that mean politically? […] Will we just hear weird sounds and then get drunk and dance, or are we now able to discuss the values that experimental music can conjure up in those scenarios as well?” [11]

In this paper I discuss genre through three aesthetic movements in post-2010 electronic music: the technophile generative, vaporwave and new dance futurism. I place these types of music collectively and artistically under a post-Internet categorization. The idea of post-Internet is treated through the definition provided by Stefan Heidenreich [12] about art criticism after the extensive adaption of the Internet. Post-Internet has the advantage of being open-ended: “[…] we belong to the internet, knowing that the internet is over” in the same way we acknowledge the post-digital: “We are digital, but it does not matter, because that is just what everybody is.” [Ibid.] Post-Internet is still a relatively new term and the music in this paper should not be confused with “Internet-music” or “Net-Art”.

I use Brian Massumi’s [4] notions of semblance and animateness to frame and work together with phenomenology and aesthetics [13]. A semblance is a potential definition of the aesthetic effect by certain stimuli. It is a lived abstraction, building on the Deluzian lineage of a “real-but-abstract”, always present “in passing” [14]: As
such semblance serves as a participatory thinking-feeling, a potential definition of the aesthetic effect and throughout this paper it presents another dimension to the phenomenology of perception. Animateness is an instantiation of the dynamics and dichotomy between organic and synthetic, living and non-living on par with post-Internet sounds’ potential ability to signify an inherent meaning. Massumi uses animateness as a way of asserting the move from Martha Graham’s modern dance to Merce Cunningham’s contemporary dance. According to Massumi, Cunningham “[…] strips metaphor and communication” [4] (138) excluding meaning that is not “[…] immediately betrayed by action” [Ibid.] (139): An embodied approach, the “[…] thinking-feeling of bodily gesture”. Ultimately, animateness is another way of conveying a semblance of life: “Embodied life: pure expression of the body’s aliveness” [Ibid.] (141), where meaning is not conveyed or thought, but perceptually felt. Through post-Internet musical examples these dynamics will be investigated with a primary focus on genre and method working seamlessly together to create an animateness of the synthetic that questions our traditional conceptions of the aforementioned dichotomy in electronic music.

2. GENRE & SOUND

In his article “Genre is Obsolete”, Ray Brassier refers to an “unformalizable surplus of sonic material” [15] in one of the musical examples of his text on the paradox of noise as a genre. The music discussed here is that of the group To Live And Shave In L.A. and their track entitled “5 Seconds Off Your Ass”. This music is a cacophony of saturation, an ode to the harshness of sampled audio and of the voice mimicking what Brassier calls the “senseless eructations of glossolalia” [15]. It is important to note that in the midst of an appraisal of the non-genre, Brassier stresses that this music should not confuse genre with total negation of signification, but instead of “postmodern polysemy” [Ibid.]. Brassier elaborates that the clear refusal to signify in the music of To Live And Shave In L.A. belongs to an uproar against structure and form much alike the stochastic principles of music syntheses and stochastic composition founded by Iannis Xenakis. In the case of “5 Seconds Off Your Ass”, and its focus on the complete distortion and permeated vocal samples, the proper analogy is a “total materialization of linguistic form” [Ibid.] as exemplified through Xenakis’ writings on musical substance and structure. Although To Live And Shave In L.A. does not belong musically to the post-Internet aesthetic outlined in this paper, Brassier’s discussion of genre does offer some direction in the following discussion of the dialectic of post-Internet [12] and sonic materiality.

2.1 On technologism & neural karaoke

In a presentation-video of the Behringer DeepMind synthesizer, electronic musician and sound designer Richard Devine is heard demoing the machine, stating: “It sounds very modular” [16]. The sounds heard from the synthesizer prior to this statement are cascading, resonant filters-wraps modulating rapidly. Devine might simply be stating that the synthesizer sounds unconventional despite its conventional, keyboard-based design and the connotations that is associated with a company such as Behringer (mass production, commercial use, etc.). Nevertheless, Devine’s statement spurred heavy debate on social media communities of synthesizer hobbyists and professionals:

The modular synthesizer community is one that prides itself by regarding the instrument as a “blank canvas” [Ibid.] for composition and the generation of sound. “Organic” and “unpredictable” are words that often appear when artists are asked to describe “the modular sound” [Ibid.]. Devine argues that the slight fluctuations and changes in the oscillating voltages bring life to this autonomous, generative instrument. The sounds emitted are not musically structured in a traditional sense per se, but the dialectic in electronic music composition is often set in a dynamic shifting between an arranging of musical events and the creation of sounds themselves. Is it then possible to distinguish genre from sound?

