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"... computer music is cool!" Theoretical Implications of Ambivalences in Contemporary Trends in Music Reception

Implications théoriques et ambivalences dans la réception de la musique et ses tendances récentes

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“... computer music is cool!” Theoretical implications of ambivalences in contemporary trends in music reception

by

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Abstract. Technical innovations in the last years have decisively changed the ways in which we consume music. The use of the internet has led to an heretofore unknown expansion in the access to different kinds of music. Napster is the slogan which popularized the idea of searching the computer files of millions of computer users through a central server and of downloading a host of music titles in fairly good quality. Other “peer-to-peer”-systems (i.g. imesh) followed. This practice has led to an economic battle in which it is not always clear which side the combatants are on. Net pirates see themselves as a kind of computer vanguard and create a myth of digital heroism for themselves. In the center of this new mythology they place the pioneer, a cultural archetype with deep roots in the mythic history of the American continent and pop culture. This computer pioneer is a fighter for freedom in the name of a just cause. But the once wide gap between pioneers and the mass of average computer users has narrowed over the years. The easy accessibility of music has become part of a popular life-style as people tend to spend more time with the computer in chatrooms and other virtual digital worlds. Playful forms of consumerism are becoming more interesting in this context. It may be argued that Jeremy Rifkin’s “age of access” has already begun, the age in which the access to the thing, but not the thing itself is it. In the context of music consumption new processes of a fetishization of technology are taking place. Computer music is cool because of computer streaming techniques – a stance which obviously raises the question whether music is listened to at all. These trends will be discussed in their implications for a further development of music reception theory.

Keywords. *music and internet, myths of electronic music, music reception theory*

Peer-to-peer, nothing for the majors

Technical innovations have changed the ways and means of how music is consumed in the last years. The arrival of the internet has lead to a hitherto unknown extension of the access to all types of music. “Peer-to-peer” is the formula which has become popular through Napster to label the opportunity of being able to search the hard disks of many million users from one’s home terminal for the desired title and to download the latter in an at least acceptable quality. An economical war has broken out for this virtual Blitz-settlement of the realm of the “majors”, which runs across all battle-lines. The American HipHop-Star Eminem could be quoted here as an example, who faces the internet with an unmasked love-hate relationship: “Whoever put my shit on the web – I’d like to get to know the guy and beat the shit out of him!”¹ The reason for his anger seems to be that Eminem’s latest album has only sold half as many times as its predecessor four years before. On the other hand the rapper earns some dollars on the data highway in the meantime, too. Yet those are obviously not enough for him and the music industry. The latter talks about being in the greatest economic crisis of all times. World-wide, music companies fear for their existence. For decades they lived exceedingly well by discovering stars, by marketing them as well as by getting the record and CD press going. However since music has become a digital file this monopoly has started to crumble at both sides of the value added chain: today an outrageously expensive sound studio is no longer needed for the production of music in hi-fi quality. Besides, the millionfold distribution of music via the web has become in principle child’s play. The music managers fear nothing more than to lose control of who may listen to music and at what price. Thomas Hesse, manager of the New York Bertelsmann Music Group, gives clear figures: “Every month three billion illegal copies are downloaded from the web world-wide, but only 170 million CD’s are sold.”²

1. See: Hofmann, Markus (2003), Ein Branchenfremder zeigt, wie es geht, Badische Zeitung, 14.5.03.

2. See: Drösner Christoph/ Götz Hamann, Die Jobs-Maschine, Die Zeit, 15.5.03.

Pirate myths

The sound ware concerns have up to now all but replied with sovereignty to the download pirates – on the contrary: their reactions reveal an exceeding measure of dilettantism. Copy protection mechanisms to deter are installed, complicated downloading offers are set up by the companies and any number of legal restrictions are introduced. Sometimes they even have bizarre-seeming skirmishes with the copying freaks: “What the fuck do you think you are doing?” blared out at fans who copied a title of the new Madonna album “American Life” from the web.

