Snakes In The Grass

Grass

Callaghan

Nico

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Contents

(No One Reads the) Foreword

This book expands upon a research paper I wrote for my Honours degree in music composition. I should make clear that while this book was released alongside an album via the same record label/publisher, the two are not one and the same – they are independent items, crafted at different paces, in different stages, with different intent and ultimately, outcomes.

The course I studied focused on practice-based research, specifically our own personal music composition process. While I would argue that the music I have made has never belonged to a typically

ambient category, the choice was natural for me, as one of the main areas of music that I listen to or ponder when creating my own is of a primarily ambient form – be it drone, New Age or some other deviation that intersects with other genres.

The rather unwieldy question that instigated my research, and eventually, my thesis, was:

> What are the social and cultural implications and obligations of ambient music, and is there a need and/or a potential for ambient music to transcend its implied nature in a post-internet world?

In reworking and releasing this text for wider reading, I'd like to think of it as a natural evolution of my thinking throughout that year of study and making music. Several sections had to be massively culled to fit within the prescribed word limit. This is my opportunity to release it in full.

I should add that the ideas expressed within this piece are ones that I am in the process of "working out". However, I think

that there are problems in the ways that music is consumed, questioned and dealt within society that need to be more openly discussed.

Some individuals have – of their own accord – fashioned novel ways of engaging with their creative process and with their listeners.Others, meanwhile, have fallen into positions dictated or enabled by those distant from both the artistic world and from those who consume the art. I would like to think of this text as a distillation of some of my thoughts, and not only would I encourage but would welcome debate about

what I've written here.

All the best – stay safe and stay well.

Part One: Sponsored Content &
Bizarro Bastardizations

In the liner notes for his 2017 album Sponsored Content, Tristan Douglas – who records intense, highly intricate electronic music as Antwood – described an experience that "disturbed him".

He wrote: "In the past year, I found that ASMR, which I had previously used as a source of foley in my music, was a fairly effective sleep aid. I'd been using the videos in this way for a few months, when I noticed a popular ASMR YouTuber announced a plan to incorporate ads into her vides; quiet, subtle ads, woven into the content. What bothered me about this was that these ads would target viewers, such as myself, during times of semi-lucid vulnerability."

One could think of ASMR as audio-visual drugs that leave no aftertaste. Primarily uploaded to YouTube – and specifically an online phenomenon – ASMR videos are often recorded in one's house on a laptop or hand-held camera in one-take sessions, extremely close-up, more often than not with an external microphone. They vary: soft-spoken mantras to hairdresser role-play, consumption of baskets of fried chicken, or relatively simple stream-of-consciousness descriptions of one's day.

Despite the disparate subjects, what these videos share is an awareness of designing an intimate experience for a viewer, to illicit a physical response specific to whichever peculiar stimuli connects with the individual on the receiving end. Sometimes ASMR is alluded to as brain orgasms. Diligence in numerous parts of the recording process tends to engage large followings, user

requests for specific content and high approval ratings. This could include microphone type or placement, playing with the stereo field and visibility of the face and eyes.

In essence, many of the viewers of ASMR videos become dedicated users, building semi-reliant relationships with the generators of this content – they become relaxed, enamored and vulnerable. There is a distinct and novel intimacy at play within the environment of ASMR, an environment where viewers like Tristan Douglas find themselves profiled, targeted, and manipulated for participating in.

ASMR's home – YouTube – is perhaps the most emblematic example of a user-generated-content site – one billion hours of content are watched every day, predominantly originating from creators who also consistently engage with other users' content. One could argue that the backbone of YouTube is in its free user content, but crucially, in the time following its inception and widespread adoption, it has been significantly reframed as not only a legitimate source of capital for larger, industrious bodies via advertising and sponsorship, but as a leading online marketplace for wealth extraction, not creation. In this scenario, the user comes off second best in what is theoretically a user-generated-content environment. This arrangement is a striking inversion of the utopian, communal trading of information dreamt up at the dawn of the internet. The idea of the user has morphed into the idea of the malleable, exploitable consumer – and it is not only corporate bodies transforming the codes of engagement.

Was this in fact always the intention?

In the same vein, Sam Kidel – another electronic musician – questions:

"Can we share musical intimacy and comfort in capitalist spaces without capitulating to oppressive templates for relating to each other?"

On Sponsored Content, Douglas explores the idea of subversive

advertisement as more or less an external aesthetic subject, to inspire creativity. In his own words, it is done so "superficially", where it isn't woven into the creative process. It is merely reflected upon later in relation to his lived experience, which in turn feeds into his individual artistic persona. However, Kidel's practice and output are inextricably linked to notions of subverting capitalism, or the "oppressive templates" that its modern iteration enshrines.

Kidel's album Disruptive Muzak is a bizarro reinterpretation of the corporate mood-music of the eponymous, now-defunct Muzak Corporation. Their out-sourced music was made not so much for its inherent artistic merit, but for increasing productivity. It is music sold onto businesses as a form of atmospheric shop-fitting, inherently designed to maximize profits.

Disruptive Muzak is also widely seen as one of 2016's most thought-provoking and acclaimed Ambient music experiments – an "immersive,

atmospheric sound piece woven from disembodied voices of UK call centre workers". Kidel literally played his faux-muzak through Skype calls to these workers, and recorded their responses, overlaying them with the composition they were presented with.

In their ceremonious weaving of the human voice within a unique sonic environment, Kidel's work and the (now enormous) collective body of recorded ASMR content bear striking similarities. Both pinpoint hyper-specific materials aimed at eliciting direct responses from the listener or viewer, be they physical or psychological cues – however, Kidel's aim is not merely to immerse the listener within a delicate environment.

In an interview with Lucia Udvardyova for The Quietus magazine, he unpacks the ideas behind his landmark work, and asks:

"Is there a place for Ambient that disrupts our usual flow of thoughts and encourages critical reflection on the omnipresence

of capitalist relations in every space we inhabit?"

In the liner notes for his 1978 album Music For Airports, Brian Eno – largely credited with coining the phrase "Ambient music", or "Ambient" for brevity's sake – supposes the nature of his newly-minted form of music:

> "Ambient Music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting."

