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THE SOUND OF NEOLIBERALISM:
THE ROLE OF MUSIC AND SOUND IN NEOLIBERAL CULTURE

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

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in

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by

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Abstract

The Sound of Neoliberalism:
The Role of Music and Sound in Neoliberal Culture

Michael J. Fennessey

This paper treats the connections between contemporary popular music and neoliberal ideology through a historical analysis and critique of digital music platforms, lo-fi, and EDM. Following the work of Byung-Chul Han and Philip Mirowski, I explore how the transformation of the disciplinary liberal state into a permissive, post-disciplinary society based on a new subjectivity of "auto-exploitation" intersects with digital music. This disciplinary shift corresponds with the emergence of a new form of entrepreneurial labor, which entails a new form of subjectivity under neoliberalism. As neoliberalism becomes dominant in the political economic sphere, its effects are felt across the social scape. To analyze these effects, I focus on lo-fi and EDM, two musical genres that develop within a hegemonic neoliberalism. My central claim is that under neoliberalism these digital musical forms take on a double character; specifically, they might be understood as countercultures expressing a desire for freedom, and simultaneously, they depend on and at certain moments reinforce the dominant socio-economic code. Mapping out the mediating antagonisms between neoliberal subjectivity and digital music leads me to the construction of a schematic framework for the listening practices of the neoliberal subject.

Dedication

I dedicate this paper to my father, Michael P. Fennessey, and my grandmother, Karen M. Kozich. Though you are gone, I feel your spirits with me always. I could not have made it this far without both of you.

Introduction

The emergence of neoliberal capitalism out of industrial capitalism has been marked by a new form of power relationships constituting new structures of experience, practice, and art. The evolution of these forms has been analyzed by an array of philosophers including (but not limited to) Marcuse, Foucault, Deleuze, and more recently, Byung-Chul Han and Philip Mirowski. I will briefly summarize the ongoing discussion of this topic through each of these thinkers below, however, I should immediately point out that what I contribute with this thesis is the notion that sites of digital music production are key examples of the interface between the construction of neoliberal subjectivity through the enactment of a form of social control on the one hand, and the possibilities for freedom expressed by everyday praxis and popular art on the other. It cannot be the case that the neoliberal power regime has rendered the critical thinking subject impossible (or critical theory itself would be impossible), so I raise the question of what kind of economy exists between freedom and domination in neoliberal society, and I explore how this question can be addressed in the context of digital musical forms.

With his conceptualization of "repressive desublimation," Herbert Macuse posits that the technological rationality characteristic of advanced industrial capitalism has rendered high art unable to represent opposition to the status-quo due to its commodification and corresponding flattening out in the realm of popular culture. The mobilization of libido for the needs of capital means that pleasure in such a society becomes a form of submission.[1] At this advanced industrialist point in history it first becomes clear with Marcuse's work that, fundamentally, the liberatory allowances extended to the subject in capitalist society can and do correspond with intensified domination. Later Foucault, too, recognizes the need for a critique of power relationships in postmodern society. However, instead of looking to the history and development of Enlightenment ideology, he focuses on three "modes of objectification that transform human beings into subjects," namely, the "modes of inquiry that try to give themselves the status of sciences," the "dividing practices" which fragment and alienate the subject, and finally the ways that human beings become subjects in the first place, which he finds is a result of human beings recognizing themselves as "subjects of 'sexuality.'"[2] These theories together point to a transition from an older form of subjectivation to a new form which involves both intensified fragmentation of the subject and a form of control based on taking pleasure in an increasingly subtle system of power administration.

Once advancements in technology led to the invention of the computer, it was Deleuze who recognized a corresponding shift from disciplinary society to a society of control. This movement involves an important shift in labor that is later conceptualized as entrepreneurial labor (which I will explore in greater detail throughout this paper): "But in the present situation capitalism is no longer involved in production, which it often relegates to the Third World… It's a capitalism of higher order production. It no longer buys raw materials and no longer sells the finished products: it buys the finished products or assembles parts."[3] Deleuze creates the metaphor of the mole and the snake to explain how this form of labor manifests in subjective experience. While the mole operates in an enclosed space (alluding to the institutional "spaces of enclosure" he associates with disciplinary society), the snake undulates and surfs in a continuous network. This metaphor leads me to the works I primarily focus on in this paper: that of Byung-Chul Han and Philip Mirowski.

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[1] See Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, "The Conquest of Unhappy Consciousness: Repressive Desublimation," pp. 72-75

[2] Michel Foucault, Paul Rabinow, Nikolas Rose, *The Essential Foucault,* "The Subject and Power," pp. 126

Byung-Chul Han takes cues from both Deleuze and Foucault in his book *Psychopolitics* where he asserts that the snake is indeed the perfect representation of the neoliberal entrepreneurial subject. This subject does not only take pleasure in the society which subordinates and subjectifies it, but like the snake, experiences freedom as it "creates space through the course it steers."[4] Byung-Chul Han insists that this new form of subjectivation is not based on the subject at all, but rather the "project," an evolved form of the subject which is free to construct itself in a system of "unlimited self-production."[5] Accordingly, this system is based on the administration of psychopolitical power. For Byung-Chul Han, Foucault's main problem is that he recognizes power administration in the form of discipline and biopolitics, but the neoliberal regime primarily exploits the psyche, not the body, with a much 'softer' form of power. Philip Mirowski with his epistemological analysis of the market crash of 2008 in tandem with neoliberal subjectivity recognizes that neoliberalism “revises what it means to be a human person,” and that Foucault’s observations “overlook the extent to which this is a drastic departure from classical liberal doctrine.”[6] He describes this new subjectivity that is visible in the rise of the “entrepreneurial subject,” a collection of investments without the “ontological platform” of the individual. Following this ongoing body of work surrounding subjectivity and power, I track some of the ways by which forms of digital music intersect with the transformation of the disciplinary liberal state founded on Enlightenment ideology into a permissive, post-disciplinary society based on a new subjectivity of “auto-exploitation.”[7]

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[3] Deleuze, *October*, Vol. 59 "Postscripts on the Societies of Control," pp. 6
[4] Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics*, pp. 18
[5] Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics*, pp. 6

My central claim is that digital musical forms, namely lo-fi and EDM,[8] which emerge under a hegemonic neoliberalism, take on a double character: specifically, they might be understood as countercultures representing a desire for freedom in an un-free society. But at the same time, they depend on and at certain moments reinforce the dominant socio-economic code. This can be seen in the reproduction of the entrepreneurial self in the "profile" economy, exploitation of immaterial labor, and mass data collection.

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[6] Philip Mirowski, *Never Let A Serious Crisis Go To Waste*, pp. 58

[7] Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics,* pp. 5

[8] “Lo-fi” refers to (1) a term created in the 90’s to describe any music created using low-quality recording standards, for example punk rock, and (2) a broad genre of music developed out of the online culture of the 2010’s which features hip-hop and pop beats, samples from the popular culture of older generations, dreamy, hypnotic soundscapes, and a distinctive low-fidelity aesthetic based on older recording technologies. Beginning in the mid 70s, “EDM” refers to “Electronic Dance Music,” an originally underground musical genre widely commercialized in the early 2000s which is played at music festivals, raves, parties, and streamed online. It has roots in Disco, Synthpop, early House, Drum and Bass, and a variety of other genres created by DJs using synthesizers, keyboards, and other audio production technologies.

