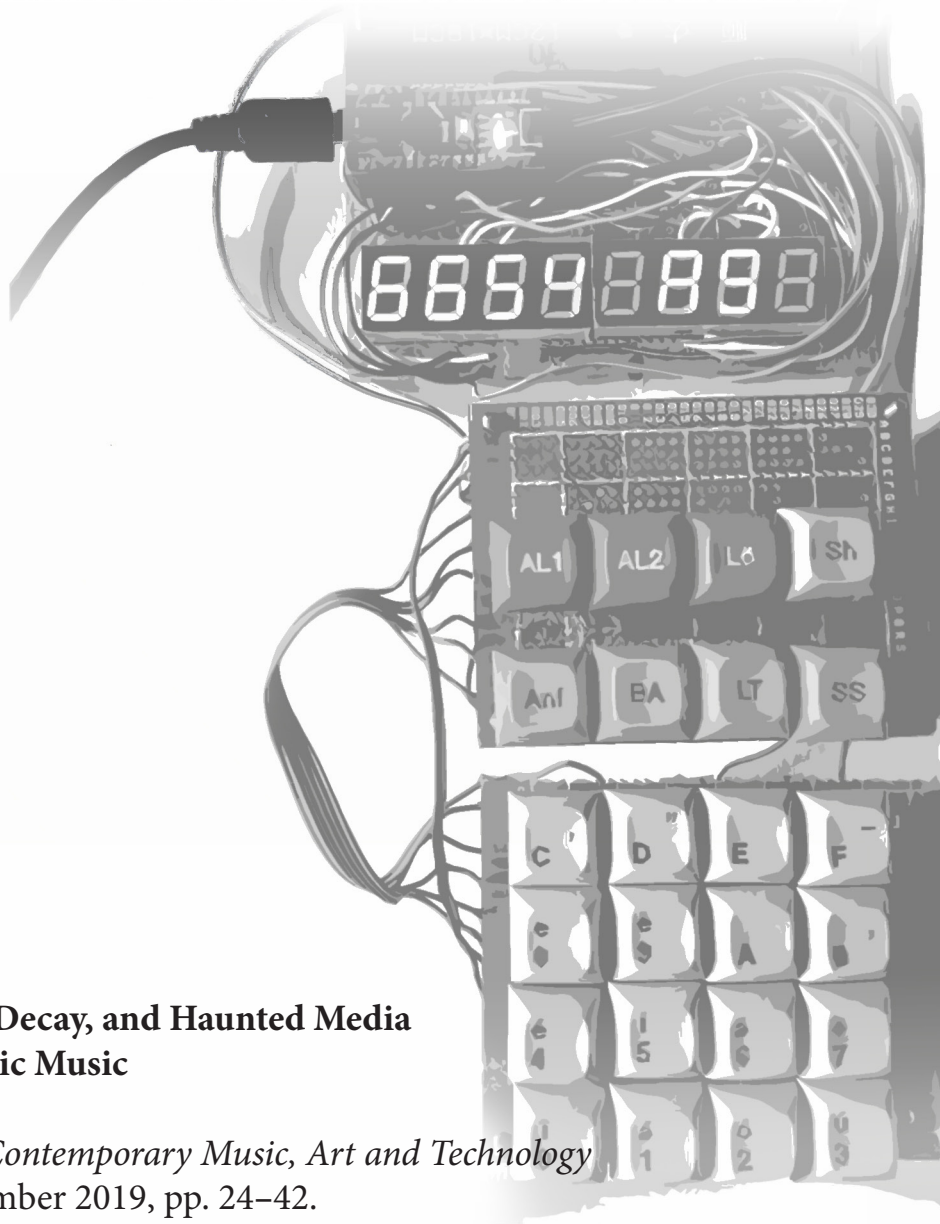


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RETRO TENDENCIES, DECAY, AND HAUNTED MEDIA IN HYBRID ELECTRONIC MUSIC

Abstract: The consequences of new media and their manifestations in post-digital arts has deeply modified electronic music. Old and new sounds blend into each other to create a new aesthetic, defined in this article as hybrid electronic music. An analysis of this aesthetic helps us understand the impact of retro tendencies on the creative process. In order to have a sufficient amount of data, this article proposes a theoretical framework for the aesthetic which encompasses an analysis of the production's material, how it is being used, live performances, and an emphasis on retro tendencies. The findings demonstrate the ambiguous and uncanny relationship electronic music can have with the past. One of the hypotheses of this article is the potential link between electronic music, future, and decay.