Eno's contention is one that dominates the dialogue about Ambient, that it should be recreational or environmental, to "induce calm and a space to think". But in the forty years since Music For Airports was released, the musical context of Ambient has evolved into something remarkably diverse and more complex. The space for Kidel's "critical reflection" – be it social, political or something else entirely – has emerged as something that perhaps needs to be considered a crucial part of its ongoing identity.

And of course, due to remaining distinct from more commercially viable and critically revered music – classic rock, dance, jazz – there is little space dedicated to broader discussion of these ideas – therefore, such conversations have yet to have their terms of engagement defined. Collecting all of the belief structures and socio-political identities of Ambient's artists from era to era in one data set for consideration would be next to impossible, and would do little to illuminate the grander narrative their practice plays into – for it is not a genre or form existing in a vacuum cut off from influence from other popular or alternative forms of art, let alone music.

The Melbourne-based composer and musician Keith Fullerton-Whitman offers a more modern hypothesis in an article for Pitchfork, writing:

> "Ambient is a great meeting point: not so much at the centre of everything, but

floating just above, in a perfect geosynchronous orbit, within reach. At its best, it casts enough shade to dampen the extraneous while causing a shift in our perceptions, enough to take us out of time and place, to wherever we need to be."

For example, the post-rave Ambient that formed out of chill-out rooms and IDM (Intelligent Dance Music) of the 1990s is a headphone-listening phenomenon that posits the solitary listener adrift from companionship.

Is it a stretch perhaps to suggest that it bears the weight of a Neoliberal culture of isolationist self-betterment, as opposed to the communal, all-too-holy embrace of 1980s New Age drones? The latter could also be perceived as a disparate, opportunistic culture heavily reliant on the fetishization and re-interpretation (or bastardisation, depending on who one asks) of Eastern philosophies.

However the focus of this text is not to ascertain the successes or failings of past musical movements as a means of simply fighting capitalism. For a multi-faceted dialogue surrounding Ambient to thrive, it cannot be contained to revisionist canonization or retromania. Within contemporary, online-dominated popular culture, modern Ambient's audience and prominence has grown and shifted significantly. In its broader recognition and appreciation, it's no longer completely on the fringe. In drawing the gaze of consumer capitalism, an active existential crisis has been forced upon its creators. Kidel muses that Ambient is now:

"...art that's vulnerable to co-option. The wind is blowing in the wrong direction to let my work drift".

It's telling that Eno points to Muzak himself in his liner notes, using it as an example of environmental music sitting at the opposite end of intent to his own. Yet, both Ambient and Muzak in their purest forms are designed musics, approaching substantially different creative aims and

producing works that do in fact bear similar musical tendencies.

The question emerges without too much prodding quite naturally – if this is indeed music that must be "ignorable" and "interesting", are there limitations to ambience or Ambient as a method of direct social action or critique, be it the creator's intent in either the compositional or presentational process? I would propose that an attitude that asserts interest alongside ignorance is perhaps more limiting than it is constructive, and is reflexively escapist in a way that may be dangerous to a healthy musical culture.

I mean in no way to discredit the notion of relaxation as a necessary means to overcome the pressures of existence – my fight is not with "chilling". However, in the face of adversity of whatever form troubles the individual or larger society, there is a difference between artistic expression as a means of transcendence and as a means of escapism. Perhaps more attention should be paid to those that may appear to engage with the

former, but may be merely facilitating the latter – particularly with disingenuous, opportunistic motives.

If this Ambient music that so many individuals dedicate large parts of their lives to engaging in with honest intent is successfully hijacked by opportunism and corrosive attitudes, it can only lead to a horrid distortion of the values many of its creators may hold dear. A culture based on alternative modes of expression and interaction surely cannot thrive and survive in an environment where those things are misappropriated as fodder for commercial scheming.

Perhaps in the contemporary moment, consideration should be given to how artists who create Ambient in the lineage of Eno may in fact contribute to the apparatus of Muzak's corporate legacy, as Bobby DeVito pointed to in his paper "But is it MUZAK????" back in

1996.[1] Despite their points of separation, Ambient's reconstituted relevance and its canonical relationship to corporate Muzak make it suitably enticing to the strategists of capitalism, themselves more than willing to exploit faux-utopian escapist fantasies for their own gain.

For those unwilling to be complicit in the shape-shifting system of corporate appropriation, Kidel and Udvardyova have a simple question that opens up an ocean of possibilities:

"What does anti-capitalist Ambient music sound like?"

1   "But is it MUZAK????: Ambient Music – from Sate through Cage to Eno", Bobby DeVito, Hyperreal, accessed October 26, 2017, music.hyperreal.org/epsilon/info/devito.html.

Part Two: An Olympic Mess &
A Trash Music Fetish

"Hey...I'm gonna tell you a
little bit about myself today."
Under his moniker, Helm, Luke
Younger released the album Olympic Mess
through the ever-evolving experimental-
powerhouse label PAN in 2015. Olympic
Mess' murky assemblage of jaggedly
spliced field recordings and watery loops,
throbbing currents and whirling dub-
techno chords falls somewhere near the
intersection of Ambient, Drone and Noise,
without quite slipping into genre-specific
clichés or gestures. It was picked up by
many larger music publications as one of
2015's best releases, and writing for Tiny
Mix Tapes, Willcoma applauds Younger's
project as:
        "a winner off the bat for
        producing material where no
        one track resembles the other."
However, forty-five minutes in,
the listener is presented with a track
very different to its seven predecessors.

"Strawberry Chapstick" is a re-pitched
and heavily processed chunk of an
ASMR video, sampled from the YouTuber
Christen Noel.
        It's a light-heartedly candid Q&A
monologue, filmed in a low-lit room, and
Noel never moves above a quiet whisper
in her recounting of her day-to-day life.
The microphone picks up all of the delicate
flutters of her annunciation, imbuing the
recording with a familiar, non-invasive
intimacy common across ASMR videos.
        Through audio manipulation,
Younger's re-interpretation bends Noel's
soft alto into a lower, androgynous voice.
Treating it as a sonic artifact, he slathers it
in short, ricocheting reverberations, as if it
were placed in a dank, metallic basement.
A gentle field recording – potentially
unnoticeable in another situation – is
introduced, softly distorted, and boosted
within the mix. By consequence it
feels brash, even intrusive, noticeably
different to Noel's original. The track is a
masterpiece of the art of sampling, and
the mood that Younger evokes is not only

dark, but uniquely mysterious, and taps into a territory rarely entered into by other experimental Spoken-word or Ambient.