It’s no surprise that initiatives by consumers like “Save the private copy” gain a lot of sympathy from many. It’s about something fundamental: the activists argue that copying and manipulating files is part of computer technology and any restriction is an attempt to abolish the web as it was once conceived of: “Information wants to be free!” The web pirates see themselves as an avant-garde and have created a mythology of digital heroism for themselves. In the centre of this a cultural archetype is to be found, whose roots lie deep in the American history but also in the history of pop music: the digital pioneer and the undaunted lawbreaker of a just cause. Bruce Sterlin³ places the data-hackers in the tradition of the American occupation and settlement of land, which ran right across the continent and found its border and destination in the West. The digital pioneers are to him the modern successors of these settlers, cowboys and mountain men. For many, this freedom is “the very breath of oxygen”, the creative spontaneity, that makes life worth living. Where ever a culture industry, a bureaucratic system can be presented, they do their job. David against Goliath. To load music from the web means much more than just to listen to music or to buy a CD in any old shop. Whoever knows the majors and is able to meet them, has precious secret knowledge at his fingertips. This is what gives his deeds something experimental, even heroic – but also something contradictory: just as the rocker always only embodies the freedom he means (usually still masculine, white, heterosexual) and the commuter across the border already carries the settler in himself who exploits the occupied land, so, too, are the self-managed peer-to-peer-exchange platforms ultimately not antagonists of capitalism, but quite the contrary its spearhead: without expanding the opportunities no expansion of the border, without permanent tinkering on the internet and music no progress. In the face of this almost classical *story of electronic free-bootery* one is reminded of Adorno’s words that the audience only to gladly wants to deceive itself or be

3. Sterlin, Bruce (1992), *The Hacker Crackdown*, New York.

deceived.⁴ Isn't the great Marlboro promise dormant in every small (musical) dream?

Musical Society of multiple options

the reason why the myth of the hackers is so powerful is because it also represents a *myth of the artist* at its deepest levels. Stephen Levy⁵ was the first to point out that handling computers has an aesthetic side to it: perfect programmes possess their own beauty – the creation of “art and beauty” also belongs to hackers’ ethics. What is involved in downloading is not only a few songs, photos and videos of the homepage and hard disk, but also the research and use of the aesthetic opportunities of the cyberspace – and for the person who likes to fiddle about in his leisure time – discovering the potential of his home computer.

Finding, saving, listening to: that is the up-to-date way for more and more people to listen to music. Thomas Groß⁶ pleads for not losing sight of the long history of *copied* music: ever since there have been recorders, fans have recorded their favourite pieces and have swapped them; pop music comes, strictly speaking, always already in a copied form on the market, that is what makes its tradition in contrast to performances of written notes. The peer-to-peer-system has radicalized the copying principle in an undreamt-of way: One doesn't need a database or a central server for searching. For the first time the software uses the whole web as one huge hard disk, to which everyone has access at any time. A new life-style has been born, a life with the total *availability* of information and data that is becoming more and more popular the more people sit in front of computer screens and spend time in chat rooms and in simulated worlds. What counts are playful forms of consumption. Jeremy Rifkin's⁷ age of an “experience”-economy, in which not the material product any more but especially the access counts, has obviously begun. Music is “cool” not because I hear it, but because I collect and save – or simply *could* save it. What the traditional record collector still had quite concretely in his possession and thus within his immediate scope

4. Adorno, Theodor W. (1986, Orig. 1963), Kann das Publikum wollen?, in: Vermischte Schriften, GS 20,1, 343 pp., Frankfurt/ M.

5. Levy, Steven (1984), Hackers, New York.

6. Groß, Thomas (2002), Desire to be Wired!, in: Klaus Neumann-Braun *et al.* (eds.): Popvisionen (23 – 37), Frankfurt/ M.

7. Rifkin, Jeremy (2000), Access, Frankfurt/M; see also: Schulze, Gerhard (1992), Erlebnisgesellschaft, Frankfurt/ M.

of vision, has been enlarged today by the knowledge of what is *possible in an unlimited way*: the musical multi-optional society has awoken. Access is superimposed on content.