Mapping out the mediating antagonisms between digital music and neoliberalism will require constructing a schematic framework for analyzing the listening practices of the neoliberal subject to analyze the implications of such a subjectivity for musical culture. In order to explore this intersection of neoliberal subjectivity and digital music, I have organized my argument as follows: Part I focuses on digital streaming platforms and general listening practices in a post disciplinary society. I claim that these listening practices correspond with the history of surveillance technology and data collection, enabling the datafication and commodification of the experience of listening to music. In Part II, I focus on audio production and how digital music facilitates efficient entrepreneurial labor, specifically looking to lo-fi as both a subculture of resistance and a form of submission to the status quo. In Part III, I turn to EDM and its expression of possibilities for freedom which are limited and contained by this new form of subjectivity emerging under neoliberalism.

Part I: Form of Streaming Platforms and Post-disciplinary Listening Practices

Unlike musical performance or musical recordings in the form of records, tapes, CDs, or even early iPods, digital music streaming involves total immersion primarily in the technology and its interface, not in the music itself. The word "immersion" comes from the Latin word *immergere*, "to dip or plunge (into a liquid), to immerse, sink" or "to plunge, bury, sink (in other things)."[9] At its most extreme, the true imperative of digital media is *total immersion* in that users are not simply surveilled at certain moments, but the digital interface *completely surrounds the user,* it submerges the subject so that they *sink* deep within an experiential field where there is no longer any 'outside,' indeed to the point that subjectivity itself is thrown into crisis. This 'experiential field' might be understood concretely as a set of digital devices and installed software individuals are expected to own which are designed to augment everyday life with closely monitored personalization options. Mirowski points out "the ultimate in solipsism in promotion of everyday neoliberalism: Don't like the way things are looking? Has the state of the world got you down? Then create your own personal solipsistic economy, a fit virtual abode for your own fragmented entrepreneurial identity. That's the ultimate in self-reliance" (102). We might add here that digital music streaming functions in line with this "solipsistic economy" as a means of expressing individuality and increasing efficiency.[10] And it should be emphasized that this manifold of personal choice expresses the "fragmented entrepreneurial identity" in a power relationship through which data is streamlined and concentrated. This is only possible in society where authority is primarily self-imposed.

Digital music streaming takes on the form of a comprehensive collection of musical works from which users, through interaction with an easy-to-use interface, can create privatized profiles specifically catered to their tastes, lifestyles, personalities, and friend groups. The data produced out of that interaction is then sold to advertisers from which specific advertisements are selected and reintroduced into target users' streams. This was not always the case. The first properly digital recording device was the CD, developed by Sony in 1982. This highly popular format remained the preeminent form utilized for listening to and sharing music until the rise of the internet made it possible to share music online for free with software such as Napster. The success of Napster was relatively short-lived after the iPod was released in 2001, making it possible to store thousands of MP3 files in a tiny, portable space. Finally, in 2007 the beta version of Spotify was launched in Europe (only made available to invited members) as an alternative to the MP3 which would decrease mass music pirating made possible by Napster.[11] By 2011, Spotify was launched in the United States, and in conjunction with Facebook, Spotify became what we would now recognize as a streaming platform complete with personalization options, including radio, news, and lyric display functions. Since then, streaming has become the most popular form of accessing music in the United States by-far; according to the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA), by mid-2020, 85 percent of all music industry revenues came from streaming.[12]

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[9] *Oxford Latin Dictionary,* Oxford University Press 1968, pp. 834

[10] Part II expands on this idea of increasing efficiency through digital music by analyzing the example of "lo-fi and study playlists."

Because music streaming has become a part of everyday life for so many people, we should immediately ask ourselves how we can understand its cultural and political implications. I suggest that it would be a mistake to understand music streaming only as a development which has increased access to music. We cannot fully grasp its impact without understanding its psychopolitical nuances. I am specifically referring to psychopolitics as a power structure of neoliberal society and maintaining that psychopolitics operate to reproduce the neoliberal subject through the administration of political power by mass psychological manipulation. My contention is that the ways in which streaming restructures the subjective experience of listening to music correlates with several dimensions of neoliberal subject formation. Let us analyze in more detail the commercial character of Spotify in order to develop an understanding of how it functions both as a business and in the everyday lives of users.

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[11] See *Spotify Teardown* pp. 43-45

[12] See "Mid-Year 2020 RIAA Revenue Statistics," Joshua P. Friedlander, Senior Vice President, Research and Economics, RIAA

Spotify is structured as a distribution network that operates to move information between data centers and users' devices on which the application is installed. This point is explained in detail in *Spotify Teardown*:

> Yet Spotify is dependent on more than venture capital and music licenses. To deliver its product to consumers, the service also necessitates a larger infrastructure… At the one end, there need to be data centers to send out music files and fetch back user data. At the other end, consumers need to have appropriate playback devices; ideally Spotify would have its software preinstalled in everything from smartphones to cars. (32)

What this tells us is that the ability for Spotify to accumulate capital depends on the internet as a space for distribution, users choosing to download and use their software, and finally the accumulation of data in physical data-centers. Thus data, and not music, is the primary commodity Spotify sells. Streaming platforms function as commercial tools in that they become spaces for businesses to advertise their products, and in order to avoid those advertisements, users are encouraged to purchase a membership. These advertisers are ideally the same people who buy the data collected through the platforms on which they advertise. It is clear that platforms like Spotify have changed the way people listen to music by providing access to seemingly limitless musical archives. But it is much less obvious that streaming platforms also function as complex surveillance and data collection machines.

Like social media, streaming platforms can be understood in one sense as advanced surveillance machines which are only possible after developments in the late 20th century, when surveillance was conducted with earlier recording technology. The history of musical recording coincides with the history of surveillance technology. Attali recognized early on, before the rise of the internet, the manifestation of authority in the realm of sound in the form of surveillance: "Eavesdropping, censorship, recording, and surveillance are weapons of power. The technology of listening in on, ordering, transmitting, and recording noise is at the heart of this apparatus" (Attali 7). Writing in the 1970s, Attali observes a state with increasing power to surveil its subjects. This power takes on the form of control over the order of noise in broadcasting, recording, listening in, and direct censorship. As Byung-Chul Han later observed, this transformation of the state into Big Brother heralds the coming of Big Data.[13] Byung-Chul Han also recognizes a key shift from this earlier manifestation of power in the age of Big Data in that the disciplinary standard of censorship is replaced by a permissive standard of total immersion. This new form of psychopolitical power over today's neoliberal subject is less predicated on the surveillance of specific sites of interest or of particular people or groups labelled as enemies of society, but rather on the collection of *as much data as possible*; the goal is the creation of an algorithm or series of algorithms which can *predict and direct all human behavior* at the micro level. Digital musical culture therefore becomes a site of power relationships through the collection of data—one of many 'behavioral fields' from which corporations can extract massive amounts of data and use it to predict with incredible certainty exactly when, where, how, and why we use our Smart devices.

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[13] "Today, Big Data is not just taking the stage as *Big Brother*—it is also taking the form of *Big Business.* First and foremost, Big Data is a vast, commercial enterprise. Here, personal data are unceasingly monetized and commercialized. Now, people are treated and traded as packages of data

The administration of power over social life now means total control over the direction of the social order, not on an application of coercive force. At the same time, the subject-object distinction deteriorates as the object becomes a representation of identity itself. Byung-Chul Han recognizes this crisis of the subject along the lines of possibilities for freedom and the transformation of subject to project:

> Today, we do not deem ourselves subjugated *subjects*, but rather *projects*: always refashioning and reinventing ourselves. A sense of freedom attends passing from the state of subject to that of project. All the same, this projection amounts to a form of compulsion and constraint—indeed, to *a more efficient kind of subjectivation and subjugation.* (Byung-Chul Han 1)

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for economic use. Big Brother and Big Business have formed an alliance. The surveillance state and the market are merging" (Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics*, 65).