In an interview with Angus Finlayson for Resident Advisor, Younger says that ambiguity within his recorded output appeals to him, elaborating when pressed that:

> "I don't really like the idea of people being able to listen to my music and go, 'That's this, that's that.' What I enjoy about making this kind of music and working with these sounds is that you can create something that's not so specific or referential to its actual source. You can make new environments, or new worlds of sound."

Although the track "Strawberry Chapstick" is a distinct outlier within this methodology, it contributes greatly to the overall aesthetic incongruence of the album, and in turn, Younger's desire for non-specificity. The androgyneity and mundanity of the spoken-word disrupt the assumed field of non-reference, but also engage with the curiousity and voyeurism of ASMR, without capitulating to musical genre distinctions. In a review for Pitchfork Magazine, Philip Sherburne writes that the track:

> "...jerks you out of Younger's finely wrought illusions and zaps you back to the real world. Olympic Mess speaks volumes without utilizing language or conventional musical tropes; it's an experience so captivating that only language breaks the spell."

Yet Younger's "spell" is not without influence or baggage from the real world. The title Olympic Mess and its accompanying materials reference a post-Olympics, post-GFC London: of Boris Johnson's mayoralty, the implosion of News of the World, and the imposed austerity of the Cameron government – in essence, Younger's own life that the album emerged from.

A follow up release from Younger –

World In Action – was recorded:

> "at the height of the UK
> media's attempt at divining
> integrity from the orchestrated
> turbulence of Brexit".

The liner notes accompanying World in Action also describe it as "cyclonic", "scattered", and "unimaginable". Younger hints at his own perspective as "skeptical, yet hopeful". But as the compositions blend heavily-processed woodwind, percussion and other abstract instrumentation, clues to Younger's immediate and greater surroundings in London are buried in the nondescript form of his musical language and technique. It's a far cry from the overt protest-song formulas that tend to dominate the popular consciousness – narratives of resistance and social justice – think Bob Dylan's "Hurricane".

Though in saying this, it would be both foolish and unfair to lay at Younger's feet the imperative to solely coordinate and direct socio-political change within his personal artistic practice.

In fact, it could be argued that Younger's methodological ambiguity is a perfectly reasonable and well-conceived antithesis to the creative problems that Sam Kidel discusses, and the core inquiries of this text. When the compositional process has at its core the notion of building a linear sonic environment for the listener, aiming for a subtly-evocative mood as a product of the project's documentation – as with Olympic Mess – the coy, ironic detachment of post-modernist gestures can be disregarded in favour of a unique and authentic communication.

In Kidel's repurposing of corporate Muzak and Younger's embracing the mundane, the two artists both engage with the idea of creating a space for the listener to inhabit that doesn't have to adhere to the "omnipresence of capitalism".

Curiously, the array of tools the two use to achieve such a desired space are opposing. Where Kidel uses the language and form of capitalism as a tool to confound it, it is done so in a manner

where the listener has to be educated in the gestures of capitalism's power – which could be argued is at its purest and most facile in the form of telephone hold-music.[2]

Kidel's efforts rely heavily on the language and form of post-modernism, and in essence depend upon late-capitalism as a means of critiquing it. Younger's own politics and methodology is certainly not simple or easily contained within any single piece of music, and it would be ridiculous to think that it could be.

However, with Olympic Mess, the "spell" that Sherburne describes certainly enables the necessary and subtle "shift" that Keith Fullerton-Whitman deems crucial to take us wherever we need to be. In this sense, Olympic Mess demonstrates how there is ample space for both reflection and critique that needn't be

politically vacuous within the previously imagined confines of Ambient.

When Kidel imagines a specific "place" for Ambient, it could be read as an immaterial, if not necessarily metaphorical space – presumably online – that somehow bypasses, or even reinvents the asserted rules for convening this music, as in political discourse.[3] While substantial developments in the reach and diversity of Ambient's practitioners and audience have occurred with the advent of the internet, it has often been at the expense of the previously-assured power and revenue streams of the music industry.

The dominant online platforms that have emerged over the past decade have siphoned and centralized the music industry's revenue models through a

2   Simon C. Jones and Thomas G. Schumaker, "On Functional Music and Power, *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 9 (1992): 156-169.

3   Lincoln Dahlberg, "The Internet and Democratic Discourse: Exploring the prospects of online deliberative forums extending the public sphere," *Information, Communication & Society* 4:4 (2001): 630.

transfer from a physical, owner-based model of music to a digital, ownerless model of ubiquitous, global reach. This is apparent across all music, not only Ambient.

In addition, the streaming industry giant Spotify has been accused of rigging its proportional payout owed to third-party content holders (record labels and artists, but primarily publishers) by filling promoted playlists with music that the corporation itself owns, or for which it can negotiate more lucrative rights and royalties. With this model of operation, it has been able to avoid proper allocation of funds to royalty holders, to the tune of billions of US dollars.

It's an accusation several of the supposedly out-sourced/in-house creators of this music have backed up, and where conclusive answers have not been found from Spotify itself, the inconspicuous, cookie-cutter or non-existent profiles of the "artists" speak volumes.

Tellingly, it is within styles and forms where attachment to the constructed lifestyle of a pseudo-celebrity musician is of least concern, if any at all – chill-out, relaxation, study – that Ambient is the most over-represented genre of these controversial playlists. But one has to remember that there are living artists that drive the aesthetic machine that are being gamed out of the system that Spotify has forced upon content creators and consumers as an industry standard. Damned if you do, damned if you don't...

