ANGLOPHONE POP MUSIC IN THE DIGITAL AGE: POSTMODERN NARRATIVES AND COMPUTER MODIFICATIONS

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АНГЛОЕЗИЧНАТА ПОПМУЗИКА В ДИГИТАЛНАТА ЕПОХА: ПОСТМОДЕРНИ НАРАТИВИ И КОМПЮТЪРНИ МОДИФИКАЦИИ

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Abstract: This article examines the influence of digital technologies on Anglophone pop music production, specifically in light of the postmodern condition. It explores how the proliferation of computer tools, software algorithms, and digital platforms shapes musical trends, particularly through the recycling of musical ideas, the standardization of production techniques, and the blurring of boundaries between artists and media celebrities. Making reference to postmodern concepts such as "simulacra", "intertextuality", and "metanarratives", the study highlights the increasing convergence of song patterns in English-language pop music, characterized by more conventional approaches to songwriting and the dominance of platforms like TikTok. The text also addresses the shift toward algorithm-driven creation, where artistic individuality is at risk of being overshadowed by digital tools. Through this lens, the article discusses the evolving nature of creativity in a digitally mediated world, suggesting that while cutting-edge technological advancements do have the potential to promote novel forms of expression, they may also lead to a greater degree of uniformity. The discussion concludes by reflecting on the role of human agency in preserving genuine innovation amidst the growing reliance on artificial intelligence and algorithmic devices.
Keywords: Digital technologies, music production, pop music, Postmodernism, TikTok

Резюме: Статията разглежда влиянието на дигиталните технологии върху музикално-производствените механизми в условията на т. нар. постмодерна епоха, по-конкретно в контекста на англоезичната попмузика. Проследява се начинът, по който разпространението на компютърни програми, софтуерни алгоритми и дигитални платформи поражда тенденции в посока на рециклиране на музикални идеи, стандартизация на техники и размиване на граници между музикални артисти от една страна, и инфлуенсъри в социалните мрежи, от друга. Хвърляйки паралели към постмодерни концепти като „симулакра", „интертекстуалност" и „големи разкази", изследването поставя във фокус примери на конвергенция на песенните модели в англоезичния мейнстрийм, характеризиращи се с по-конвенционални подходи, както и с доминирането на платформи като TikTok. Изследването се вглежда в ускореното навлизане на алгоритмични подходи в комерсиалното производство на музика – поле, в което артистичната индивидуалност би

могла да се окаже уязвима от страна на технологиите. През тази оптика е осмислено и променящото се естество на креативността в един дигитално медииран свят. Отчитайки алтернативите на хоризонта, открит от компютърните технологии като стимул за нови форми на изразяване, авторът същевременно насочва вниманието към скрития в тях потенциал за унифициране на артистичния изказ. Заключението предлага рефлексии за особената значимост на човешката иновативност (било в англофонния свят или другаде) на фона на нарастващата зависимост от изкуствения интелект и „алгоритмизацията" в творческия процес.

Ключови думи: Дигитални технологии, музикална продукция, попмузика, TikTok

This text explores how computer technologies influence trends in popular music, particularly within the framework of the so-called "postmodern situation" – a phenomenon often viewed either as an admirable inevitability stemming from the technological evolution of the modern world or, conversely, as a peculiar and dehumanizing regression. I will start by examining several key concepts from the lexicon of postmodern discourse, both because such an approach is in line with the topic in question and because these concepts shape attitudes towards knowledge, culture, and, more specifically, popular culture, whether explicitly or implicitly.

Postmodernism emerged as an intellectual movement and a worldview "vogue" in the latter half of the 20th century. As its proponents admitted, it sought to critique and dismantle *grand narratives*, i.e. universalized concepts of objectivity, reality, progress, rationality, and, notably, the hierarchical value systems established during the Enlightenment Age and later on refined by Modernism. Jean-François Lyotard's articulation of "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984, p. 24) became a defining feature of the postmodern epistemology, encapsulated in his influential work "The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge" (Lyotard, 1984). In Postmodernism, a great degree of scepticism towards comprehensive metatheories about the world and society is fully articulated as part of a broader critique of universalist thinking in knowledge. Instead of proposing new overarching frameworks, Postmodernism emphasizes the need for critically examining, questioning and deconstructing concepts such as reality, truth,

and progress, as well as established value hierarchies. It promotes what is often described as the horizontalization or de-verticalization of values, dissolving distinctions between "high" and "low," correct and incorrect, truth and falsehood, objective and subjective, original and imitative… among other binaries rooted in overly rationalistic and logocentric traditions. To this end, Postmodernism refrains from offering prescriptive worldview postulates or constructive frameworks in the fields of ontology and epistemology. Its primary focus lies in deconstructing well-entrenched narratives rather than constructing new ones.