Byung-Chul Han refers to Hegel’s conceptualization of the subject as ‘the one who has been cast down’ here claiming its transformation into a project. If the subject was previously cast down, then now it is the project which is raised up to new heights, glorified in its unhindered efficiency. The key movement is from a state of affairs where subjugation means *subservience* to new conditions where subjugation becomes a *projected reflection of self which is set free on the digital market* while what Adorno might have called “practical life” becomes merely a necessary force behind the construction of the project.

Power can be understood from one point of view as the ability to implement change. The foreclosure of this kind of power might be one way to think of repetition, which becomes a central feature of mass music early on. Beginning in the 20th century, the formal quality of the musical commodity shifts from an emphasis on performance to an emphasis on recording, and this shift constitutes the proliferation of recorded sound which can be stored in collections. Attali shows how the objects in those collections crystalize use-time in the same manner that money crystalizes exchange-value. He goes on to explain how this system demands adherence to a social norm:

> Repetition becomes pleasurable in the same way music becomes repetitive: by hypnotic effect… *in a society in which power is so abstract that it can no longer be seized, in which the worst threat people feel is solitude and not alienation, conformity to the norm becomes the pleasure of belonging, and the acceptance of powerlessness takes root in the comfort of repetition.* (Attali 125)

With the rise of recording technology, it suddenly becomes possible to hear the same exact song over and over. This revolution in musical history has long-lasting implications for the relationship between individuals and the collective. As popular music becomes more repetitive, it comes to reflect not only the listener's inability to create change, but also defines the musical work of art as an original copy that sounds the same every time it is heard. Listening to the same songs on repeat becomes a way of accepting this situation as normative. As a result, isolation becomes threatening partially because it represents a movement away from the repetitive, away from the status-quo. Increasingly abstract power relationships are not experienced as directly because the need to administer power with the use of physical force, which requires the physical presence of the oppressor, becomes more and more superfluous. Isolation transforms from a separation from society into a site where power is administered through auto-exploitation. At the same time, neoliberalism dictates that the individual, not the group to which the listener conforms, is the elementary socio-economic unit. So, while listeners are driven away from isolation toward the group, at the same time they find themselves in a situation where entrepreneurial work demands a certain level of isolation. However digital music streaming, with the aim of creating a personalized musical inventory that can be reducible to data, allows the user to maintain a sense of individuality while still adhering to the status-quo.

Observing popular music over 30 years after Attali, Jeffrey Nealon offers an interpretation of changing listening practices during the rise of digital music media with an example: "the meaning of 'Born To Run' isn't 'in' the song but in the way that song functions for a particular individual or group—the emotions it provokes and the people or events that you associate with it" (Nealon 74). I would suggest that we can understand the difference streaming has made in musical consumption through this shift in packaging. Listening to music has changed so that it is no longer as much about the aesthetic experience of a song, but rather, as Jeffrey Nealon suggests, it is the usage of the music—the social context in which it is heard—that becomes more important.[14] Using music as a facilitator of work and play is not actually a new phenomenon; people used records, tapes, radio, and CDs in this way. However, the streaming platform marks a moment in musical history when the predominance of music as utilitarian is much more pronounced. For example, creating playlists catered to specific social contexts becomes much easier, encouraging listeners to utilize music more readily as means to an end, for example, as a way to ease tension created at work, push harder at the gym, or make driving a less monotonous experience. Let us take a closer look at the functionality of these playlists.

The ability to stream music has made possible the transformation of the record collector into an online profile with playlists associated with moods and times of day. This has happened because Spotify can justify its existence in a neoliberal culture because it is undeniably *efficient*. The bulky, dusty libraries of the record collector are not understood as important archives of musical history, but rather as outdated, obsolete technology stubbornly kept only by the few who refuse to give themselves over to the paradigm of progress. The entrepreneurial self would rather utilize the compact, highly personalized Smart technology which can mold itself to the contours of everyday entrepreneurial practice. Looking again to Spotify, one can observe that suggested playlists on the user's homepage are in a constant state of flux, changing based on likes, most-played tracks, and the time of day, for example a "Good morning" playlist when the user wakes up, and a "Good evening" playlist when the user is winding down. What this points to is the now widely accepted notion that one should desire that their technology "knows them," and digital music streaming is a particularly subtle means of introducing such a relationship between people and technology while extracting capital from the interaction in the form of data.

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[14] Jeffrey Nealon, *I'm Not Like Everybody Else: Biopolitics, Neoliberalism, and American Popular Music*, pp. 74

These features of popular music presented by Attali and Nealon together—its formal quality of repetition alongside its packaging around social context—become particularly salient during the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic. While both online streaming and live performance markets have suffered[15], streaming remains the most popular source for music in the United States. Rather than being interpreted, experienced, or performed, with streaming the music is utilized in order to make the conditions of isolation more comfortable by organizing empty time into something resembling a normal work-day. Attali recognized a condition like this in 1977. In that era, records were produced and marketed according to genre and style. Now, particularly on Spotify, music is organized so that users are immersed in predictive playlists that augment individual emotions and experiences. And because of the profile form in digital media, information about individual tastes and routines is data-fied and made available to corporate marketing teams. None of this was possible before the creation of digital streaming.

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[15] See Mikael Wood's article in the *Los Angeles Times*, "How the music business is fairing amid the COVID-19 pandemic," July 9, 2020

However, from the perspective of corporate entities running these sites, the social context of a song is important precisely because that social context gives the corporate machine a greater insight into the lives of users. The collection of this information depends on an unfettered marketplace of data where any person can construct their identity within the framework of the digital interface. Mirowski discusses the character of subjectivity construction under neoliberalism as follows:

> Chat rooms, online gaming, virtual social networks, and electronic financialization of household budgets have encouraged even the most intellectually challenged to experiment with the new neoliberal personhood. A world where you can virtually switch gender, imagine you can upload your essence separate from your somatic self, assume any set of attributes, and reduce your social life to an arbitrary collection of statistics on a social networking site is a neoliberal playground. (59)

This is certainly true for social networking sites, but can we consider digital music streaming as a form of social networking? Not entirely. They are similar if only because functionally, digital music streaming serves the same purpose as neoliberal social networking: winning out in the competition for users' attention and selling intervals of time between popular pages to advertisers. To occupy the space of 'the user' in cyberspace today fundamentally requires locking oneself within a massive interactive marketing campaign. Also, like social media, full immersion in digital music streaming sites, namely Spotify, requires the creation of a profile, interacting with friend’s profiles or playlists, and liking or disliking different pages. These preferences are then used to construct a model of each individual which can be used to predict that individual’s future behaviors.

Social networking is premised on a scene of communication: communicative action is its primary content. But one can plausibly interact with a digital music streaming interface *at all times* without direct communicative action. Because of its dependence on listening rather than viewing, users can, for example, use Facebook and Spotify at the same time. This allows for the online streaming interface to mold fluidly into the everyday life of the user. Control over the interface turns out to be another form of data collection. Simply skipping a track or adding a track to one’s library is a significant enough micro-action to be data-fied; a mass of data points like this can then be reorganized and interpreted to reveal more information about users than one might expect. This trend could be seen as part of a larger shift towards what Mirowski calls “a scale-free Theory of everything,” which determines that “something as small as a gene or as large as a nation-state is equally engaged in entrepreneurial strategic pursuit of advantage” (59). Digital music streaming functions in this picture as a means of constructing a musical backdrop fit for the particular experience of a user. It provides an interface for transforming micro-actions into commodified data. These micro-actions take the form of personalization options that can be molded by the user in a strategic way in the sense that one can organize their workflow with a combination of music utilized for different settings, for example, lo-fi playlists for work, and self-help podcasts for down time. Time spent listening to these playlists alone becomes a form of labor in the sense that it translates into value.