However, a dichotomy between helpless, exploited artists and comically evil corporate tyrants is too simple and convenient. There are, of course, professional musicians generating the content being used by Spotify to increase its own dividends – and in some cases, structuring the oppressive templates for relating to each other that Kidel speaks of. In examining the more fundamental problems facing Ambient and more broadly speaking, experimental music, one needs to consider the obligations and responsibilities of the artist when navigating the complexities of the digital

music world.

A handful of musical sub-genres born out of the cultural boom of the late-2000s Internet have taken inspiration from the signifiers and detritus of late-capitalism as an aesthetic starting point. Primarily favouring an irreverent, playful approach to composition, they distort these elements into something at times terrifying, at others, comical. Whether the former or the latter, occasionally they stray into the eerily beautiful and the remarkable.

In a lengthy pair of articles he wrote for Dummy in 2012, the music writer Adam Harper is credited with bringing broader cultural awareness to a form of sample-based – indeed, primarily sampled – music, called "Vaporwave". He describes it as having:

> "a fetish for the trash music on either television or just somewhere in the background, by turns chipper and dreamy... treated through endless loops, drones and small-cell repetition".

Yet again as in Kidel and Younger's practices, the affectation for the mundane resurfaces – and in this case, Muzak and Ambient facilitate the gestural content of Vaporwave. Powered by user-administered distribution websites like Soundcloud and Bandcamp, Vaporwave's artists initially remained anonymous, hidden behind obscure and labyrinthine online personas to craft their irreverent – and in most cases, illegal – edits of Sade and Diana Ross, among others.

Often saturated with the retro-futurist imagery of Japan's asset bubble economy of the late 1980s, the visual identity quickly designated the genre's space and influence, even as the methodology and practice of its source material's creators remained largely discreet and seemingly distant. They were the faceless progenitors of a sanitised, musical space that wasn't so much interested in dehumanization, more so the absence of humanity in places built specifically for modern, controlled human desire – the shopping plaza, the high-

class hotel, the luxury car showroom.

A major point of contention around Vaporwave's broader artistic merit and cultural value was whether it could transcend merely toying with notions of taste in an extremely exaggerated sense, and with the Western society's preconceived notions of "good", in the form of uniquely post-internet cultural mischief.

To illustrate this, Marvin Lin's review of the now-seminal Vaporwave album 札幌コンテンポラリー questions the need for a critique of the music's political allegiances – and where other critics have settled upon the simple narrative of cool, ironic detachment as a lazy aesthetic short-cut, Lin differs in his analysis, concluding that:

> "While this music's relationship to capitalism is certainly worthy of investigation, the value of 札幌コンテンポラリ — shouldn't hinge solely on the degree to which we deem it transgressive or subversive or resistant... 札幌コンテンポラリー is playing with, if not expanding, what it means to aestheticize in the age of appropriation, and it's doing it, not by speaking the language, but by actually becoming the language itself..."

Ironically, Vaporwave's independent and DIY method of production and distribution – primarily of limited-run cassettes apart from digital sales – suffered the same hype-driven over-commodification as early punk records. The most revered tapes, often just issued in hand-dubbed collections of fifty tapes in the early 2010s, occasionally change hands via resellers online for many hundreds of US dollars, prices usually reserved for obscure Dub Reggae or Algerian-Disco limited editions.

In the years since its emergence, Vaporwave's mass of online artists has splintered into fragmented scenes that tend to softly disavow the label, opting instead to apply the techniques initially

used to "chop and screw" corporate mood music and saccharine, manufactured pop, to other forms. All of their efforts are indebted to consumerist, late-capitalist style and imagery, but seem to make little or no effort to purvey any kind of nuanced analysis or critique of the themes they draw on so heavily.

Sam Kidel disavows Vaporwave as a "dead-end for leftists" in his Quietus interview, and despite a shared affinity for reimagining corporate Muzak, his own practice seems concerned with superseding or challenging the ever-presence of capitalism, not merely replicating it. So the question remains:

> how do you posit an
> alternative to a system
> that appears implacable?

The late music writer and philosopher Mark Fisher rather neatly paraphrased Alain Badiou's complex theories in insisting that an effective anti-capitalism must be a rival to capitalism, not a mere reaction to it. It must oppose Capital's globalism with its own authentic universality. The shortcomings of Vaporwave's successors seem to perpetuate a stagnant collection of ideological meta-commentaries on our current globalised society, and in this sense, it would appear that Vaporwave's aesthetic material does not offer any unique methods or strategies for overcoming the very thing it is purported to critique.

But crucially what it does show instead is a willingness of its artists to flirt with potentially illegal ideas – copyright disobedience, or something along those lines. Whether the ultimate musical end is insipid and detached, or strikingly novel, it is an entirely different attitude to the rather assured and relatively safe environment that many "serious" musicians occupy. And I doubt Brian Eno would find much solace within the confines of this community, despite his output from the 1980s serving as a ripe source to plunder for Vaporwave compositions.

In contrast, Vaporwave reveals

the relative conservatism at play within many fields of contemporary music when it comes to the release and promotion, where creators are incentivized to play ball for some kind of goal that remains curiously out of control and reach. Damned if you do, damned if you don't...

Part Three: Up Red Bull Creek
Without Ideological Insulation

> "At what point does ironic
> mimicry of the symptoms
> of an unjust order become a
> genuflection to that order? If
> you claim to mock a regime
> while accepting both its actual
> patronage and adopting its
> tropes and gestures with comic
> flair, you are not subversive –
> you are a court jester."

Mostafa Heddaya penned this caustic critique of the art collective Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for Hyperallergic.

A member of GCC and an acclaimed electronic musician, Fatima Al Qadiri's solo work under both her own name and a variety of monikers sits alongside her collaborative work with the production supergroup Future Brown. Since emerging in 2010 under the pseudonym of Ayshay with her Muslim Trance mix for DIS magazine, Al Qadiri's artwork, releases, and DJ mixes have garnered immense approval.

Drawing on a mix of sampled and synthesized sound sources that intentionally blur distinctions between high and low art, between realistic and imaginary, Al Qadiri's work is often described as either "hyperrealism", or as displaying tendencies usually attributed to artists who self-describe as such. Aside from purely aesthetic concerns, however, her music is pointed to as innovatively addressing previously unexplored tangents of sexuality, race and subversion through a highly distinct visual and musical language.