Common themes in postmodern parlance include terms like "crossing the boundaries", "resignification of signifieds", and "recycling of meanings" among others, which are often pejoratively framed as mere imitation or simulation of meanings. In her book *Dialogical Music: Blues, Popular Culture and the Myths of Modernity*, researcher Claire Levy points out that Baudrillard introduced the concept of "simulacra" to illustrate the churning out of "false, pseudo-artistic realia" [my translation] (Levy, 2005, p. 205), specifically in relation to the dominant flow of copies, cover versions, collages, or modifications that lack any genuine connection to any original works. The term "simulacra" itself suggests that, within the postmodern context, artists merely reformulate, rearrange and, put simply, "regurgitate" older musical artefacts. Nevertheless, Levy argues that such recycling of codes in the artistic process can also possess "high communicative potential" [my translation] (Levy, 2005, p. 207), especially when musical communication is understood not merely as a transmission of information, but also as a dialogical process that can generate new meanings. The argument for the creative potential of code recycling is arguably well-supported, particularly when *the individual as a creative subject is actively involved* in this process.

Last, but certainly not least (and increasingly so in recent years), Postmodernism is closely linked to digital technologies, particularly in the way they blur the boundaries between media streams, decentralize previously centralized narratives, construct virtual, simulated identities, and facilitate intertextuality and cultural hybridization. Below, I would

like to focus on Anglophone pop music, primarily examining trends from the past 10-15 years within the context of the rapidly progressing digitalization and electronic manipulation of human activity. At the same time, I will argue that *in the digital era,* such developments do not necessarily lead to the positives Levy discusses, but rather evoke old, though not entirely forgotten, concerns.

Certain Regularities in Approaches towards Music Production

Since the production of popular music after all remains a commercial endeavour, one of the main objectives of the music industry is to drive the sales of its products. In light of this circumstance, it is understandable that many music companies prioritize strategies already known to be successful. While experimental approaches are not necessarily excluded, proven formulas tend to take precedence as they increase market appeal. A case in point is that a great number of popular songs have been crafted to align with radio formats, taking into account time limitations and stylistic norms. This approach, by nature, involves a certain predictability and consistency in the music production process. An example of this is the three-minute pop song with its classic "verse-chorus" structure, designed with a relatively narrow range of melodic and chord progressions.

However, in recent years, with advancements in computer technologies, newer patterns of regularity and structure have emerged making English-language music production more standardized. It is worth noting that the issue of standardization in popular music was addressed by Theodor Adorno in the 1930s when discussing the mass production of popular songs (Adorno, Simpson, 1941, pp. 17–48). While his arguments have faced substantial criticism over the years, his insights still hold relevance to this day. Here I will briefly explore some contemporary examples and trends that have shaped patterns of music production and consumption in the digital age, offering a modern perspective on Adorno's critique.

The Millennial Whoop

A specific musical formula, reproduced repeatedly in pop songs since the beginning of the new century (and very appealing to younger English-speaking audiences), is the so-called "millennial whoop"[1]. The phrase itself is attributed to music blogger Patrick Metzger, who notes that hundreds of pop artists around and after 2000 use a specific "sequence of notes that alternates between the fifth and third notes of a major scale, typically starting on the fifth. The rhythm is usually straight 8th notes, but it may start on the downbeat or on the upbeat in different songs. A singer usually belts these notes with an "oh" phoneme, often in a *Wa-oh-wa-oh* pattern". (Metzger, 2016). According to Metzger, this melodic formula is found in hundreds of pop songs topping the charts and its use is extremely widespread (*See* Metzger, 2016).

Timbre convergence and dynamic range equalization through sound compression

In recent years these have been key factors in the evolution of popular music. Another notable trend in songwriting results from the development of computer technology. I should highlight a study titled "Measuring Evolution in Contemporary Western Popular Music", which followed a piece of research by the Spanish National Council for Scientific Research and was published in Scientific Reports in 2012 (Serrà, Corral, Boguñá, Haro, Arcos, 2012).

The study analyses approximately 500,000 songs across all musical genres from 1955 to 2010, using algorithms to mainly assess metrics, such as harmonic complexity, sound volume, and timbre diversity. Three prominent trends have been identified: 1) a decrease in the variety of chords used in harmonic progressions, 2) an increase in volume levels, and 3) a narrowing of the timbral range. Essentially, the sound palette has become more homogenized, with fewer instruments and recording

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[1] "Millennials" are the young people born around the middle and second half of the eighties of the last century, formed as a generation around and after 2000. They are characterized by their fascination with digital technologies and dependence on social media and networks.

techniques being employed. Rather than a wide array of instruments (as in the past), many songs now rely on a single instrument (typically a synthesizer) along with a drum machine and computer. The study reveals that much of mainstream Anglophone pop music after 2010 is constructed using relatively uniform combinations of these tools.