This resurgence of the modular synthesizer is still relatively recent to the general public [8]. The popular Eurorack format’s online forum members post photos of their modular gear, racks and cables, usually complementing to the technological affinity that is associated with the Behringer community and a type of collective conscience that online forums afford. This merely supports the point of...
technological infatuation being a primary component in a narrative of a collective of individualistic electronic music producers with boutique gear.

If the gestalt of sound is bound by nothing, like with modular enthusiasts created from a “blank canvas”, it is in affect bound by everything and the above reveals that paradoxically there is an aesthetic surrounding “opened-ended” technology and music altogether. Even though “The results are not necessarily uninteresting” [15] this does present a dilemma towards a semblance of listening to electronic sound that demands what Tom Smith from the aforementioned To Live And Shave In L.A. calls a “PRE-aesthetic”: “[…] a negation of the errant supposition that spiffed-up or newly hatched movements supplant others fit for retirement […] PRE? As in: all possibilities extant, even the disastrous ones.” [Ibid.] This is a distancing from what is phenomenologically perceivable due to “[…] quandary concerning musical innovation.” [Ibid.]: A liberation of sound, so to speak, in line with the lectures of pioneering composer Edgard Varèse and surprisingly resemblant to the sublime awe of industrial progress sensed in the texts by e.g. Varèse or Cage [13]. The modular synthesizer is still a “young” instrument [16] for many and the blank canvas-argument represents the premature evaluation of a technology we have yet to comprehend.

Previous research surrounding an algorithmically music producing agent has mostly been centered on mimicking human-behavior, e.g. an estimation of “natural creativity” [19] or musical functionalistic results to fit tradition. There appears to be an uncanny feeling associated with the experience of synthetic sounds that are emulating nature [13] – the same goes for the musicality of these agents. This is evident in the field of neural karaoke [20]: A recent direction in music and artificial intelligence research where an algorithm is trained in a conventional musical genre and is then fed a photograph that it associates to certain musical variables of rhythm, harmony, melody and English-language lyrics. The algorithm ultimately generates a short, one-minute song. In his “Culture Trip 1”, researcher Hang Chu [21] has provided the program with a picture of a seemingly sad boy in a bunny outfit standing at a homely staircase. The lyrics are hauntingly precise mixed with obvious algorithmic non-sense. The sounds of the synthesized voice and accompanying piano and drums have the supposed function of being secondary in the matter; neutral and fairly anonymous made from standard General MIDI and Applescript speech synthesis. But I will argue that these sounds do invoke an important semblance [4], a lived abstraction, of the artificial on the premise of music tradition: The confines of traditional songwriting in neural karaoke lay bare a meta-aesthetic. The same goes for a similar example in classical music by David Cope’s music producing algorithm aptly named Emily Howell on the unsungly entitled album “Breathless” [22]: The sounds usually associated with standard notation software (i.e. General MIDI) are given new aesthetic validity exactly because of several emphases on their artificiality.

Enter the phenomenological, paradoxical aporia: A byproduct of research in electronic music, sound synthesis in particular, as the search for natural likeness suddenly conjures up this aforementioned meta-aesthetic and the discussion of obsolescence shifts from genre to sound as the end-results are more overpowered by technology than empowered. Standard and non-standard sound synthesis methodologies [13] seem outmoded as synthesized vocals, flutes, drums or string instruments belong to an entirely different aesthetic category than the otherworldly sounds of e.g. Morton Subotnick [23] of the 70s or other experimental releases using synthesis categorized as “non-standard” [13]. These plastic, seemingly conventional sounds of General MIDI are in a sense “standard”, but they are still fundamentally alien and as zany [24] as the imminently unconventional [13]. This is an abstraction that is arguably missing from the general discourse of opposing acoustic and synthetic instruments and sounds, and the discussion of the overarching dichotomy of the organic and the synthetic.