In an effort to illustrate what existential problems Ambient musicians may face in navigating their musical world's increasing proximity to that of corporate bodies, it is worth looking at influential artists from other conceptually-related genres who have profited from new forms of patronage, and the corporations promoting them to higher visibility within the cultural consciousness.

Because much like with Vaporwave, Al Qadiri's work has opened up debate about adopting and re-imagining capitalist signifiers in a creative context. However, particularly within her work with Future Brown, inconsistencies have been repeatedly pointed too when considering the substantial patronage afforded to them – among many others – and in turn, whether that involves adherence to the machine, values and vision of corporate patrons.

Co-comprising Lit City Trax-founder J-Cush (Jamie Imanian-Friedman) and the duo Nguzunguzu (Asma Maroof and Daniel Pineda), Future Brown is described by one of its heaviest backers as "something of an underground supergroup", crafting "hyperreal club music that's an ambitious fusion of grime, hip-hop, dancehall, reggaeton and more".

Across multiple publications, Future Brown is continually described in reverential, awed tones: NPR's First-Listen segment detailed it as "post-human, post-geographical music", and "future music for a world faithful to a sense of place". The Guardian called it "Time-bending, space-shrinking", claiming it could "pass for a field-recording from some distant future".

It is ironic that the main site promoting Future Brown as an "underground supergroup" is not a traditional journalistic organisation – like The Guardian or NPR – but the now leviathan-like music arm of Red Bull – the Austrian energy-drink turned pan-cultural patron superpower. In addition to running an enviable guest-lecturer heavy Music Academy annually, Red Bull's entire art, sport and music divisions operate events throughout the year across every

49

continent – even Antarctica.

Red Bull's ubiquity in sponsorship at music festivals transcends simple placarding and branding, as they pour huge amounts of money into increasingly creative methods of galvanising attention into both the artists they promote and their brand. Perhaps inspired by Silicon Valley and its success in fostering and drawing emerging talent, the exchange resembles that of start-up incubators.

It could be argued that the music culture monopoly that Red Bull appears to desire through its efforts condenses discourse and criticism into a safe-zone where earnest dissent is not only discouraged, but actively suppressed. Jordan Sargent pondered for the now-defunct platform Gawker, "What happens when a soft-brink brand is scared by its own journalism?" in response to Red Bull deleting a critical review of Future Brown's debut album on its own daily newsletter only a day after publishing it.

While it was never made apparent who requested the article to be removed, it isn't hard to imagine how it would have disturbed the thorough and calculated efforts of Red Bull's promotional campaign, with reviewer Alex Macpherson writing:

"Much of the theorising around 'internet artists' has been that the internet has been a great leveller, a means of connecting disparate but likeminded artists with each other. What's gone undiscussed is the ease with which artists from privileged backgrounds, fluent in the promotional use of art-speak, can wrap up existing real scenes in a vague concept, whack on a theoretical layer, then sell it back to us – even most of the tunes are dud. At the heart of the Future Brown project is a co-option of 'hood' artists into

a thoroughly bourgeois milieu for the sake of street credibility. It's an old story, so maybe it is music for the world we live in – but it's not such a futuristic concept, after all."

It is important to point out that a major part of Macpherson's attack is focused on assumptions of class and upward mobility that appear dangerously thin without evidence or quotations from Future Brown about those very things. On a more reasonable note, Macpherson's critique of Future Brown's approach and aesthetic is derived separately from his interpretation of director Rory Mulhere's music video for Future Brown's single "Vernáculo". The clip is accompanied by a rather blunt description:

"Appropriating the advertising language of global beauty brands like L'Oreal and Revlon, 'Vernáculo is an exercise in capitalist surrealism".

In an interview with Jazz Monroe for Dummy, Imanian-Friedman and Maroof describe the video as "parodying the beauty industry", "trying to portray how absurd it is", and "as if scars aren't beautiful".

Like Kidel (and to a lesser extent Vaporwave), capitalism's advertising aesthetics are re-purposed as heavily stylized criticism, in this instance taking the concept of a "Future Brown" and projecting it into a traditionally Caucasian-dominated space.

Macpherson's criticisms could be viewed as unreasonably harsh considering how many artists engage with critical concepts with assistance from corporate backing. With this in mind, it is also important to recognise that the visibility afforded to Future Brown via their positioning in the lead up to the release of their self-titled album promoted an important alternative to the hetero-centric, male-gaze biased whitewashing of

53

electronic music.[4]

In the comment sections for "Vernáculo" and much other media that Future Brown has released, ridicule and complaints abound, seemingly stemming from the notion of the release not belonging to the established church of experimental electronic music. The canonization of house, techno, jungle and a multitude of other styles is important, but it has been adopted into larger, corporate music cultures – a shift away from its marginalized beginnings.

This shift has gifted promoters and sponsors a more wholesome swathe of content to draw upon when branding and marketing, however, it consistently undermines, ignores or trivializes the individual efforts and creations of non-white, female and/or non-binary people – many of them at the crux of essential

4   Kembrew McLeod, "Musical and Social Differentiation Within Electronic/Dance Music Communities," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 13 (2001): 64.

developments now key to electronic music's culture. It's fair to say that Al Qadiri's craft and output have had an incredible influence on many musicians and artists who haven't faced belittlement or criticism – warranted or unwarranted, conscious or subconscious – anywhere near as significantly. In 2018, it cannot be denied: there is a gendered and prohibitive culture surrounding electronic music.

It's important to relay these concerns back to Ambient, for in its contemporary setting it increasingly overlaps in cultural spaces with the likes of Future Brown. Any discussion of the socio-political fabric of Ambient itself as a broader listener culture needs to remain critically aware of the prohibiting biases many of its denizens propagate, and the residual effect this has on the practical accessibility of the physical and virtual spaces for those who don't fit the assumed and priveledged norms.

As with festival line-ups for more popular forms of music, there is a visible problem that musicians are routinely

ignored or dismissed when they don't immediately fit in with the narratives that the electronic music industry has mindfully enforced. If Ambient is to serve as an authentic and disruptive foil to limited consumerist narratives, its practitioners need to be aware of the institutional proclivities that may distort it within a broader cultural fabric, and offer visible alternatives to rigid, commercial plans.