In the past, creating popular music required purchasing instruments, amplifiers, and microphones, developing musical skills, and investing significant time in rehearsals. Today, with the availability of a computer, much of this is no longer indispensable. Buying instruments, learning to play, and forming a band can be expensive and time-consuming. At the same time, music creation relying on music software has become much more accessible. As a result, traditional instruments turn out to be not as essential as they used to be. Another aspect of achieving a greater degree of uniformity in modern music production is the common practice of sound compression, which involves amplifying the quieter moments of a song to bring them closer in volume to the louder moments, effectively reducing the dynamic range. This process is used to make the compressed version sound louder overall compared to the uncompressed version. This technique comes at a certain cost, though. There is the acoustic phenomenon that when sound is boosted beyond its original dynamics, it leads to a loss in sound quality. As a result, compressing the dynamic range of music reduces its timbral diversity and diminishes the subtle nuances that were more apparent in the original recording.

Streamlining vocabulary towards greater convergence

Another thing is that the number of song lyricists is becoming increasingly smaller. Nowadays, many popular English-language song lyrics are written by a limited group of producers. A post by Larry Getlen, named "Every Song You Like Was Written by These Two People", highlights Lukasz Gottwald and Max Martin as the text-creators behind a significant portion of mainstream English-language hits (Getlen, 2015). Another article takes this even further and specifically focuses on Max Martin's central role in this trend. Its tale-telling title states: "Virtually One

Man Has Written Almost Every Major Pop Song of the Last 20 Years, and You've Probably Never Heard His Name" (Levenson, 2020).

It is worth considering what drives this type of convergence in text production. The main factor is the reliance on established patterns that have already proven successful. Given the pressure to produce large volumes of music and the limited time available for the creation of lyrics, producers often find it easier to recourse to well-tried formulas of past music hits. As a result, many more songs begin to sound more alike. The music industry, though, does not emphasize the identities of these songwriting producers, as it would rather entertain the notion that the creative figures behind the music are the singers or bands themselves. The high proliferation of lyrical content and the need to appeal to a broad teenage audience also result in the creation of less challenging lyrics, often with shorter phrases and a narrower vocabulary range. Figurative language tends to be used sparingly. Surely, short and simple lyrics have always been there, not just in English-language pop music, and their increased prevalence should not be seen as inherently problematic. It is only when this trend becomes quite widespread that it creates a sense of certain insufficiency. On the one hand, the lack of lyrical complexity is not supposed to challenge the listener's interpretive abilities, unless they deliberately seek to find a deeper layer of meaning beneath the surface. On the other, within the postmodern context, sophistication need not be necessarily regarded in glowing terms – after all, a more straightforward approach can be appreciated for its own merits without getting into over-analysations.

TikTok consumption and quick viewing

Songs, both in terms of lyrics and music, have to be increasingly engaging due to listeners' shrinking attention spans, which have been influenced by the fast-paced nature of platforms like YouTube and especially TikTok. In discussions about pop music, the term "hook" often comes up – a catchy and repetitive phrase designed to capture attention and linger in the mind. While in the past a song might have employed a single hook, repeated throughout, today's hits often rely on multiple hooks

scattered throughout: in the intro, the verses, the chorus, and even the bridge. This shift is driven by the reality that radio listeners and TikTok users quickly move on from a song if it does not offer enough immediate stimulation. This kind of attention deficit needs to be addressed by incorporating stronger, more frequent hooks to keep the listener engaged.

TikTok deserves further attention, as it is profoundly transforming the way newer generations consume music. Fewer young people are tuning into the radio or purchasing physical music recordings, which leads to a decline in album sales. For context, here are a few examples: Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, the best-selling album of all time, is considered to have sold around 70 million copies. In 1999, the Backstreet Boys sold approximately 40 million copies of *Millennium*. Eminem's *The Marshall Mathers LP*, released in 2000, sold around 35 million copies. However, from that point onward, album sales began to decline sharply, largely due to the rise of illegal download sites altering the way music was accessed – in 2010 Katy Perry's *Teenage Dreams* sold about 12 million copies, while in 2020, Canadian pop artist Abel Makkonen Tesfaye saw only 5 million units of *After Hours* sold. All of this highlights the dramatic changes in music consumption patterns over the past two decades.

One reason for this decline is that record companies no longer focus on discovering new talent and building pop stars from the ground up. In the past, when media was more centralized, record labels had the power to shape an artist's public image, create "hype", and market their music through well-established channels. Today, however, companies tend to hire already popular "faces" and simply pair them with pre-existing music, bypassing the process of developing an artist's persona and media presence from scratch.