Keywords: haunted, decay, organic, uncanny, regression, popular, alienation, body, paradox

The future of humanity is constantly being questioned. From the biblical apocalypse to the big 2000 bug, numerous prophecies have foreseen chaos. I define "chaos" as an amalgam of numerous, confused, and disordered objects in an entangled state.

Similarly, technological advance is continuously challenged in terms of its own evolution. In 1998, Nicholas Negroponte announced that "[T]he digital revolution is over". Moore's law is showing its limitations. Our fragile technological paradigm is threatening to stop, or worse, collapse. This scenario seems to be the current apocalyptic promise. For some minorities, regression, defined here as the return to a previous stage of development, is contemplated as a viable alternative.

Retro trends imitate, suggest, or exalt a bygone era. They are able to bring chaos by fusing heterogeneous epochs. Past references equally act as a regressive backward

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movement. They are sometimes tainted by nostalgia. They manifest—in a way similar to chaos and regression—an ambiguity about their identity.

This ambiguity may be equated with alienation. Alienation is understood here as the fact of becoming a stranger to oneself. Chaos and regression convene two identities into a single one. Chaos' heterogeneous elements struggle to unite. Regression, being inhabited by a wish to look back, brings a contradictory direction to the current technological paradigm and epoch.

Chaos, regression, and alienation are therefore communicating concepts. Chaos and regression are seen by a large part of society as synonymous. They also both describe an ongoing transformation. Finally, alienation materializes in the inability to find a stable form of identity.

These three concepts are present in the aesthetic of “hybrid electronic music” (HEM). This aesthetic movement is currently being studied and is at the heart of my research. We will define this movement typically using retro trends in popular electronic music. HEM will be part of our analytical framework to study these retro trends, despite its unstable form.

The “hybrid” designation is inspired by Edmond Couchot's (1998) theory. In our work, it will serve the purpose of incorporating new media theory with the organic structures of our research object.

This article, through an ethnomusicological and transdisciplinary lens (notably cinema, plastic arts, and philosophy), will study how retro trends manifest themselves in HEM. It will also study the relationship between chaos, regression, and alienation in retro trends. By expanding the research, we will also see how these trends are reflections of societal phenomena and give a positive outlook on the future.

To that end, we will first analyze retro trends in relationship to chaos. Then, we will study audiovisual and live performances in connection with regression. Finally, we will establish the link between retro trends and alienation in society.

1. Chaos: division, glitch, bricolage.

Division

Retro trends are first and foremost the expression of divisions. From variable sources, multiple, and heterogeneous, they apply to many levels of the artistic work's design. Three distinct forms of divisions can be found in retro tendencies.

Firstly, sound itself is very unstable. Composed of vibrations travelling through the air or another medium, a sound is heard when it reaches a person's ear. Sound's movement in dimensional space, along with its diffusion with the environment and other sounds, generates different experiences for everyone. For Michel Chion (2005), sound brings back memories that can only be interpreted (14). Not only sound can bring back memories. The body can also remember. For instance, the music's vibrations that are felt can be replicated by one's body at a lower volume as

a memory reflex (Chion 2005, 14). Therefore sound is made of divisions, because of the different people hearing it. These divisions are chaotic because of their abstract interpretation and unpredictable behavior.

Sampling, defined here as the act of selecting and reusing a suitable visual or sound sample, has a second trend. The practice of sampling applies to sound, video, and picture. Consequently, our examples will be drawn from these specific media. The artistic work, when comprised of samples, is already divided by their multiplicity. Reassembled by the artist, these elements can have new meaning within the work's broader cohesion. However, internal divisions can still be observed.

For Yann Beauvais and Jean Michel Bouhours (2000), sampling is like a citation system, with similarities to Deleuze's molecular concept (108). To develop further Deleuze's concept as applied to sampling, we can ask where the sample begins and ends.

An instinctive answer would be at the beginning and end of the sound. However, the sample itself was recorded in the past. For instance where does the inspiration for "amen breaks" come from?² Beginning with the track "Amen Brother" in 1969,³ The Winstons were probably influenced by other bands of their era, the Afro-American legacy, or other musical genres.