Emerging boldly from within the contemporary Ambient landscape, a growing number of artists at the forefront of the genre's experimental strands are presenting novel pairings of musical and socio-political aesthetics – at times visibly heavy with commentary, at others engaging in more subtle discourse.

Fred Warmsley's album $uccesor as Dedekind Cut and Yves Tumor's Serpent Music have endured as some of 2016's most critically-acclaimed releases for their respective fields – but on top of this, their identity and bold re-framing of typically "Ambient" gestures in their productions serve as a disruption to the assumed stereotypes of Ambient.

In a genre punctuated by a visual language of greyscale photographs or gleaming, crisp rainforests, instead, a night-time photograph of two African-American men riding horses distinctly marks out the cover of $uccessor. In an interview with Passion of the Weiss, Warmsley illustrates his choice for the photograph, saying: "I love the idea of someone of colour on a horse, something you normally don't see being portrayed in the media, like a person of colour making ambient music".

Chino Amobi's Airport Music For Black Folk is another assumption-rattling Ambient album from 2016. Through its unconventional, industrial palette and murky atmosphere, it upends the familiar genre descriptors: peace, tranquility, and relaxation. Its title is both in reference and

challenge to the "untenable privilege" at root of Eno's landmark work previously mentioned in this text.

Amobi's distinctly different impression of the airport environment serves to disrupt Eno's assumed values and experiences of such spaces. Kevin Lozano of Pitchfork bluntly – and appropriately – questioned: "Who actually gets to be calm at the airport?"

Yves Tumor's output was affectionately described by Alex Frank of Pitchfork as "Disgusting Beauty". It's an oxymoronic aesthetic paradigm perhaps too unsettling for the logical, trackable narratives that tend to suit corporate sponsorship. In recognizing something of cultural value, they may try in vain to place projects and artists into pre-existing commercial signifiers. However, at the time of writing, it seems that no one has successfully pigeonholed Yves Tumor.

Individuals who don't naturally belong to the conservative bloc that tends to dominate the upper tiers of the Western corporate sphere may well have authentic and pragmatic political beliefs that do not naturally mesh with the over-PR'd, politically-correct consensus their backers may wish to project in an effort to assure market security.

However, managing to adopt and patronize those whose politics are the antithesis to a corporate body's own leanings may be the best kind of approach for bottoming-out dissent and criticism. The shackling of leftism to Red Bull via music is just another indication of an effort to redirect uncomfortable perspectives. As Future Brown collaborator Kelela Mizanekristos writes in an Opinion piece for Resident Advisor:

"Capitalism is intersecting with social justice in a way that is never has before, and that means that it's quite literally bad business to look racist or sexist, to have overt examples of how these dynamics are showing up in your company or your

brand, or whatever. If you are not actually doing something proactive, you're looking really dumb as a company."

With this proactive approach to brand security as an obligation, it could be rather cynically argued that despite the supposedly distanced and altruistic patronage of their backers, Future Brown's cultural capital could be far more valuable to Red Bull's overall brand aesthetic than the funding and exposure they provide back to the artists.

As major capitalist enterprises are forced to adapt to shifting socio-political climates and technological advancements, perhaps the lavish benevolence of Red Bull and its fellow corporate bodies is largely just elaborate ideological insulation for the new digital age. Look what happened to Pepsi.

Red Bull's efforts are extensive and all-encompassing, confined not only to genres or events that one may immediately associate with energy, or vitality. Perhaps criticism directed at its style of patronage, and its involvement with left-field and experimental music could be perceived as petulant, considering how much support it provides to musicians in the face of increasingly massive gaps emerging in revenue streams. Mizanekristos has something important to say about this:

> "It's easier for black women artists to generate money that can be funnelled into other things that we care about... there's a way that we can enterprise and flip it when we earn a few tokenising white dollaz (sic). Some people have a hard time seeing that there is activism in this."

While individual, enterprising artists may be presented with a choice about how they engage with the corporate sector, it is not a far-fetched idea to suggest that some music institutions could not operate as they have without considerable corporate patronage. However, the onus needs to be on

61

these individuals and bodies to answer if they can maintain an authentic, critical dialogue within the worlds of art and music if they are in essence in the employ of arch-capitalist bodies like Red Bull. As the writer Douglas Rushkoff says:

> "Corporations don't control the arts – but once cultural production is commercialised or corporatised, it is no longer art. There are individuals who have decided to stop being artists and instead be professionals, but no art comes out of the capitalist system. This is not to say capitalism is bad – capitalism is great for soap, and cars, and tonic. But it's not where art happens, and particularly in a world where the thing hypnotising us is the market, art – who's responsibility it is to make people see what's going on, to wake people up from the dream they're in – must remain distinct from that dream."

It's one thing to make experimental media with a budget and safety net (somewhat) guaranteed by corporate backers – there are numerous ways to divert funding that is in opposition to or bypasses prohibitive intent. It's another thing entirely to craft experimental music where capital, manipulation and post-modern critique are the both the aesthetic signifiers behind the work and the facilitative means.

How can a heavily supported artist earnestly centre their critique upon capitalism's intrusions into "every space
we inhabit"
while literally soundtracking or performing in a commercially-dictated space? If the musical craft and surrounding discourse that has flourished with corporate backing is based upon a broken methodology that does little to dismantle the structures it purportedly critiques, it cannot be viewed as a system that will "remain distinct from that dream".

If an artist is engaged in a

transactional or strategic relationship with a brand or company, perhaps this needs to be viewed in a different sense to the behaviours and relationships of the average consumer. Little space for change is allowed if all behaviour is villified beyond reasonable discussion.

The overused adage that there is no ethical consumption under capitalism implies a crude power dynamic of the system oppressing the subject at every turn. However, perhaps artists do indeed have power to make choices, be they relatively small or large. They are the ones with the ideas, the talent, the artistic capital, and therefore, the leverage.