New Relationship to Music

Accordingly, the music fans' need to be able to copy music from the web at any time and in any place cannot be brushed aside – quite the contrary. Producers summarize their methods under the name of “Digital Rights Management (DRM)”, which rule with the help of technical means, what a user may do with the downloaded music he has bought and what not. The computer producer Apple started its download portal “Musicstore” at the end of April of this year and had sold more than a million songs within very few days.⁸ Applying the motto, comfort instead of harassment, the people responsible at Apple created the biggest (legal) online-music company of the world within a few hours. The experience gained in computer history shows, however, that no one can stop cunning hackers and crackers – and that there will always be a semi-legal grey area in the internet. The new online-record shops modelled on Apple will also not stop illegal copying. However, they offer an alternative at least for those, who want to pay for single pieces or whole albums, because it is simply too much of a bother to spend half the afternoon searching for a certain song only to manage to grab an incomplete, muffled sounding or virus ridden version. Such portals, which treat the buyer not like thieves but as customers, accommodate therefore the average music lover.

The young fans have quite obviously developed a new relationship to music in the past years. Leisure time researchers call them “flexible drifters” and point therewith to the fact that they do not stick to one single style or leisure time activity for years. New types of sport have come up besides music, besides the discman the mobile phone. A CD collection is nowadays rarely the expression of a lasting life style or even the key to a biography. Music has rather become a consumer article with an expiry date, that has been shortened drastically in its relevance. Today songs do not spread a comparable aura like the song “Satisfaction” did by the Rolling Stones in its days in 1965! Not even the current superstars like Madonna or Eminem can manage that with their new pieces of music (who speaks by the way still of Michael Jackson?). What importance do

8. For further details see: Drösser, Christoph/ Götz Hamann, Die Jobs-Maschine, Die Zeit 15.5.03.

these superstars still have then for the life of today's listeners? Do the aesthetics of their bodies now create a style rather than their music?

Special cultures: Opposition and social Distinction

Music will still continue to play a big role for youths. The reception of music, however, has become much more *complex* and *multi-dimensional*. It rests first of all on old *myths* – the image mentioned above of the synaesthetic artist stands for them just as much as that of the heroic man of the frontier, a symbol of freedom and adventure. The latter is not only indebted to the past, but in it one can see a new myth developing, namely the “Consumers Power” movement⁹ which is just becoming strong: if the music market is controlled to a good 80 percent by an international oligopoly (America's Universal and Warner, England's EMI, Japan's Sony Music and Germany's Bertelsmann Music Group), then everyone knows that the best pre-conditions are there for pushing the prices for music to a merciless height. Is it not inevitable that ideas of resistance will suggest themselves to the consumer according to the maxim: he who doesn't fight, doesn't live right?

Yet the opponents are also on one's *own* side: music integrates to become its own youth culture and squeezes out other life styles. People fight with their gloves off in the market of vanities. Diedrich Diederichsen¹⁰ succeeds in showing how differentiated and coded the *strategies of social distinction*¹¹ have in the meantime become with the example of the post techno-milieu of the “new electronic music” (USA: Electronica/ in Germany e.g. the group “Mouse on Mars”). Just as in the first electronic “artificial music” of the 1950^{ies} the new music is also about high art and to be precise lays a determined claim to being avant-garde. The creation of the term “electronic music” should allow a differentiation to techno. While jazz in the years of the 50^{ies} – and by the way still until today – craved for recognition as high culture by imitating the specialisation of the E-culture: detailed liner notes, musical vocabulary, cast lists and recording dates learnt excruciatingly precisely off by heart, the representatives of the new electronics are going about it in different ways: silence (only title and author are given) and the culture of pseudonyms (pseudonyms of pseudonyms ...)

9. Consumers Power*

10. Diederichsen, Diedrich (2002), Es streamt so sexy, in: Klaus Neumann-Braun *et al.* (eds): Popvisionen (58-74), Frankfurt/M.

11. Bourdieu, Pierre (1982), Die feinen Unterschiede, Frankfurt/M.

which can be interpreted as a form of encryption of the culture of experts reign. Only the initiated know what's going on. Pop music that promotes the continuing categorization fetishism – Genre Techno, Minimal Techno, Phunky Techno, Hardhouse, Deep House – and that is supposed to solve the paradox to be faithful on the one hand to a social milieu, a style, an attitude and view of the world and on the other hand to satisfy the primitive but not completely implausible idea of progress and development, can only be saved by a further *new term* or new category: Deep House, Disco House, Minimal House, Noise, etc. The fetishism of technology fits in with this development: since the “digital revolution”, technology has become per se cool, talking about processing dominates the reception. Technology instead of content! The pop musical totem sound – according to Diederichsen – loses its magic by making semantics out of the technology which is itself charged with ideas of the future: “What music are you listening to there? That's probably streaming out of the web, or not?” someone enthusiastically asks someone else on the telephone. Streaming is the new thing pop offers, so the caller can only mean that this streaming is cool not the music any longer. Whoever does not understand this directly, is ignored.