TikTok is quickly becoming the go-to platform for Generation Z, i.e. those born after 2000. It is to them what MTV was to former generations in the 1980s. On TikTok, snippets of songs are often featured by popular content creators, with the full tracks available on streaming platforms, such as Spotify and Apple Music. Producers now tend to hire TikTok influencers because of their achieved fame, with musical talent or training taking a backseat. Record companies are no longer willing to invest years

of time and money into developing an artist or their music without a guaranteed return. They would rather prefer to work with a "ready-made" TikTok celebrity who already has a built-in fan base, and they would then seek the right music to match the person, thereby minimizing potential risks.

For many of the youngest internet users, TikTok has already replaced traditional radio and music television as a primary media channel and a key to popularity. Many can distribute their music through streaming platforms without ever signing contracts with record labels. Meanwhile, users no longer need to buy albums or address specialized TV channels to discover music. Instead, they are likely to follow social media influencers, listening to short snippets of the songs they perform. And then, if they wish to hear the full tracks, they can do so on the above-mentioned platforms (whether they will do so is an entirely different matter). Given the vast amount of content available online, users can quickly switch from one song to the next, often prompted by the appeal of a particular TikTok celebrity. In light of this development, pop music itself no longer seems to be the central focus of youth culture – rather, social media is. Thus, online entrepreneurs and influencers are now stepping into the role of previous pop or rock stars. Generation Z is entirely digitally dependent, growing up in a world where smartphones and social media are omnipresent. They are accustomed to instant gratification, watching TV without schedules and switching content the moment a song or video loses their interest. As Ventsislav Dimov rightly notes, "In today's digital age, in the boundless networked society, portals are many and always open though this neither makes us happier nor makes our world safer [my translation] (Dimov, 2017).

While previous generations turned to creative activities, such as writing, drawing, or playing, now the situation is starkly different as entertainment is available at the touch of a button. Long before the digital age, music researcher and pedagogue Gencho Gaytandzhiev predicted that today's world would witness the expansion of radio and television, with video taking away what little spiritual effort remained, but at the same time robbing people of the joy of playing their own games and enjoying

activities according to time-honoured traditions. In his own words, "The world (…) will begin to realize that (…) out of sheer spiritual sloth and a thirst for consuming ready-made entertainment, it had put itself in trouble (...) by having unlearned many useful things that life had taught it for its own good for centuries. The world will then slowly begin to reflect on its roots and feel some warmth and pleasantness, realizing that the joy of doing certain things and pleasures through its own effort has not completely disappeared… that this unquenchable drive for creativity, so essential to humanity, has not completely vanished" [my translation] (Gaytandzhiev, 1990, pp. 24).

Concluding remarks

The postmodern era has undeniably influenced pop music developments in recent decades. Through the recycling of musical themes, sampling of sounds, machine-generated rhythms, and various collage techniques, many artists, particularly in the Anglophone world, have adopted a pluralistic, yet fragmented aesthetic that mirrors the complexity of contemporary society – one that is beginning to blur the line between artist and audience. Nonetheless, this shift raises questions about the coherence and communicative power of messages, especially those produced by software-driven algorithms. While no one can claim exclusive authority on defining meaning from an aesthetic, epistemic, or value-driven standpoint, when a musical (or any semiotic) space becomes overcrowded with disparate images, the distinction between signifier and signified could be rendered unclear. A wide range of modern, electronically generated works seem to evoke emotions, intuitions, and sensations rather than clear-cut, coherent, and culturally grounded messages. Such deconstruction of meaning, often aided by technology, does indeed align with the postmodern mindset, which has embraced relativistic interpretations of the world while remaining sceptical of more traditional and normative approaches to understanding it.

From a theoretical perspective, the repetition, reinterpretation, and resignification of existing musical and textual material provide fertile ground for blending styles and cultural symbols. However, in the current

technological landscape, this process can easily drive individuals into outsourcing their creative efforts to software. This often results in standardized outputs, especially when replicating familiar patterns happens to be the deliberate aim of technology users. In recent discussions, much has been said about artificial intelligence (AI) and its seemingly limitless potential. Yet, what we often refer to as "artificial intelligence" is, in reality, a sophisticated system of rapidly evolving software designed to compile and generate outputs based on pre-existing works and artefacts. The software algorithms are programmed to modify and reshape material to such an extent that direct recognition of the primary sources becomes nearly impossible.

AI inherently involves algorithmization, standardization, and, in the final analysis, a degree of deindividualization. It adds, subtracts, divides, multiplies, combines, and recombines – but it ultimately generalizes, distilling processed data into typical or average values, as such is its foundational design. In doing so, it might well nudge its user towards familiar patterns and clichéd approaches. If true individuality and creativity are to be sought, whether in global pop or the particular streams emerging from English-speaking contexts, it would be reasonable to place trust in the individual. After all, it is within human beings that the essence of the creative process and the potential for genuine innovation lies. Even more broadly, what is uniquely human in the world is most likely found in Homo sapiens – the biological human – rather than its artificial counterpart, "Robo sapiens."

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