There may be an overabundance of artists attempting to scrape together subsistence in the wake of bottoming-out financial opportunities – however, are reflexive, post-modern gestures able to offer much scope for genuine artistry through a prism dictated by a soft-drink company?

In recognizing that the performance and discourse that Future Brown engages in is distinctly different from much of Ambient music, it is apparent that the same constrictive socio-political potential that corporate patronage necessitates is a backwards step to the kind of constructive movement needed to facilitate innovative approaches to the problems that face the music industry.

In amassing individual behavior into a collective pool of negative stereotypes, perhaps one ignores and minimizes both the self-policed, creative dilemmas and in turn, the personal responsibility facing these musicians. But whether they are excessively conceptual contradictions, or complex and subtly-deployed aesthetic subversions, if the corporately-patronized artist practice does not challenge a destructive corporate status quo, it is indeed understandable why thinkers like Heddaya may perceive of some individuals as "court jesters".

"Once again music
has rediscovered a new
VanguardTM – the conflation
of melody with incidental noise,
metric patterns with random
systems, heavy symbolism with
mindless chatter. The audio
revolution has been rekindled
by our resignation to the fact
that there is no originality in
feigning originality. We smile
at Sartonian Nothingness. We
engage in identity politics and
anti-essentialism. We sleep
each night nuzzled in this post-
Modern polemic."

– Terre Thaemlitz, aka
DJ Sprinkles

Part Four: Tearing A Hole In The Grey Curtain

In asking what anti-capitalist Ambient sounds like, Sam Kidel could inadvertently be posing a secondary question – what does capitalist Ambient sound like?

Does it really mean anything or have any distinction in a world where the governing precedent – Globalism – is post-capitalism's next level, where information is ever-present and crafted gestural content becomes background noise?

Of course, this question needs to be viewed within the context of contemporary culture, with Muzak essentially obliterated by the burgeoning adoption of Ambient by corporate enterprise. From small retail situations to massive commercial ventures, curated Spotify playlists are the logical evolution of licensed mix CDs, providing an optimized experience at the tech giant's supposedly omniscient discretion.

Capitalist Ambient may be synthetic, organic, or even a combination of the two. It may evoke thick and humid tropical rainforests, or snow-swept Nordic landscapes. It may be fluent in style, atmosphere, and straddle many micro-genres within its sphere of influence ever-so cleverly – but it doesn't have any point of authentic distinction, or for that matter, any reason to exist aside from guaranteeing its own perpetuity as a creative product. Insofar as its aesthetic is informed by a cultural marketplace, it is dictated by capital – but certainly not with the same skittish detachment of Vaporwave.

This kind of Ambient music completely disposes with the (now dissolved) dichotomy of underground and mainstream – and even while its less successful associates may wither under the gaze of financial obscurity caused by disintegrating revenue, it too is disposable. The continuing success of any artist conceding to this system is dependent on the whim of a transactional

digital business model that has no defined interest in keeping them afloat, especially once they have served the purpose of constituting a bullet-proof brand, cultural environment or populist directive.

But to bear this in mind doesn't mean dispensing with harsh condemnations (nor transparent heroisms) of artists reconciling confusing facets of the modern music landscape in their practice. People may make or participate in what they want with intentions that are nobly or naively affirmative and aimed at fostering positive action. However, when examined and viewed from a distance with detachment from the individual's insular narrative, one may see that in fact these efforts may reinforce behavior or attitudes that are counter-productive to what spurred such an endeavor in the first place.

Criticizing these individuals need not fit with the vengeful rigor that many contemporary publications or armchair critics rely upon, a rigor mostly engineered to maintain a foothold within another industry that feels the push from corporate bodies – television and journalistic media empires.

In the rapid technological shift of the new millennium, the dialogue that has overtaken the music industry has been laid out by the digital-age, venture-capital behemoths like Twitter – Apple, Spotify, YouTube and even Red Bull – not to mention Rupert Murdoch's "journalistic" body, News Corp.

As a curious side note: News Corp even clawed its way into the once-refreshing VICE, and its subsidiaries like Noisey. It appears their shares were sold to Disney, which is not an insignificant development for musicians to consider when spruiking for promotional spots and sponsored content.

Their "innovations" in the industry of redirection, sponsored content and curated misinformation naturally tend to facilitate simplistic narratives even as their internal machinations are complex and difficult to penetrate. It is hard to imagine what could surpass these massive

digital institutions in the way they have superseded blogs, radio and television. They appear to have solely defined the potential role of a musician operating within their Western-specific systems – and while no doubt, something else will emerge, it is hard to imagine or anticipate what kind of psychological rupture that will be, considering how confounding the notion of a social-media driven internet would have been in the 1980s or '90s.

Wider adoption of subversive tactics in a non-traditional manner is paramount in tackling the contemporary dilemmas of creation and engagement in a system that seems omnipresent and impenetrable. Centralized protest or boycotts seem unlikely to cause any kind of lasting effect, for this is not the place for authoritative prescriptions on how to tackle institutionalized practices. Kidel himself says:

> "I don't want to talk too generally or prescriptively about music's subversive potential. I think music does have subversive roles to play, but its roles should be plural, dialogical, and certainly not defined by one person."

Instead, the digital giants may struggle to contain the unpredictability of authentic artistry across genuine, disruptive communities – individuals or movements that are not defined by the parameters set by those who wish to wring all capital and possibility out of creative thought. It is hard to see how Vaporwave's explosion across meme culture in this decade could have been accurately predicted or adopted by larger corporate bodies without leading to a blanket abandonment of its key artists – which appears to have occurred naturally.

Despite Vaporwave's inability to be focused into a direct confrontation with the capitalist signifiers it aped, it displayed such an unconventional mode of internet-specific expression and community-building in its emergence and proliferation, that important lessons can be taken from its bypassing of regular

rules of engagement.

Ambient may be on the precipice of a far larger cultural adoption through corporate patronage and shepherding, largely due to a vague "meeting point" of gestural content that can be neatly codified into a feasible product. Spurred on by a questionable YouTube algorithm for "Ambient" recommendations, an expensive and deluxe re-issue of Midori Takada's obscure 1983 album Through The Looking Glass ended up being the highest-selling "New Release" on the massively popular online music marketplace Discogs for the first half of 2017.