2.2 On vaporwave & new dance futurism

The notion of “genre as method” is taken from a short article on Bandcamp.com about the music surrounding the vaporwave community [25], a fairly recent branch of online art and culture appearing out of early 2010s seapunk stylistics. Musically vaporwave encompasses a vast amount of musics, but is in general characterized by its “plunderphonic” chopping up, slowing down and rearranging of samples from 80s and 90s pop-culture spanning from recordings of popular music and lounge jazz to sounds from early versions of the Microsoft Windows OS and elevator or shopping mall muzak: “[…] what’s also essential to it is the highly self-conscious, critical stance it takes to its source material. It remolds and repackages it, adding implicit layers of social commentary.” [Ibid.] Vaporwave captures “genre as method” through an extensive array of subgenres being created and dismantled every day, some gaining immediate support from creative artists, others a part of a constant descriptive renewal then vanishing into thin air in total “Internet plenitude” [26].

Moving from the pioneering ecomoans to Macintosh Plus’ “Floral Shoppe” [27] and especially James Ferraro’s hyperreal “Far Side Virtual” [2], vaporwave has segued through diverse commentary on late-capitalist society since 2010. The effect is best exemplified through Jacques Attali’s points about atmosphere-music for commercial use and the intellectual/experimental in the light of John Cage: “So-called learned music […] arrives at the negation of meaning announced by mass music.” [9] Attali questions if Cage’s functionalistic musing on music “like furniture” in the long run is “[…] a strategy for the radical destruction of usage in music, a politics of the liquidation of meaning, opening the way for a subsequent renaissance?” [Ibid.] (my italics). Vaporwave’s aestheticization of muzak questions this in terms of sonorous perceptive association with commercial branding. Furthermore, muzak hints at the same aesthetic as General MIDI and the standardized speech synthesis discussed in section 2.1 in this paper. There is a very similar societal commentary and questioning of animateness [4] (138-141) inherent in this music.

The instruments and sounds on Ferraro’s “Far Side Virtual” [2] and “Human Story 3” [1] are undeniably
synthetic and artificial, but this does not exclude them from kinesthetic perception: It is not merely music for the political-minded to invoke thoughts of societal absurdity or aesthetic irony or kitsch. Startup-sounds of Skype, plastic strings from a TV-ad for real estate and shakily played rhythms inhabit the aesthetic pandemonium of iPhone 4 ringtones. It is an experiment in sound on the level of To Live And Shave In L.A. [15], but from the viewpoint of the interplay between sound and technology. Ferraro’s sonic experiments are much less overtly experimental because they mirror sounds we already know from a phenomenological and cultural standpoint [13]. The dynamic between pop-culture and avant-garde operates as a result of many levels of abstraction: The line between the conventional and the unconventional is increasingly blurred through instrumental music that comments on commercialism. Vaporwave is surely an expression of nostalgia, not in so far as rehashing old aesthetics but rather deconstructing the ‘sounds of genres past’ in aesthetic decay and grotesque obscurity.

The sound of an artificial replica is intrinsically political, not merely because of its pop-cultural, nostalgic or kitsch reference, but inherently political in the societal economy and inseparability of man, music and technology in the 21st century. Here, the point is not only technologism’s effect on the creative outcome, but of electronic sound as a representation, the ever-changing simulacra [5]. It constantly shifts between Baudrillard’s “good appearance”, “the evil” and the “being-an-appearance” [Ibid.], but never crosses over to full simulacrum: These sounds lack the possibility of what ambient electronic music offers as sonic immersion because the abundance of technology in society is an aesthetic immersion that has already happened. This represents a plenitude of technology culturally negating meaning in whatever attempt to artistically mirror phenomenological immersion. This aligns with how James Ferraro describes his music and creative process as a way of addressing how technology “works against us” in late-capitalist society: “[…] there’s a lot of duty in human technology and how we are able to use certain things, but the way it usually ends up being used is through ways that are less meaningful. It’s a double-edged sword, where our own technology, which is a really beautiful thing, is used against us.” [28] Posthumanism lurks in the corners of Ferraro’s aesthetic, but the 21st century human being is riddled “un-virtuous with folly” [1] (my italics) and this is the paradigm of human potential as Ferraro asks in the liner notes to “Human Story 3”: Will human achievement “[…] be restored via our successors artificial super intelligence” (sic) and conclusively states that “perhaps this is the human story” [Ibid.] (my italics). The folly of man and technology are key aesthetic components of Ferraro’s hyperreal narrative. Animateness in electronic music becomes a matter of the phenomenologically known-unknown and the relational qualities of experience [4] in virtual hyperreality on the branches of Deleuze’s “real but abstract” [14] (4).

Pierre Schaeffer’s phenomenological reduction of sound and source [13] is paradoxical in the post-Internet age.