And after all, streaming a podcast personalized for one’s wants and desires would offer a much more efficient means than something like talk radio of collecting information relevant for one’s personal entrepreneurial goals precisely because companies like Spotify collect user data and then suggest particular playlists based on that data. In his conception of self-entrepreneurship, André Gorz describes how “The boundary between work and non-work fades, not because work and non-work activities mobilize the same skills, but because time for living falls, in its entirety, into the clutches of economic calculation, into the clutches of value” (22). Since the outset of mass recorded music, people were able to listen to music while conducting daily business. But with the rise of Smart technology and advanced algorithmic surveillance programs, digital music platforms mold themselves to the user’s personality, paradoxically in an attention economy requiring less attention as they learn more. The hundreds of playlists dedicated to ‘music for work’ represent how “the boundary between work and non-work fades.” Time becomes a matter of economic calculation directly in the sense that when the digital platform does capture the user’s attention, the recorded data is almost instantaneously commodified to be transformed back into capital.

Part II: Audio Production Aesthetics, lo-fi, and Efficient Entrepreneurial Labor

The combination of the advancement of digital technology and the rise of the neoliberal regime constitutes the breeding grounds for new forms of music. One of those is ‘lo-fi hip-hop,’[16] a musical subgenre often made by amateur producers who lay generic or sampled hip-hop beats over samples from pop music, advertising, cartoons, television shows, and other pop culture sounds from previous generations. The resulting product is heavily edited with pitch alteration, tempo changes, and audio filters to purposely lower the clarity of the sound, harkening back to an aesthetic associated with older recording techniques. It is important to note that this genre as it is understood today is not intended for live audiences. Rather, it is often streamed online in solitude using headphones or speakers on a personal computer while listeners work or study. This music represents an entanglement between the desire for authenticity in an increasingly simulated environment, the desire for serenity in a culture of anxious productivity, and the facilitation of the neoliberal paradigm of efficiency. However, before speculating too much about the political implications of the music, let me begin with a concrete example of the particular brand of lo-fi I am focusing on here.

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[16] Tony Grajeda provides a useful description of lo-fi: “Referring primarily to production values, lo-fi stands as technical shorthand for “home recordings,” those small-scale efforts made on (relatively) inexpensive equipment such as four-track tape machines. Unlike state-of-the-art recording techniques, low-fidelity equipment produces an altogether rough and ragged sound quality, often failing to mask hum, static, tape hiss, and other noises endemic to the very process of recording. Not simply a case of technology but also of technique, lo-fi has been used further to describe those musical performances marked by amateurish playing (often on minimal instrumentation), off-key singing, and a certain casualness in delivery” (357).

Take for example the track “I Am Nobody” by the lo-fi artist chief.[17] which begins with a piano beat slowly fading into the mix over a sample of an interview from 1970 with the Bill Evans trio, a jazz group formed after Evans quit the Miles Davis band. The listener can hear the speaker through the static sound of rainfall saying “it’s sort of a feeling I think, a melodic feeling, just to say a certain kind of a thing. To try to… to maybe show somebody something through music, even show myself something, because as I’ve discovered in myself, it’s been a revelation.” A slow, clicking hip-hop beat drops, creating a dying pulse beneath dreary, dreamy piano for about one minute, and the track abruptly fades away and ends. What is that “something” we are being shown? The indistinct quality of that melodic feeling Evans is talking about resembles the undirected reflection on the past characteristic of lo-fi in general, and that quality is revealed in its indistinctness. This is to say that because the listener cannot quite put their finger on what they are ‘supposed’ to find, they enter the exact state of mind with which lo-fi is associated. This is the quality of the music that creates a moment of comfortable, nostalgic identification. But it is possible to talk about this nostalgic quality as an intentional, retroactive imitation of the noise produced by the recording process itself, thus clarifying the significance of the term “lo-fi”. Let us explore this in more detail.

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[17] This artist’s name intentionally begins with a lower-case letter and ends with a period. Lo-fi utilizes digital media as part of its aesthetic, so we might, for example, see words written I N A L L C A P S W I T H S P A C E S, or all lower-case titles with periods at the end. Perhaps this points to the format of concise, badly punctuated comments.

Once it became possible to create hi-fidelity sound with advanced recording technology, there almost immediately emerged the counter-culture of lo-fidelity music, termed "lo-fi" in the 90's. The history of lo-fi corresponds with production quality and a wide range of musical genres going back as far as The Beach Boys and continuing through the 2010's when 'lo-fi and study playlists'[18] consisting of lo-fi hip-hop tracks reached peak popularity on YouTube. In this section I would like to analyze the later online phase of lo-fi music using the approach Chris Cutler describes in *File Under Popular* which revolves around the forces of production and the creative process. The qualities of those forces of production shape the creative process and reach certain limits which are only overcome by new advances in production. What this means is that we can look to the internal qualities of music, that is, the "the traditional modes, vocabulary and possible meanings of music and the physical properties of the instruments and of the media of production and reproduction," in order to determine the "musical mode of influence" and formal possibilities of a given music. [19] With contemporary lo-fi, we will see that the recording technology associated with the process of production directly determines and limits the music's content; put another way, lo-fi is a strong example of the form of a process of production shaping the artistic content of music. However, we will also see that new advances in musical production—specifically those associated with recording technology—correspond with a re-introduction of older forms that become aesthetic content.

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[18] A "study playlist" is a collection of songs which are often slow, relaxing, and lyric free intended to be heard while one is reading, writing, or doing other forms of work. 'Lo-fi and Study playlists' were a popular set of videos on YouTube which featured long mixes of tracks consisting of distorted hip-hop beats played over samples from pop music. The dreamy, dreary, hypnotic, and oddly calming sound of the music was popularized among anxious, overworked high school and college students in the 2010's. This aesthetic was achieved through what might be understood as 'lo-fi production methods' which involve purposely including hum, static, tape hiss, and other 'mistakes' inherent in older recording technology, or producing such sounds artificially with digital technology.

[19] Chris Cutler, *File Under Popular*, pp. 22

While the earliest understanding of lo-fi music would simply correspond with any music created using amateur, low-fidelity production methods (such as punk rock), with the rise of music streaming, lo-fi is re-introduced as a purely digital music that utilizes digital recording methods to imitate the sound-quality of older recording technology. The genre's popularity was short lived, but in that small window of time a vast array of subgenres spawned due to easy access to cheap audio production software. What all of these genres share is the single distinguishing feature of all lo-fi: an aesthetic based on the sounds produced as a biproduct of older recording processes. But why would low fidelity sound reach peak popularity after the turn of the millennium when perfectly crisp, clear audio recording becomes possible?

According to the authors[20] of *Spotify Teardown,* once a technology becomes successful or advanced to a certain point it is rendered invisible, in the sense that it becomes a matter of indifference—an object utilized in everyday life without a second thought:

> In the terminology of science and technology studies (STS) from which this metaphor is imported, actors grow with the number of relations that can be put into black boxes, that is, be made invisible by their own success. A black box contains that which no longer needs to be reconsidered, those things whose contents have become a matter of indifference (7).

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[20] Erikkson, Et al.