Mainstream: Immunization against Discourses about Dissidence and Authenticity

Special cultures are characterized by such dialectical processes as the transformation of myths and the practice of distinctions. The mainstream youths are going their own, different ways. They do not want to devote themselves completely to a life in the strait-jacket of the hard core scene, but only want to be *somewhat* part of it – they want to therefore be “in” and not “out”. To be “in” does not mean then any more than just not being “out”. This ex negative position makes it difficult to almost impossible to specify *what being “in” entails*.¹² Their style constitutes an amalgamation¹³ of institutional integration, the openness of manierism and occasional escapades in the youths' cultural scene. Music is to them part of the youths' media market that presents itself harmonically, *i. e.* it offers not excluding but including identification possibilities. All that has something to do

12. Schmidt, Axel/ Klaus Neumann-Braun (2002), Ethnografie der Musikrezeption Jugendlicher, in: Klaus Neumann-Braun *et al.* (eds): Popvisionen (246-272), Frankfurt/M.

13. Vollbecht*

with pop music and youth culture respectively that seems to connate youth culture – pop bands of all shades, fashion and beauty, lifestyle, cinema, sex, parties, rumours about stars etc. – is to be found in the thematic focus. Pop music represents an all round medium for these youths, into which their personal needs, those specific to the situation at the time and matters of relevance can be projected. To make use of the music industry's offer to know certain codes and to use pop music in all its facets, can give a vague feeling of being “part” of it, that appears to completely suffice for youths orientated by the general youth culture: “Only because I listen to rap” – so a typical comment – “does not mean I have to wear those baggy trousers!” Pop music means to these youths a way of experiencing the body and having shared emotional tuning-ins in local connections. The central fixed point of identification is the local peer group within which circle music is admittedly listened to, the ideological potential of which, however, is neither adopted nor even lived more intensively. Finding a general social style becomes more important than the special music.

Conclusions

Technology and access are superimposed on the music, listening to music becomes a double or threefold activity with many facets. And the general participation becomes more important than the consumption of specific pieces of music. The use of music has obviously become more complex and multi-layered. There are still the almost classical (music-)fans of *great gestures* – the internet pirate or the cyber space artist belong to them. The staging of *special cultures* too, however, lives by presenting itself in a conspicuous way as authentic and dissident – and be it as in the case of the new electronic music in a conspicuously inconspicuous way. Yet the fans of the *little gestures*, the *mainstream youths*, go their own way. The modern technological communication system eliminates local, national and related traditions to a certain degree and constitutes a global non-descript culture. This combines with local contexts of communication through the mediation of market and media. Global “*feelings of affinity*”¹⁴ develop in which the global peer-to-peer contacts add to the local contacts of those of the same age, but do not displace them. Diedrich Diederichsen speaks of the music/ “Pop I” becoming part of a pop-cultural supermarket/ “Pop II”. To go shopping here becomes far more significant than the particular products, the different types of music that land in

14. Eckert, Roland *et al.* (2000): „Ich will halt anders sein wie die anderen”. Opladen.

the shopping basket. Social styling remains admittedly relevant, becomes differentiated, however, within the framework of a generalising pop-cultural social styling that is based on the known in-or-out rankings. Once the choice has been made, a glance in the shopping basket shows that the consumer of music has almost become an omnivore¹⁵.

Music reception research is confronted with difficult tasks by this constellation. Whoever does not want to argue ideologically, has to rely on *phenomenologically* and *ethnographically orientated reception studies*, of which there are still too few. There's a reason for this: own studies show that this research task is extremely complex with the main problem that the single elements of analysis, in this case, the reception of music and its own specific functions and importance can hardly be isolated from one another by a clean cut. Music simply just belongs to daily life. Its absence would be noticed quickly, its presence remains unnoticed, however, to a large extent under the cover of habit and its relevance vague. The only point is to accept this empiric challenge and to overcome it.

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15. Peterson, R.A./ R.M. Kern (1996): Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore, *American Sociological Review*, vol. 61, pp. 900-907.