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PRODUCT: Surface Play and Simulation in PC Music

In 2014, record label PC Music exploded across the Internet. Hundreds of articles written about the label expressed nearly as many opinions on it, catapulting it from obscurity to a bona-fide musical phenomenon. At this point, PC Music was essentially a collective of musicians organized by producer A.G. Cook. Artists affiliated with the label posted their works to PC Music's SoundCloud account, reflecting populist methods of "indie" culture distribution rather than methods typically associated with a record label. Featuring feminized, pitched vocals and a smorgasbord of samples sourced from computers, video games, iPhones and other technological relics, PC Music's distinct sound was highly polarizing among critics who could not decide whether the project was a new iteration of high art or an elaborate joke played on the industry and the consuming public. The discourse around PC Music connected the group's use of post-production, collage, and surface-level meaning to discussion on pop music and consumer culture. It is through these discourses that PC Music actually manages to become a significant reflection of pop culture today. PC Music operates not only as innovative dance music, but also as a work of "post-internet" art and a postmodern discussion on consumer culture's construction of authenticity and identity.

In its pastiche of pop music, collage of sounds, and emphasis on the remix, PC Music follows closely with the conventions of postmodernism and post-production. Writer Philip

Sherburne describes PC Music as “a grab bag of metallic pings, rubbery zoings, helium-soaked chipmunk vocals, trance stabs, airhorns, hardstyle kick drums, happy hardcore, eskibeat, K-Pop, J-Pop, Vocaloid, 8-bit, black MIDI,” etc, articulating the way PC Music appropriates and recombines the musical styles of its contemporaries to create something outlandishly new out of familiar textures and sounds. As innovation accelerates, the time period in which something is relevant becomes increasingly short (Crary). New things stay “new” for shorter periods of time as the “next big thing” is released increasingly often. PC Music recycles “new sounds” almost in parallel with their creation, a clear articulation of this accelerated rate of remixing within modern culture. PC Music relies on the contexts of the technology, brands and contemporary culture it references in order to create meaning by juxtaposing these cultural phenomena with one another. In the contemporary moment of post-production, we create meaning in new passageways through pre-existing texts (Bourriaud). PC Music represents an Internet-dweller’s re-reading of the contemporary pop landscape in its combination of J-Pop elements, video game samples, and pitched vocals. It foregrounds our culture of the image, and the baseless nature of the music we regularly take for granted as “real” and “authentic”. Finally, its music generates discussion about the ways modern society blurs the binaries that once separated women from men, humans from machines, and consumers from products.

PC Music’s “deliberately ambiguous” relationship with pop music and commercialism allows it to articulate the structures of these systems without taking a stance on the binaries they simulate - female vs. male, authentic vs. derivative/automated (Wolfson). Though many musicians and music critics today morally oppose the use of technologies like Photoshop and sound editing programs, claiming that they create “inauthentic” works, PC Music transparently

integrates these technologies into its works. PC Music foregrounds the superficial tweaks many other modern musicians work to hide by clearly and purposefully distorting the vocals and the promotional images of their musicians. In this, much of the discourse around PC Music likens the project to an elaborate, ironic art project, working to highlight the “inauthentic” aspects of modern pop music. However, discussions with members of the collective themselves indicate that these musicians are not attempting to create ironic parodies of the music industry, but are working to create a project that reflects their interests just as any “authentic” musician does (Sherburne). PC Music confounds critics in its purposeful adherence to the creation of something really fake, simulating what we consider the baseless simulacra of pop music. In a world of simulations and simulacra, there is no way to tell whether one is witnessing the phenomenon or an exact replication of the phenomenon, and in this, “truth, reference, and objective causes have ceased to exist” (Baudrillard 169). PC Music brings the baseless nature of our concept of authenticity to light by anointing the “inauthentic” aspects of pop culture - product tie-ins, technological enhancements, adolescent femininity - with the same respect we usually give “authentic” artistic creations. In its reverent simulation of pop music, PC Music reveals that authenticity is an arbitrary measure of worth based on collective agreement rather than empirical value.

Baudrillard states that “parody makes obedience and transgression equivalent” (178). PC Music holds none of the malice or hostility against the ideas behind pop music that the term “parody” suggests, but the project’s efficacy stems from its ability to articulate the system that regiments the difference between commercial music, and the “authentic art” of the indie and critically acclaimed music worlds. In its critical simulation of pop music, PC Music deconstructs

the system's constructs of "good" and "bad" or, in this case, of "authentic" and "inauthentic". Baudrillard also describes how we use spectacular examples of simulacra, like Disneyland, to justify the realities we imagine they are based in, like modern America (172). In truth, the Ideal America is just as fabricated as Disneyland, but is not as clearly fake as Disneyland itself, so we use Disneyland's obvious fakeness as a counterpoint to any fakeness we notice in "the real world" (172). In Baudrillard's description of simulacra, there is a "basic reality" beneath the "real world" we've come to accept. Other postmodernist theorists would insist that such an underlying truth never existed in the first place, each layer of perception distorting an earlier simulation that a collective tacitly considered a "truth." For example, as we simulated God in works of arts, we reduced Him to a number of recognizable signs, replacing the "real" deity with images that we come to recognize as indicative of His presence (Baudrillard 170). Of course, in our increasingly atheist and agnostic times, this example shows how relative the "realities" Baudrillard considers are. Beyond our collective definition and acknowledgement of God's existence, there is nothing empirically and inherently "real" about him, just as there is nothing inherently "real" about the forms of musical authenticity we search for in Arcade Fire and The Beatles.