One way to understand this phenomenon is to observe how older forms of technology become standardized and then *naturalized* in the sense that people accept their widespread existence as simply 'the way things are.' This concept can be extended to understand the naturalization of audio-fidelity coinciding with the advancement of studio production necessary for contemporary lo-fi's existence which Tony Grajeda describes in his essay "The Sound of Disaffection":

> The entrenchment of this aesthetic of audio fidelity (the idealized state of music) continues to set conditions on and for a listening subject, shaping the ways in which aural pleasure is experienced through a technological apparatus. And the aesthetic cuts both ways. The studio standard raised the stakes on the notion of an immaculate sound, altering the terms of assessment—spontaneity, artificiality, and accuracy. Once an unblemished sound has been judged, say, to be 'sterile' (the result perhaps of what is called 'recording consciousness' said to afflict some performers), the blemished sound subsequently takes on new meaning, now valued over the 'artificial' studio recording. (361)

A feature that spans across all lo-fi music is an acute distaste for the perceived artificiality of high-quality studio recordings. Since the early 2000s and especially in the 2010s, aesthetically, the music consists mostly of pop and hip-hop beats combined with samples from throughout pop culture, purposely including 'mistakes' like pops, cracks, buzzing, distortion, and generally un-mastered audio rendering. This aesthetic has a particular nostalgic effect that can be explained with an understanding of "black boxing." Because older sound-producing devices such as gramophones, tape players, and tube amps eventually became naturalized, or black boxed by their own success, they come to represent a kind of prelapsarian state of music before it is tainted by the perfection of digital recording. The fact that so many lo-fi listeners were not alive when tapes and vinyl records were popular does not seem to change the nostalgic trigger for simpler times when, in the mind of the listener, technology and commercialization did not saturate every area of life.

Ken McLeod writes about one lo-fi subgenre that emerges in the 2010's known as Vaporwave. The term 'Vaporwave' refers to a specific subgenre of music produced with similar techniques to the lo-fi hip-hop music on 'lo-fi and study playlists,' but drawing less influence from hip-hop, Vaporwave producers tend more often to sample jazz, R&B, and lounge music. The way these samples are edited creates a sound with a slow, atmospheric, dreamlike, nearly psychedelic aesthetic.[21] McLeod argues that it corresponds with a critique of consumerist society through the reconfiguration of pop music, but he points out the paradoxical quality of its dependence on techno-orientalism and its co-optation by the alt-right in the form of Fashwave, Trumpwave, and Naziwave, which I discuss below. He provides a useful critique of the genre, noting the relationship between recording technology and cultural nostalgia:

> The subculture surrounding vaporwave is often associated with an ambiguous or satirical take on consumer capitalism and popular culture, and tends to be characterized by a nostalgic and often surrealist engagement with the popular entertainment, technology and advertising of previous decades. As such it also has ties to the trends of 2000s lo-fi and post-noise music, such as 'hypnogogic

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[21] As Ken McLeod points out, the term Vaporwave is "notoriously slippery," however he provides a general overview of the way the music is produced: "Producers of vaporwave digitally loop and fragment samples of pre-existing songs, altering the pitch and dramatically slowing the tempi to a lethargic state in which vocals and other identifying features of the original become almost unrecognizable. Loops often gradually sonically evolve or are interrupted with intentionally poorly edited samples that add an element of glitch and an aesthetic of potential brokenness to the mix" (124). It is useful to note as a matter of distinction that lo-fi hip-hop could also be described as dreamlike and atmospheric, but these qualities are more pronounced in Vaporwave. Its sound might be described as lazy, compressed, reverberating, distorted, and robotic all at once.

> pop,' in which varied artists began to engage with elements of cultural nostalgia, childhood memory, and outdated recording technology. (123)

The forces of production shape the creative process here in that advances in recording technology reshape the form of human labor necessary to create musical works, and in the process of producing Vaporwave, the residual collective memory of that shift in technology and labor corresponds with the creation of purposely low fidelity sound. This reflects both a distrust in the authenticity of digital technology and a desire to halt the destructive advance of progress. Paradoxically, the dissemination of Vaporwave and its short-lived spike in popularity were only made possible by the same digital machines for which it harbors such distrust.

It might be possible to understand the nostalgic element of lo-fi music along similar lines that Frederic Jameson understands nostalgia films and science fiction. His essay "Nostalgia For The Present" shows how a certain form of historicity emerges not from a direct representation of the present or past, but rather with "a perception of the present as history, that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective" (284). Jameson explains how one might observe the historicity of a given society shaped by a given mode of production as the way it perceives its own history. What is at stake is "a process of reification" where time becomes an object we can comprehend as "the eighties" or "the fifities." A distinctive feature of lo-fi music is that it harkens back to the 70's and 80's, when tapes were popular media, by imitating the sounds those tapes inherently created as a biproduct of the recording process. The aesthetic of imperfection in the audio only becomes aesthetic once it is overcome by advances in digital recording. In other words, during the 70's and 80's, the "imperfections" heard on tapes were merely part of the listening experience and recording process, not a part of the music, so they were not recognized as aesthetic. What the digital imitation of these imperfections in lo-fi represents, then, is not so much a return to past musical forms, but rather a defamiliarization of the present that reifies past forms and 'aestheticizes' them; this aestheticization only becomes possible once those past forms are rendered obsolete.

The co-optation of Vaporwave in the form of Fashwave confuses the political implications of a music produced as a critique of the conditions created by neoliberal society because fascism was traditionally held to be incompatible with neoliberalism. This perceived incompatibility might merit a reexamination, however, in the context of the Trump administration, which shows significant affinity with elements of both fascism and neoliberalism. Perhaps we could say that the co-optation of Vaporwave by fascism makes sense given the sense of historicism present in the music which would pair well with the alt-right's nostalgic fixation on their idea of small-town white America. The music sounds like most other versions of Vaporwave, except that Trump speeches are played over the dreamy, unmastered electronic drum beats. The ambiguous signifier "Make America Great Again" is mirrored in Trumpwave with an idea something like 'make music great again.' Purposely low fidelity sound counters the new, more artificial form with an impossible resurgence of the past, but because it often utilizes digitally mastered beats passed through a distorting filter, the music can only artificially imitate the sounds of a vinyl record or tape. It imitates an outdated noise and triggers a difficult to pinpoint memory of a time which never quite existed for the average lo-fi listener, a simpler past when technology did not saturate every area of life. This is why such an aesthetic is so easily co-opted by fascists whose politics depend on distorting images of the past, claiming them to be purer, more natural, and more appealing than the present.

According to McLeod, the alt-right has a long history of "flipping the script" and co-opting leftist positions, and this can be observed in the realm of popular culture:

> The ironic and/or paradoxical flipping of the script by which radical conservatives liberalize their image and portray themselves as victims while casting the left as authoritarian has been recognized in several recent academic works. The similar tactics of an ironic co-option of popular left protest music, however outside the mainstream they may be, are clearly part of the same enterprise and should not go unnoticed or unmentioned. (137)

Following McLeod's argument, what traditional Vaporwave and Trumpwave have in common is a certain disaffection with socio-economic life in the form of a "sonic critique" of the conditions created by poverty and isolation in capitalist society. This points to both the antagonism between neoliberalism and fascism, and the way that fascism emerges as a right-wing anti-elitism. While the fascist leader appeals to populism, ironically an appeal made effective by the economic disparity produced in the very society from which he emerges, neoliberals view economic disparity as an indispensable function of the market. Trumpwave takes on the appearance of a critique of socio-economic conditions because it co-opts the more leftist intensions originally behind vaporwave and absorbs them into the cohesive force that is created among followers of fascist leaders after economic crisis. But how is it that a fascist music co-opted from anti-commercial music functions in neoliberal society? To answer this question, it is necessary to understand how lo-fi music in general facilitates the neoliberal paradigm of efficiency.