However, that "meeting point" also has the potential to be adapted by those unwilling to submit to a digital machine, as this contemporary form of Ambient in a widespread manner is a much harder idea to pin down, due to its predilection for abstraction.

Arguably the defining categorical difference between independent and/ or DIY musicians, and larger record companies and tech giants, is the relationship to the listener. While there are algorithmic processes that build on previous iterations on the "digital store" in place to drive operations like Bandcamp, one crucial element to its success is in its re-imagining of the exchange between artist and listener.

Perhaps similar efforts that restructure the knowledge and application of an interaction do more to innovate, rather than simple aesthetic evolution on the behalf of the artist. Anonymous supply chains with prescriptive middle-men do little to foster productive or adaptive environments.

The prohibitive and shortsighted model of Spotify continues to haemorrhage vast sums of investor capital in the often belated and insultingly thin paying off rights-holders, even as its (unusually) predominantly public valuing opened at the astonishing height of 26.5 billion US dollars. In narrowing the listener's window of engagement to that of satiated consumer, it doesn't offer any novel prospect for fixing the revenue

issues facing artists, publishers, and the multitude of other individuals who facilitate the performance and exposure of music – not to mention record companies.

For all their scheming machinations, larger institutions like these don't tend to exhibit qualities that give the impression of them maneuvering confidently in the rapidly shifting modern economy – hence why they are forced to play catch-up with Spotify and Apple Music, adapting to terms of engagement that lead to market-based strategies as opposed to artistically-derived creative decisions.

It's worth pointing out that while some artists are able to enjoy modest income from Spotify, its payout methodology bears a striking resemblance to the laughable top-down pyramid of Neoliberal economics – a system facing widespread interrogation throughout the world through populist electoral insurgencies in Europe and the United States. These hierarchical structures do little to enamor creative individuals to their causes, resigning them to deal with it and glean what thinning benefits they can while simultaneously limiting the scope for dialogue.

If would be fair to argue that these criticisms I have presented are informed by an idealistic, leftist mentality – and it would also be legitimate to question if this is a position informed by (perhaps) unrealistic wishful-thinking. Should every individual have the right to productive and fruitful artistic careers in a world where in many people's minds, aesthetic pleasures are marginal concerns that shouldn't overtake more pressing dilemmas?

Perhaps artists themselves have the ability – perhaps even a responsibility – to redirect their practice away from the capitalist-informed, ultimately professional arenas that dominate popular culture. In turn, in allowing their practice(s) to be multi-faceted to invigorate meaningful methodologies and spaces for community and expression, they may in fact offer new opportunities outside of the limited sphere of capital-steered aesthetic reference.

Taking a detour, and wandering outside of the prohibitive options of capitalism's imposed realism may offer novel insights into transcending it in other applications outside of just music itself. The alternative is just to sit tight in one's ideology and refrain from examining value systems that may not be based on anything other than what one is told is aesthetically or socially correct, rather than what one may find empowering and stimulating. Perhaps there is a different kind of intrinsic value to be found within that?

As powerful as their algorithms are, and as many rights they have accrued, criticising the systemic failures of Spotify needn't be read as leaning on political clichés – rather, merely examining an existing structure to imagine alternatives. The intrusion of corporate bodies into experimental spaces is merely one example of artists needing play to catch-up with those that have considered this before them – they needn't fall too far behind.

Proactive approaches outside of larger, superimposed structures are of course, difficult and confronting to actively engage in. Electronic musician Holly Herndon succinctly presents the dilemma of the dominant digital meeting grounds:

"Our data is mined with no compensation, we can be banished from platforms for any reason, and we do not have the choice not to participate without incurring serious social and economical consequences".

However, Herndon's philosophy is perhaps a little defeatist, and leads to

a discourse perhaps merely in spite and servitude to our digital overlords, not looking beyond them as a blip within musical traditions. To not have the choice to not participate should be reason enough to dispel any notion that these systems are designed in the interest of content creators or audiences. To not have the choice to not participate should be a clear indication that the system that propagates such an authoritarian relationship with not only musical cultures, but also society on a broader level, is a system in dire need of scrutiny and reconsideration.

For the Ambient musician to remain peripherally engaged, to craft contributions that are admittedly interesting – yet crucially, unfortunately, ignorable – is indicative of a post-modernist malaise. When the contained gestures offer a sardonic acknowledgement of a grander social context within a non-confrontational and commercially-viable musical setting, ripples of desire and conformity spread, inevitably

contributing to a culture unable to move beyond the trappings of its own vacuity.

The process of releasing or performing music that is both commercially-minded and politically-motivated leaves the artist no choice but to somewhat capitulate to the whims of a capital-geared, non-artistic master – and to be clear, when the capital flows from one direction to the other and will keep flowing that way, the master is easily identifiable. In addition, exercising a radical political ideology within this setting dilutes its meaning just as it strengthens the commercial viability of what is now, more or less, a product.

The ultimate victim of selling-out in this vein ends up being not the artist, their followers or their art – it is whichever set of idealisms is adopted, exhausted, and folded into a corrosive version of itself. In many cases, those that adopt the signifiers of an ideology have little to lose themselves when that art, music, gesture inevitably sinks out of fashion.

Does the current crop

of successful ambient musicians – not to mention those waiting in the wings, or those who are entering their creative selves – wish to erode their culture into a dispensable meta-culture entirely at the discretion of an inherently broken, directionless music industry?

If you can afford to exploit something beautiful and honest, it probably doesn't mean that much to you.

To counter this kind of faux-idealist posturing, novel methods from outside the assumed frame of engagement within the music world are required. They are strenuous and ambitious – they are confounding to conceive of, and even more difficult to implement if they are at odds with the dominant models enforced by enormous corporate powers and artists.

Yet thinking optimistically, they are also inevitable.

To quote Mark Fisher:

"The very oppressive pervasiveness of capitalist realism means that even glimmers of alternative political and economic possibilities can have a disproportionately great effect. The tiniest event can tear a hole in the grey curtain that has marked the horizons of possibility. From a situation in which nothing can happen, suddenly anything is possible again."

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