Because of this, many forms of music today use pop music as their Disneyland - they point to the highly produced, highly derivative pop works created and distributed across commercial radio to justify their "authentic works" and reinforce the (actually baseless) superiority of their works. PC Music makes no attempt to do the same, refusing analyses of their project that align them with a critical stance on pop music. PC Music holds a purposefully ambiguous relationship with pop music so that it cannot be placed in the matrix of values that

judges popular music as “authentic” or not. PC Music refuses to be pop music’s Disneyland, simulating and exaggerating pop’s characteristics in order to justify pop music’s “realness”. Instead, PC Music acts outside of the values of modern music criticism’s standards, existing as a cyborg blend of the aesthetic sensibilities of pop music and the intellectualization of “art music”. In creating music that sounds like pop but is framed like “art”, PC Music criticizes the idea that pop music is inherently vapid or has an innate “worth” based on the modern matrix of music judgment and criticism.

Related to this baseless system of value judgment, Baudrillard describes how simulations “reduce [phenomena] to the signs which attest to [their] existence,” flattening phenomena so that their surfaces become their identities (169). The insistence that the surface of the work is part of the experience of the work further relates PC Music to the contemporary moment of postmodern theory. Modern subjectivities are built on a collage of “selves” we distribute via various social media sites - as personal choice is externalized and commodified, so is our conception of the individual. We project our “brand” in much the same way that celebrities do, which PC Music brings into consideration in the marketing strategies of its artists. Hannah Diamond and QT represent one extreme of PC Music’s relationship with identity, in their highly manufactured personas. Both projects are the work of women who, prior to their involvement with PC Music, considered themselves advertisers rather than musicians. Their projects convey this in Hannah Diamond’s emphasis on the fabricated image of the popstar and QT’s tie-in soft drink. Discussing the artists’ comments about their music, a writer for the *Guardian* said that the language of PC music “isn’t the language of creativity... it’s the language of marketing” (Wolfson). The musicians of PC Music, then, are marketed constructions, the works of people

whose profession is to create and distribute appealing images to their consumers.

In the creation of these highly manufactured identities, PC Music articulates the way modern subjectivity blurs our autonomous conception of ourselves with the technology we consume. As part of any dance music tradition, it makes sense that PC Music incorporates both human and machinic aspects into the creation of its music. By reflecting the aesthetics of modern consumer machines, like videogames and voice-changing software, PC Music highlights the integration of these products into our lives and ourselves. The cyborg PC Music consumer is shaped and enabled by the iPod they stream the music on and the social networking sites (like SoundCloud) that they use to share the projects. Beyond this, PC Music also blurs this distinction between human and inhuman in the way it markets its musicians, especially Hannah Diamond. Hannah Diamond manipulates images of herself in order to create a perfectly Photoshopped persona, whose form is partially attributable to the photo editing and processing technology that create her publicity images. PC Music musicians and creators never work to hide these technological hallmarks of their music and their personas, instead making these aspects of their production an important part of the discussion that surrounds the project. The music of the collective clearly evidences its technological inspirations in “Keri Baby”’s robotic vocals, in the pitched vocals and video-game sound effects on “Hey QT” and in the eclectic editing of Lipgloss Twins’s “Wannabe”. Lyrically, however, the songs reflect human emotions and experiences - adolescent desires for relationships, desires to fit in or to have fun and get drunk. The combination of these superficially human and technological traits create a new, hybrid sound that explores the reality of our blurred identities. PC Music deliberately foregrounds both the human and machinic portions of its creators, reveling in the modern cyborg consumer and creator.

A number of authors have already considered the repercussions of the way we incorporate modern technology into our conceptions of the self. Jonathan Crary criticizes the way these devices indoctrinate us into a culture of 24/7 consumption. Our lives are increasingly accessible to marketers and consumer scientists, who are unceasingly devising ways for us to become increasingly productive within the capitalist system, furthering this system's dominance within our lives (10). PC Music and related artists also consider the consumptive side of this cyborg blurring, made clear by songs like Lipgloss Twins's "Wannabe" or by the useless "silicon product" that acted as marketing ploy for SOPHIE's singles collection, titled *PRODUCT*. The marketing of these groups is an indispensable part of their identities, articulating how important commodification is in a culture where we've become so focused on the image. No longer are we just being sold the music, we're being sold the personas of the artists behind the music, the images of these artists, and the narratives of the musicians and the collectives they identify with. PC Music plays with this notion, collecting musicians who misdirect conceptions about their identity by using names of the opposite gender and musicians who have built intricate personas and narratives for themselves in a single project. This juxtaposition makes the frivolity of both extremes clear - it is just as valuable to the collective to be an articulated caricature, like "wild child" GFOTY (short for Girlfriend of the Year), as it is to be an enigma like Thy Slaughter - "authentic" substance doesn't matter so much as marketable structure.