Lo-fi is not *only* an artistic critique of consumer society; it is also an adjuvant to the work or training regime in its provision of musical accompaniment in the service of workplace efficiency. So, from the perspective of the critic looking back on Vaporwave, it appears to negate the increasingly high-fidelity demands of audio production in an evolving consumerist society. But from the perspective of the individual listener, the music helps to facilitate the free flow of labor. For example, lo-fi music is commonly played while the listener types away at a computer screen in a residential space (as opposed to public), more efficiently producing work with the relaxing hum of music designed not to require much attention. Again, the music is not intended to shock the listener, but to lull them into a passive state of relaxation. The calm, hushed, slow-tempo, and dreamy instrumentals associated with lo-fi point to this intention as embedded in the sound of lo-fi itself. And many people understand and utilize this music for exactly the aforementioned purpose; in a short article featured in *Inc*, a magazine run by an American media business in New York City, Jessica Stillman points out that “the word both Szabo and other music experts use to describe the effect is ‘cocooning.’ Lo-fi wraps you in predictable, soft sound, protecting your thinking from the unpredictable and harsh outside world."[22] In this sense, lo-fi is experienced internally and personally, and allows the mind to enter a state of relaxation.

This means that we can think of lo-fi as a *private* genre in the sense that certain features relegate the music to utilization in private spaces. However, it is important to understand that workspace and private space are not as separated as they once were. Even the "private" space of the home has the potential to become a space for conducting entrepreneurial business. But what is it about lo-fi that makes it private? First, lo-fi is not generally created with original lyrics, though sometimes it might feature short samples with lines from older songs. This means that in its typical setting, lo-fi has no singer-audience relationship, nor a sing-along quality which might be shared in groups. Second, there are essentially no live lo-fi performances where an audience shares an experience together with the music. And because lo-fi is not performed live, we do not talk about lo-fi bands, but rather almost exclusively lo-fi artists or lo-fi producers. This leads into the third feature, that lo-fi is produced almost exclusively by individual artists in private at-home studios. Finally, lo-fi is not dance music. Unlike EDM which is specifically geared towards collective dance, bodily sensation, and a distinct form of frisson, lo-fi is a more cerebral, ethereal, and inward-oriented. Thus, lo-fi is music that is often created at home and heard at home, but importantly also in a private corner of one's school or workplace. If such 'private corners' could not be found at school or work before, lo-fi encourages the creation of private space in that it is meant to be heard on headphones in a state of quiet reflection and introspection.

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[22] See "Struggling To Tame Your Stress And Concentrate? Science Suggests This Type Of Music," *Inc. Magazine*, July 8, 2020.

Drawing on the work of Susan McClary, Grajeda provides some analysis of lo-fi as a "feminized" sound produced in the home:

> The sound of incompleteness, indefinite structure, lack of resolution—such traits have been gathered up by traditional music theory as 'feminine endings.' Evidently lacking a 'strong tonic,' these features, as musicologist Susan McClary argues, have been castigated in the discourse of music criticism as passive and 'weak.' (366)

This interpretation of 'feminized' sound is only imaginable in patriarchal society with gender roles which assign women to the home, and under those conditions, the home is painted as a site of powerlessness. In this light, Grajeda goes on to argue that lo-fi becomes an expression of the disruption of technology and powerlessness simultaneously:

> Such 'weakness,' I would suggest, characterizes lo-fi both formally, as fragmentation, and technologically, as disruption. This latter notation of instability, the breakdown of technology and its concomitant loss of mastery, control and order, throws into question the status of the authoring agent of lo-fi sound. (366)

In neoliberal society, the "authoring agent of lo-fi sound" is thrown into crisis because the music, as a protest against powerlessness, becomes merely another representation of that powerlessness. While it is true that lo-fi can be characterized by a certain kind of "weakness," it is not clear that it is intended to be heard solely in the home, only that it is intended to be heard in private. Especially as private space and workspace continue to blur together, the premise of this point, that lo-fi is produced in the home, misses the character of entrepreneurial labor which transforms the home (at least during certain moments) into a workspace. This privatization of listening allows for more efficient entrepreneurial labor as opposed to more traditionally capitalist labor done in workspaces like the factory or office. This entrepreneurial labor is decidedly more isolated. Lo-fi does not stir movement or action, but rather normalizes the conditions of powerlessness felt in isolation and makes them more comfortable.

Part III: EDM, Rave Culture, and Possibilities for Freedom

EDM and rave, especially in its early years, emerges as a counter-culture based on collectivity, peace, and pleasure-seeking, opposed to the neoliberal paradigms of individualism, competition, and efficiency. The rave scene acts as a mediating zone which functions to resolve the antagonisms between the status-quo and the demands of capital on the one hand, and a spiritual party culture based in freedom on the other. In this section I will show how this is made possible by the rise of Smart power and advancement in digital marketing technology. But this is not merely a system of domination. The subjectivity produced in a social order where the appearance of freedom promised by digital technology becomes a form of control comes to bear on EDM culture, altering its formal possibilities and the significance of its ethos. But this does not negate the ways that rave culture represents a movement towards a mode of musical production that depends on the listener’s sense of freedom and authenticity. In order to unpack this conceptualization of rave and EDM, it is first necessary to understand its elemental form.

The name EDM derives simply from its utilization of electronic instruments. In “Sound Visions and Visible Sounds: Electronic Musical Instruments and Their Power to Change,” a report on an EDM exhibition in Berlin which draws on EDM history, Benedikt Brilmayer distinguished electronic instruments by their lack of mechanical parts:

> Purely electronic musical instruments could only be created at a certain stage of technological development, one that can be marked quite clearly with the invention of the vacuum tube… from an organological point of view, by using a vacuum tube you do not have mechanically moving parts for sound production, which you actually have in all other categories of instruments, for example in a string, an air-column, a membrane, or the body of the instrument itself. So properly speaking, electronic instruments indeed only use moving electrons to produce sound. (105)

For this reason, electronic instruments have the capability to produce sounds that have never previously been heard. Without the ‘mechanical anchor’ of an instrument, the sounds produced in electronic music become otherworldly, reaching for a technological utopia or spiritual beyond. Most importantly, the performative aspect of rave shifts its emphasis from the musician to the crowd. The electronic sounds produce an atmospheric vibe when they are met with the rave’s vital organs: bodies in motion—collective dance. The elemental form of rave is therefore a collective embodiment of electronic music through dance.

Reynolds suggests that a rave might be understood as taking the form of both a desiring-machine and a TAZ (Temporary Autonomous Zone):

> A decentered, non-hierarchical assemblage of people and technology, the desiring machine is characterized by flow-without-goal, expression without meaning. Powered by E-lectricity, the rave sound-system or pirate radio is a noise factory; the feedback-loop of the phone-in sessions make me think of

> Hakim Bey's vision of the TAZ as a temporary 'power surge' against normality, as opposed to a doomed attempt at permanent revolution. (235)

Here, Reynolds focuses on pirate radio stations of the 1990s as representative of rave's function as a resistance to social norms. Like live raves, these radio stations focused heavily on audience participation with 'phone-in sessions' where listeners could call in to the studio and request music or participate in the DJ's banter. Using portable cell phones on either end of these calls, the studio locations were impossible to trace. Reynold's point about these sessions reveals that the space opened at a rave operates to alter the status quo and introduce a new way of moving through the world. Simultaneously as a manifestation of the desiring-machine, the rave is collective desire as a productive machine. Functioning as desiring-machines, raves are at once sites of social production and desire. These desires are not repressed at a rave, rather, they are immediately met and produced in a process that itself produces the social body of the rave. The audience becomes a part of the show.