Another expression of aestheticization of late-capitalist society, plasticity and the synthetic is found in very recent ideations between pop and experimental electronic music mostly inspired by the dance and club scenes. Journalist Phillip Sherburne heralds this as a “new near-futurism” and states: “This new thing is not a genre, exactly; call it a style, a sensibility, a veneer. It has to do with computers and digital sound and digital imagery. It has to do with representation and malleability” [29]. The aesthetic of this music draws some parallels to both the more disinsonantly chopped-and-screwed vaporwave and Ferraro’s hyperrealism, and likewise took root post-2010, but presents however a very different stylistic approach and confrontational sound altogether. This new near-futurism largely encompasses two directions: One is a “neugothromanticism” [6] characterized by a sensation of late-night-club-infused hyper-melancholia and noir “digital maximalism” [Ibid.]. The other encompasses a bubblegum cuteness of “screwball antics” [29] either inhabiting a nightmarish absurdity or a total glossy utopia and might best be characterized as hyper-pop. Although musically different, these two directions find common ground in what journalist Simon Reynolds calls “[…] overloaded sensations of future-now dysphoria and disequilibrium”, a “digi-baroque” [6].

Interestingly, Reynolds [6] and Sherburne [29] heavily disagree as to the immediate relevance and originality of this “new dance futurism” or if in fact should carry this name at all. Reynolds questions whether or not the hyper-melancholic is more than but a rehashing of 90’s IDM and cites music blogger Kid Shirt’s sequential prose blog-post on the music of Krakkbop (a less known producer of related music):

“[…], fragmented / restless / self-interrupting / auto-sabotaging / deliberately ‘broken’ – disruptive, rather than *ermm* discoursive – music that reflects the jarring, multi-channelled. Corporatized ADDH culture that demands our attention from every which way but forward at the same time.” (sic) [6]

Reynolds uses Kid Shirt to point out that the societal commentary in especially the hyper-melancholia of electronic music producer Arca exists in the pace and fragmented nature of the rhythmical arrangement of sounds: There is often no gridded timekeeper, percussive elements are scattered and blurred, even background textures are broken, sporadically shattered in convoluting spaces of grandeur or abyss. Albeit a different aesthetic, the artists of “screwball antic” PC Music mirror the same societal tendency of “corporatized ADDH culture” [6] brought on by technology, making full circle with James Ferraro’s [1] sonic societal critique of human folly. The gender-bending queer-goth appearance and sonority of Arca and the HD aesthetic of PC Music’s Hannah Diamond act together in the digi-baroque as monikers for an appropriation of the digital as darkly kitsch and a disassociation of pop through shameless association [26], “self-consciously hypermodern” [6].

[1] “Far Side Virtual” [2] was originally intended to be released as a collection of ringtones [3].
The digi-baroque in music is rapidly evolving through new iterations from e.g. Japanese artists like toiret status [30] or Foodman [31]. Both these artists, affiliated with the Orange Milk Records label, approach a future-now-dysphoria from yet another aesthetic angling of ADDH culture and hyperrealism. Their neyjuke- and footwork-type “spastic digital sketches”, described as such in the liner notes of toiret status “◎omaru◎” [30], aligns with the ‘original’ hyper-pop culture of Japan and Korea. Artist toiret status furthermore states on “◎omaru◎” that he “[…] understands that in 2016 anything can be a hook, a two note melody, a phrase, a sample, a sound or texture, and that the widening perception of hookiness means that abstract music comes alive in new contexts and dialogues with other popular musical forms.” [Ibid.] The abstract music and hooks of toiret status include flushing toilets, downpitched burping keyboard-vocals and aggressively active drum-machine plasticity. Hyper-melancholia, hyper-pop and Ferraro’s take on vaporwave become meta-commentaries on the sounds in and of society altogether: The utopian, dystopian, euphoric or dysphoric is embedded in the materiality of sound.