In their use of indistinct identities, PC Musicians resist the tendency to separate themselves from the technologies that increasingly shape members of our society, reflecting our contemporary "reality" that combines virtual experience with the "real world". PC Music gained the cultural relevance it did because we recognize and empathize with its hyperactive

combination of man and machine, of product and consumer. Even if we consider the project a short-lived novelty, its postmodern collage of video-game sounds, derivative drum-beats, and distorted vocals captures the aesthetic of the era we're currently living in, where distinctions are increasingly blurry and works are increasingly derivative. As sampling and "genre fusion" become increasingly popular across dance and popular music, postmodernism and post-production's influence on our culture is articulated increasingly often.

PC Music's artists also consider the way technology undermines the structure of the gender binary. Along with related artist SOPHIE, PC Music is at the forefront of the "feminization" of dance music culture, which critics see as a shift away from masculine genres like house and techno toward deliberate femininity. SOPHIE and other male-fronted projects use female names, stereotypically feminine imagery, and/or pitch-shifted vocals in order to simulate femininity that contrasts the masculine culture of earlier genres. These musicians are alternately lauded and criticized for creating and exploiting stereotypically feminine projects and personas. On one hand, many academics consider the group's use of femininity as a marker of modern gender difference blurring. Again, Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* discusses the revolutionary potential that occurs when we inhabit the space between binaries like gender, man/machine, and man/animal. In keeping with this, destabilization of masculine dominance can only come when we reveal the baseless nature of "gender difference" the same way PC Music deconstructs "authenticity." We implicitly understand and categorize people through their relationships with socially constructed gender identities (Butler 16). Therefore, the best way to destabilize and bring these binaries to light is to contradict their expected associations. PC Music's deliberate combination of stereotypically female characteristics and male musicians inhabits this space

between gender, playing with the idea of gender by reducing it to flimsy, baseless stereotypes and therefore destabilizing it.

On the other hand, these projects perform femininity by using reductive female stereotypes popular in today's culture - vapidity and concern with boys and goods, bright pink and high pitched voices, etc. Regardless of the intent of the project, so long as the men at the head of the PC Music collective are using these stereotypes to convey femininity, the stereotypes are being exploited and reinforced commercially (Kretowicz). Both of these readings are valid praises and criticisms of PC Music, though, because the phenomenon will be interpreted differently in different contexts, and will be used to start discussions about gender in some circles despite being used to reinforce existing gender expectations in others.

According to Roland Barthes's seminal work *The Death of the Author*, the creator of a work has no authority that prioritizes their interpretation of the work's "meaning" (4). In articulating their work, the creator separates themselves from their work, allowing the meaning of the work to be determined by anyone who interprets the work for themselves (2). PC Music members work on the surface of their projects, creating music with adolescent lyrics that make no pretense at a hidden meaning or profound inspiration. Because PC Music invites so much music criticism, a wealth of voices work to articulate their understandings of the project and its relevance to the worlds of art, music, consumption, gender, and new media. From *Fader* to the *Guardian* to *Rolling Stone* to *Pitchfork*, all manner of modern music criticism sites have written numerous pieces dissecting the project and its relationship to pop music, consumerism, and gender. No longer the value judgments of the NYT critic, these think pieces theoretically dissect PC Music. This represents the same shift to "structure over substance" we see in the work of PC

Music itself - critics are no longer valuable for their taste, but for the way they connect works to other works, creating a structure of meaning rather than a metric of value. In a postmodern treatment of PC Music, these interpretations of the works are just as important as the works themselves because they offer a sampling of the ways PC Music generates discussion within the world of critical dance music consumption (5). PC Music's conceptual discussion of electronic instrumentation in pop music, gender, and consumption could be tied to any number of other popular music projects. T-Pain purposefully uses autotune in his music, blurring the difference between creator and machine; any number of female musicians come into discussion with gender stereotypes in their music; and merchandising throughout pop music could be considered as 'artistically inventive' as PC Music given the proper spin. However, PC Music is not a popular music phenomenon as much as it is an art music phenomenon that has gained ground within pop culture. Because of this, people are more willing to intellectualize these aspects of the collective rather than take them for granted as symptomatic of the industry. In its careful simulation of pop and art music conventions, PC Music invites discussion of these conventions.

PC Music reflects the modern state of our relationship with technology, gender, and consumption in its hyperactive and sometimes discordant fusion of pitched vocals, electronic samples, and drum tracks. It's relationship with popular music despite its intellectualization as an art music movement helps to make the conventions that separate the two clear. In an era where "authenticity" is totally relative and where "indie" is no longer a mode of production as much as it is a musical aesthetic, PC Music is the "authentic" fabrication of popular music, confounding critics that attempt to fit it into one subculture or the other. PC Music revels in Donna Haraway's realm of the cyborg, attempting to destabilize binaries that are irrelevant in today's culture of

homogenization - gender, human/machine, and product/consumer all come into question in PC

Music and the discussions that surround it.

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