Raves are manifestations of desiring-machines to the extent that they allow for the open flow of desiring-production in a non-Oedipalized environment where the family (and other institutions) do not seem to have any bearing on the immediate conscious experience. A rave community is then produced out of collective desires which are blocked during 'regular life' in capitalist society, namely the desire for genuine collective experience itself. These desires are (at least temporarily) fulfilled in the rave because they are met at the level of the collective—an assemblage that is otherwise undermined by hyper-individualism. A sociological study of EDM conducted by Philip R. Kavanaugh and Tammy L. Anderson describes how solidarity is formed at raves in a "multidimensional" cultural system that is shaped by the "social-affective" dimensions of drug-use and within a variety of spaces existing outside of the scene, including social networks.[23] The general conclusion is that drug use does indeed contribute to solidarity in the rave scene, but in a variety of dimensions which all depend on the affective feeling of being a part of a whole: "This kind of solidarity was typically formed 'in the moment' as scene members described deeply powerful and meaningful experiences at dance events. Even then, such experiences were equated with a sense of being part of a larger kind of community or youth movement" (Kavanaugh, Anderson 199). What this tells us first is that the rave is limited to collective experience and cannot be fully experienced individually. Yet people still walk away having gone through a deeply profound personal experience, and through this their consciousness, and by extension behaviors, have been altered. We can properly refer to a rave as "social-affective" because it is a zone where desiring-production is operating in an uninhibited manner to immediately manifest counter-hegemonic desires in reality. This is essentially what Tim Jordan argues when he writes that "when there is such a free-for-all, Deleuze and Guattari's desire is present in the unrestrained creation of new differences" (129).

However, Jordan explains why we should not see raving as inherently revolutionary or anti-capitalist:

> the ease with which raving has been incorporated into capitalism through the mass marketing of its fashion, in the baggy or grunge look, and its music, in a

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[23] Kavanaugh, Anderson 199

> seemingly unending series of 'dance chart hits' albums, connects with Deleuze and Guattari's ambivalent attitude to capitalism's creativity. It is accordingly hard to see raving, as interpreted through Deleuze and Guattari's theories, as a revolutionary movement or as anti-capitalist (139).

"Capitalism's creativity" has given way for the general tendency towards unlimited self-production. This is to say that capitalism has been adapted so that the subjective production of identity has become a market function. So, the production of difference in diverse identity at the rave does not amount to production of difference in the political economic sphere. However, Deleuze and Guattari's theory of desiring-production still underlines one important aspect of rave that is relevant here: that rave culture as a structuring of experience has political content and is not only an expression of self. Frederic Jameson points out in his book *The Political Unconscious* this important aspect of *Anti-Oedipus*:

> the concern of its authors is to reassert the specificity of the political content of everyday life and of individual fantasy-experience and to reclaim it from that reduction to the merely subjective and to the status of psychological projection which is even more characteristic of American culture and ideological life today than it is of a still politicized France (22).

So if we can include raving in the sphere of everyday life and fantasy-experience, it becomes clear that the next step would be to look for its political content, which, if Jameson's theory is correct, should be possible if we look beyond the individual "project of salvation" and recognize "that there is nothing that is not social and historical—indeed that everything is 'in the last analysis' political" (20). This is the basis of the notion of a political unconscious. The question becomes not whether we can identify rave as anti-capitalist or revolutionary—a question which smooths over the complex history and evolution of rave—but how we can understand rave as a cultural and experiential framework with distinctly political dimensions.

This necessarily involves a dialectical approach to rave, which means exploring moments when the rave scene must mediate contradictory forces. Let us examine how this has occurred in the past with a concrete example. In 1988, during what was called "the Second Summer of Love,"[24] the EDM sub-genre Acid House emerged as a second-generation explosion of ecstasy-use on the scene occurring alongside the rise of the Thatcherian brand of neoliberal politics seems to have triggered a surge of 'New Age' spirituality. Reynolds points out that this moment was marked by "peace-and-unity" rhetoric which, he says, was basically apolitical:

> And yet, for all the self-conscious counterculture echoes, acid house was a curiously apolitical phenomenon, at least in the sense of activism and protest. While the tenor of the peace-and-unity rhetoric ran against the Thatcherian grain, in other respects… acid house's pleasure-principled euphoria was very much a product of the eighties: a kind of *spiritual materialism*, a greed for intense experiences. (47)

I have chosen to include this example of an early form of EDM in a critique of contemporary EDM because this "spiritual materialism" and "greed for intense experiences" have proven not to be particular to "the eighties" (a concept which Jameson's work in "Nostalgia for the Present" urges us to question anyhow), but has embedded itself in EDM ethos in general. What Acid House also makes clear is that EDM does not function as a direct political response to political economic conditions, rather, it is a product of a reified social order where the primacy of the individual does not address the needs of the collective, or of spirit. The “pleasure-principled euphoria” associated with Acid House is itself political because it is associated with an attempt to reassert the collective power to access what might be called “higher” levels of consciousness. This of course does not disprove the idea that Acid House was not a form of activism or protest—it was not—however, Acid House is political form that takes shape as collective expression and aesthetics, less predicated on resistance than submission to the ‘higher power’ of the collective body of the rave.

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[24] Reynolds pp. 46

One political dimension of EDM culture in particular can be understood by looking to the way that EDM becomes a site of knowledge production which is then limited and shaped by the commodification of that knowledge. As EDM culture is shared outside of the rave on various scenes, those scenes become supplement to what Kembrew McLeod calls a “gate-keeping mechanism,” not only with the commodification of EDM culture, but also with marketing strategies including the proliferation of subgenres which are not only a result of the development of EDM over time, but also a strategic use of language by record companies. Let us examine this mechanism more closely. McLeod shows how the proliferation of subgenres falling under the umbrella term EDM relate to both a system of economic exploitation and cultural appropriation:

> The process of naming new subgenres within electronic/dance music communities is not only directly related to the rapidly evolving nature of the music itself. It is also a function of the marketing strategies of record companies, accelerated consumer culture, and the appropriation of the musics of largely non-White, lower class people by middle- and upper-middle-class Whites in the United States and Great Britain. Further, the naming process

> acts as a gate-keeping mechanism that generates a high amount of cultural capital needed to enter electronic/dance communities. (McLeod, Kembrew 60)

McLeod argues that the “naming process” that drives the vast proliferation of distinct genres functions to restrict and appropriate knowledge about rave culture. The record store and the internet become sites of knowledge production where the circulation of terms can be restricted to predominantly white, upper-class, male groups.[25] In McLeod’s argument, restriction is based on a system where certain people are, so to speak, ‘in the know’ while others are left out because they do not understand the specialized language associated with a given sub-genre.

I would argue that this “gate-keeping mechanism” coincides with a more general neoliberal tendency to create “artificial barriers” between human beings and forms of wealth that are not created through the production process.[26] This barrier takes the form of limiting options to what is available through ‘illusion of choice’ marketing tactics. This type of limitation is a restructuring of barriers into formal limitations, or more specifically, a process for controlling the *form* of the means of access to wealth and knowledge, not just the means themselves. André Gorz explains how “natural riches” can be turned over to the needs of capital through restriction of access: “It is true, however, that though they cannot be appropriated and ‘valorized,’ natural riches and common goods can be confiscated through the creation of artificial barriers that reserve the enjoyment of them to those who pay for a *right of access*” (Gorz 38). The “payment” for this right of access can take the form of both monetary wealth or cultural capital. But in this process of formal limitation, the ruling class need not implement strict disciplinary standards or physical barriers to defend various forms of capital. Instead, access to knowledge is restricted in the sense that means of knowledge acquisition which previously existed outside of the production process are repurposed to accumulate knowledge as a form of information capital; today we call this form 'data.'