3. RHYTHM & ANIMATENESS

According to Baudrillard [5] unreality no longer resides in the dream or fantasy, but in “[…] the real’s hallucinatory resemblance to itself”. (145) The electronic musics hitherto discussed all deal with how electronic sound seems to represent some kind of material variation [4] (49-50) on and of itself, facing societal commentary or introvert immersion in something’s likeness [Ibid.]. It is a result of the potential of the aesthetic experience of sound and music as the composition of musical events and of the sounds themselves is a constant process in the making and the making-sense of listening. Throughout the post-internet aesthetic, rhythm seems to be at the focal point of the artistic expression and the discussion of the aforementioned dichotomy, and there are some philosophical attributes to consider in the relational qualities of the likeness of rhythm’s animateness:

3.1 Rhythm’s Encomium

Pulse is the frequency of which events occur and reoccur: A pulse can only happen if it happens again. The width of the pulse, the duration and subsequent pause of something’s happening [4], is comparatively dependent on the consistency of the frequency of the event. Whether it is a constant or a variable, a pulse happens at the point of its repetition, not before. In accordance with the idea of animateness, pulsation is a constant in every living organism. Whether happening at a slower or faster rate this oscillating cadence-function is immanent in the sustaining of basic life. Without the natural fluctuations and flow-disturbances in the rhythmically steady throbbing of a heart this pulsation is artificially reproducible and computable. As seen with the voltage rerouting of modular synthesis these fluctuations are indeed autonomous in technology (within set parameters). The same goes for musical performance, which is arguably why the first cavenmen started banging their clubs together: to resemble some kind of motion to bridge the exterior with the interior; the throbbing of the veins with the beat of a branch.

Fluctuating and un-gridded rhythmic structures have always been part of the musical palette for experimental electronic musicians from Morton Subotnick [23] to Foodman [31]. Composer Charles Wuorinen’s “Time’s Encomium” [32] works around a conceptualization of performance and rhythm as one of the first works ever made for synthesized percussion. Wuorinen [32] states that in “performed music”, rhythm is a qualitative and accentual “matter” and that a composer uses qualitative additions to specific events as a means to making music sound “coherent” (Ibid.). However, in electronic music, he argues that these resources do not exist and he asks what could take its place: “In my view, only the precise temporal control that, perhaps beyond anything else characterizes the electronic medium. By composing with a view to the proportions among absolute lengths of events […] rather than to their relative “weights,” one’s attitude toward the meaning of musical events alters and (I believe) begins to conform to the basic nature of the medium […]” [32] (front cover).

“Time’s Encomium” and Wuorinen’s liner notes offer a keen insight into the process of making and performing electronic music that is very applicable to the concepts discussed in this paper. It tells us something about how the connection between man and technology adheres to the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of “sound as sign” [10] – sound’s “[…] signification to us” [14]. “Time’s Encomium” is a representation of the semblance of humanity perishing in sound. This connects to how (post-) vaporwavers experiment on the premise of their societal critique of historic decay like Ferraro on “Human Story 3” [1]. Or how the experimental now resides in the club with no 4/4-techno kick drum to guide our heartbeats. Instead, we experience frenetic, chopped-and-screwed textures of rhythmic brutality, an even clearer “Archaic Revival” in the 21st century where “pop-culture is culture” [33]. Post-Internet music aims at deconstructing the already deconstructed simulacrum of sound in an active semblance of listening.

4. CONCLUSION

Post-2010 the dynamics of an inherent dichotomy between the organic and the synthetic pushed forward an experimental electronic music that focuses on popular culture as a societal meta-commentary through both sonic disassociation and assimilation. It is an avant-pop, an experimentalism based on the negation of experimentalism. Genre is obsolete [15], but sound is everything.

This paper investigates how seemingly different movements in post-Internet electronic music comments in unity on the same dynamics in aesthetics and society. When genre is obsolete and all of our extrinsic sound-references are completely disrupted and scattered by society, the musical differences inside new movements such as ‘new near-futurism’ [29] or ‘vaporwave’ [25] are rendered inert in the aesthetic judgment. Aesthetic assertion of post-Internet electronic music adds another level to how its different sounds and musics are felt, how we react.
to the grotesquely weird. The reaction to weirdness arguably creates yet another semblance of listening, a perception of the aestheticized experience of “technological innovation and human dispossession” [1].

This experience runs deep in the dichotomy between the human and the machine, where the organic is no longer defined as a clear-cut negation of perceived inanimateness, but as a simulacrum [5]. Electronic sound becomes the reproductive medium of hyperreality [Ibid.] and the semblance of listening to it a kind of hyperhuman intuition: “[…] a life style.” [4] (51) This qualitative relational economy between a sense of life or animateness and an experience of noise is not a straight line. This is the conundrum the organic presents in electronic music: It is somehow immediately superior to something purely synthetic in terms of expressing a human characteristic. I however believe that things inhabiting a ‘neotenously’ plastic, grittily zany or bubblegum quality in great detail express not only something intrinsically human, but an overflow of the human: Human excess.

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5. REFERENCES
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