Through a sample's deep analysis, one can discover that a sample's own construction is composed of other samples. These other samples' origin, fragmented in infinite layers, is impossible to retrace. In addition, they will each receive different interpretations from the individuals hearing them. It is therefore impossible to determine a sample's beginning or end.

As we have demonstrated, there is a link between memory, body, and sound in the interpretation. This relationship has significant meaning for retro tendencies. For instance, samples can be used for various purposes such as nostalgia, inspiration, or to pay tribute. Amon Tobin pays tribute to Edgar Varèse's *Poème électronique* (1958) through sampling in his own work at the end of "El Wraith" or in "Proper Hoodidge"⁴

Electroacoustic music such as Varèse's⁵ is a likely inspiration for HEM producers such as Amon Tobin, Aphex Twin, and Autechre. The infancy of this movement can be found on Usenet⁶ forums. The creation of the "IDM List" in 1993 being one of its first online chat about Rephlex and Warp Records labels. Breaking the codes of rave culture, early HEM's signatures were micro rhythms and organic sound textures.

2 The "amen break" is a historical sample frequently used in electronic music. It is sampled from the rhythm of the song "Amen Brother" from *The Winstons* in 1969.

3 *The Winstons*, "Amen Brother", *Color Him Father / Amen Brother*, Metromedia Records, 1969.

4 Amon Tobin, *Out From Out Where*, Ninja Tune, 2002.

5 The Philips Pavilion created by Iannis Xenakis and Le Corbusier, inhabited by Varèse's work, suggested an exchange between external visitors and the organic interiority's structure in the shape of a stomach.

6 Usenet is a network where people exchange news. It was very popular in the 90s for producers, DJs and electronic music enthusiasts.

The goal of these practices was to emancipate this new movement from a strictly structured digital aesthetic. For instance, Autechre's work is sometimes described as incomprehensible. The numerous details, as well as an ever-changing structure, suggest a mysterious organic interiority, difficult to elaborate.

One way to give electronic music an organic quality is through the creation of unpredictable structures between digital and non-digital. Glitch, studied here within the theoretical framework of Kim Cascone and Rosa Menkman, is a practice often used to achieve this goal.

Glitch

Glitch-Hop, IDM, and Breakcore genres make extensive use of the fast repetition of sound fragments, mechanical rumblings, and aliasing sounds. An echo of these abundant perturbations can be found in Kim Cascone's article, "The Aesthetics of Failure" (2000). He details the saturated soundscape of machines, such as hard drives, clipping, and glitch computer sonification (Cascone 2000, 12–13). This aesthetic foundation surpasses the hopes and dreams of the digital revolution. It also indicates a return to digital systems' inner workings.

For Rosa Menkman, any failure resulting from an unknown cause can remind us of the ghost inside the machine, disturbing the logical operation of an immutable system. The author defines the glitch as an artifact different from the error to solve, the glitch being deeply rooted in a technical device and therefore in an interpretive process (Menkman 2011, 26–27). Glitch artifacts can feel like objects intentionally placed and detached from music. Therefore, they can be interpreted as archeological objects or ruins which lost their shape and function over time.

In Bibio's recent album *Phantom Brickworks*,⁷ ruin exploration is the driving creative force. Gathering musical compositions over ten years (Murray 2018), the video clips accompanying the music take place in specific venues. Indeed, the artist filmed in what seemed to him like haunted places. The compositions mainly use repeating loops. Layers slowly add up to a structure, before decaying progressively.

In the project, the photo album and the video explore landscapes and ruins overgrown with vegetation via slow dolly shots.⁸ In his other works such as "Old Graffiti", Bibio does not hesitate to use cheap and analogic sound reminiscent of late 70s soul music.⁹ He also works with 8mm films in "Curls".¹⁰

Glitch artifacts can also hide images inside them. Using a spectrogram, on some of them one can observe images drawn with sounds. In Venetian Snares work "Look", we can observe cats on his album, *Songs About My Cats*.¹¹ Aphex Twin's

7 Bibio, *Phantom Brickworks*, Warp Records, 2017.

8 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=08ctUR90WrM&t=1332s>, accessed 09/15/2019.