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[25] McLeod, 73

[26] Andre Gorz, 38

Gorz explains this tendency in terms of capital's tendency to "capitalize" on knowledge production:

> There can be no question for capital of not attempting to appropriate, valorize, and subsume a productive force which, in itself, cannot be reduced to the categories of political economy. It will therefore do everything within its power to 'capitalize' it, to make it correspond to the essential conditions by which capital functions and exists as capital. (40)

So, if we are to recognize the internet and record stores as sites of knowledge production where the language of EDM culture is restricted to certain groups, we must also recognize how those sites are formally shaped by the general tendency to "appropriate, valorize, and subsume" them into the process of capitalist production.

Smart power operates as a kind of 'gate-keeping mechanism' in the sense that it restricts certain possibilities through the illusion of choice. Byung-Chul Han has shown how power in neoliberal society operates through a seductively positive regime:

> Power that is smart and friendly does not operate frontally—i.e. against the will of those who are subject to it. Instead, it guides their will to its own benefit. It says 'yes' more often than 'no'; it operates seductively, not repressively. It seeks to call forth positive emotions and exploit them. It *leads*

> *astray* instead of erecting obstacles. Instead of standing opposed to the subject, smart and friendly power meets the subject halfway. (14)

This notion of the administration of power in neoliberal society seems to be at odds with the notions of "gate-keeping" and "the creation of artificial barriers" to secure cultural capital, but this can be explained by understanding how Smart power does not close off access to knowledge itself, but rather dictates the processes of knowledge production. Like a barrier, it represents a form of restriction, but it takes on the guise of unlimited freedom. With Smart power, avenues of access to experience itself are controlled by assembling a system where the subject is expected to experience everything *primarily* as filtered through a Smart device. Raves are a quintessential example of how this tendency plays out in practice because they manifest as transient experiential moments far removed from the status quo, and that experience can itself be "captured" using digital technology and reformatted as a feature of the digital self in the form of shareable media (pictures, videos, posts, etc.). One particular EDM track captures this idea rather accurately.

The DJ Mike Inzano, known as INZO, released a track in 2018 titled "Overthinker" where he samples a speech given by the British philosopher Alan Watts regarding thought and meditation. In this speech, Watts comments on the peculiar way we experience events in the current age: "most of us would have rather money than tangible wealth, and a great occasion is somehow spoiled for us unless photographed. And to read about it the next day in the newspaper is oddly more fun for us than the original event. This is a disaster."[27] The ethical dilemma behind this sample is based on the idea that today subjects are not meant to experience *anything* in life for its own sake, but rather as a supplemental feature of a digital self. It is not uncommon to see people at raves recording an entire night filled with heavy drug and alcohol use so they can "remember" what happened despite having blacked-out. In moments like these, the memory of the event exists only digitally. Yet at the same time the speech itself is recorded, and then sampled on this track, meaning that we do not hear it in its original form, but rather as a copy mediated by multiple levels of technology. This is not just an oversight made by the producer. It is a necessary component of the music; the layers of warping, phaser effects, and synthesizers allow the listener to incorporate the speech into a 'trip,' and in that state of mind, the listener can experience the mediated copy as authentic. Functionally, the sample transforms from a mere copy of the original into an original experience that is reimagined each time it is played for a new crowd. The crowd becomes part of the performance. In this scenario, unlike with music stored in collections, the experience of listening to the music becomes a fundamental component of the music itself, without which the song would not be able to make its case for authenticity.

Perhaps we can understand this kind of performative listening along the lines of a new form of production. In the mid-eighties, Attali designates an emerging form of noise based on "Festival and Freedom" which closely resembles this system of self-production.[28] He talks about composition as a re-ordering of old divisions of labor that weakens the distinction between worker and consumer:

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[27] Alan Watts, "Art of Meditation"

> The listener is the operator. Composition, then, beyond the realm of music, calls into question the distinction between worker and consumer, between doing and destroying, a fundamental division of roles in all societies in which usage is defined by a code; to compose is to take pleasure in the instruments, the tools of communication, in use-time and exchange-time as lived and no longer as stockpiled. (135)

Attali's concept of composition reaches beyond the sphere of music-making, designating a shift in production in general. It is a movement from production based on a pre-given code to production based on the producer's will. Attali sees this emancipatory moment of the producer as a "conquest of his own body and potentials. It is impossible without material abundance and a certain technological level, but it is not reducible to that" (135). With EDM, we have indeed seen a shift towards this concept of composition in the sense that the will of the listener becomes a fundamental part of the performance. Through the movement of their body and shifts in their perspective, the audience participates in the composition of the music, which means that down to the level of individual tracks, this music is always in a state of flux. Each rendition of a track represents its rebirth through a new group of producers.

In the conclusion of his article, Tim Jordan asks important questions about Deleuze and Guattari's theory and the status of raving in the post-modern world:

> The politics and values of the left and new social movements need to be reexamined in the light of postmodernism, but the politics of postmodernism must also be analyzed from the standpoint of emancipatory movements. If ravers are Deleuze and Guattari's revolutionaries, what sort of revolution is

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[28] Attali 134

> this? If desiring-production cannot clearly mark capitalism as oppressive because capitalism is itself inherently creative, then how oppositional is the substance of Deleuze and Guattari's work? (140)

At this point, we can re-visit these questions and first realize that rave culture never promised to be a revolution in the first place, though raves have always had an anti-hegemonic essence. Deleuze and Guattari imagine a politics of creating new pathways of desire along the lines of Schizoanalysis in order to resist an Oedipalized capitalist order, however today the problem arises that even anti-Oedipalized and anti-capitalist movements can be attached and absorbed into the dominant neoliberal social order. While Deleuze and Guattari's theory might not be able to specifically designate capitalism as oppressive due to "capitalism's creativity," it still provides an important basis for understanding how desire and production function together to form the rave, and by extension rave is certainly a political phenomenon. We must then adjust, or rather add to the theoretical framework applied to rave culture in order to account for the mediation of antagonistic forces. The desire for collective fulfillment is met by the production process, transforming the ethos of rave and splitting it between the requirements of human beings and the requirements of capital.

Conclusion

We first explored the function of digital music streaming in order to reveal how it has paved the way for new practices of listening, collecting, and sharing music which correspond with the production of a data-collection manifold between people and large corporations. I should reiterate that online streaming platforms play a role in the formation of the neoliberal subject because they become a part of the "solipsistic economy" of the "fragmented entrepreneurial identity."[29] This effectively means that this new form of music involves a re-capturing of control over oneself and one's environment, but while that control is imagined to be a form of freedom, it reveals itself to be a mechanism embedded in the process of capitalist production.

With the internet at the disposal of the ruling class, neoliberal politics have found new routes of dissemination. And it has become increasingly clear that digital subjectivity is not restricted to online spaces, but rather carries over into "practical life." In society today, digital music takes on the function of a soft layer between the neoliberal subject and corporate entities, co-opted for the purposes of data collection and profit. This antagonism embeds itself in the many social forms which are then structured in various musical scenes, including those of lo-fi and EDM. Looking to these musical cultures allows us to understand how popular culture functions as a mediating grounds between political-economics and collective praxis. We might then realize that one of the difficulties arising from the spread of neoliberal ideology as cultural norm has been the resolving of contradictions between the production of the socio-economic order and the production of new forms of art that express the desire for freedom. I have by no means exhausted the possibilities of examining how this phenomenon manifests in the popular musical sphere, and digital music remains incredibly rich as an object of analysis for a critique of neoliberal capitalism.

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[29] See Mirowski, pp. 102

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