9 Bibio, *Old Graffiti*, Ribbons, Warp Records, 2019.

10 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-OTU25i5QWc>, accessed 09/15/2019.

11 Venetian Snares, *Songs about my cats*, Planet Mu, 2001.

smirk appears in “ $\Delta Mi-1 = -\partial \Sigma n=1NDi[n][\Sigma j \in C\{i\}Fji[n-1] + Fexti[[n-1]]$.”¹² The track name is like an inaccessible machine language for the average individual. Moreover, a keyboard seen from above seems to appear at the beginning of *edIT*’s “Laundry”.¹³ This process reminds us of the ghosts and spirits largely represented in electronic music.

For example in Lorn’s video for “Ghosst(s)”,¹⁴ magnetic tape glitches are reproduced on a face submitted to various constraints.¹⁵ Chris Cunningham collaborated with Autechre in 1996 to make the video for “Second Bad Vilbel”.¹⁶ In this work, numerous glitches take place before a monster is revealed and then a disturbing robot hard to perceive. Chris Cunningham also worked on “Come To Daddy”¹⁷ with Aphex Twin one year later. In this videoclip, a demon is trapped inside a television, generating numerous glitches, repeating “I want your soul, I will eat your soul”, and who is then finally released.

Glitches often occur with circuit and data bending, which are useful practices to bypass technological frames and limits. To understand how they work, we will now explore their deep relationship with the internet.



Chris Cunningham, *Come to daddy*

© Chris Cunningham, *Come to daddy*, frame from videoclip,
music composed by Aphex Twin, Warp Records, 1997.

12 Aphex Twin, *Windowlicker* EP, Warp Records, 1999.

13 *edIT*, “Laundry” in *Crying Over Pros for No Reasons*, Planet Mu, 2004.

14 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzrzGyKo6g>, accessed 09/15/2019.

15 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzrzGyKo6g>, accessed 09/15/2019.

16 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8BuyTYwTto>, accessed 09/15/2019.

17 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZ827lkktYs>, accessed 09/15/2019.

Bricolage

New media, objects comprised of code and consequently of language, has increasingly fostered interactions between people, artworks, and ideas (Manovich 2001, 99). The means of communication, sharing, and diffusion are now so important that we talk about “intercreativity”. This process allows everything put online to be used, transformed, and manipulated out of their initial context (Graham 2015, 373-382).

This intercreativity is related to the French term “bricolage”, defined in our study by the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962). Lévi-Strauss explains that bricolage is the use of old signs to create new ones. In this conception, everything is reinterpreted and formed upon fragments and residues of reorganized events (24). It always works by transforming existing signs to create a new meaning. A simple instance of this concept in HEM would be Amon Tobin’s album *Bricolage*,¹⁸ created with a large variety of samples from old vinyls.

Production of electronic music is itself closely related to bricolage. DAW are shared through peer-to-peer networks.¹⁹ Anonymous artists broadcast themselves on Soundcloud for free.²⁰ Musical creation breaks out of its confined categories and genres divide themselves into micro genres, such as Witch House, Breakcore, Glitch Hop, and Abstract Hip Hop. Similar to living organisms, practices, tools, musical aesthetics, and ideas are unstable and mutate all the time. As a result, it is nearly impossible to make a clear distinction between musical genres.

Many examples can be found of the connection between bricolage and electronic music, like Autechre’s donation of their SYX files online,²¹ or Korg’s empty pins on their Monotron synthesizers to let people modify them easily.²²

A more political example is Squarepusher’s 2016 project, “MIDI sans Frontières”. The artist created a track and shared its MIDI data worldwide, with the goal of protesting against Brexit through an intercreative process. As a result, plenty of remixes were created and shared online.²³ The artists formed a united front against the political event, speaking for a large majority of the electronic music scene. This example reveals how intercreativity and bricolage can feed a global consciousness.

For Lévi-Strauss (1962), bricolage is demonstrative of the way “mythical thinking” works. In opposition to intercreativity, mythical thinking highlights the importance of something that is missing. There is always something lost in the process of combining past objects. As a result, mythical thinking is creation through

18 Amon Tobin, *Bricolage*, Ninja Tune, 1997.

19 DAW stands for “Digital Audio Workstation.”

20 SoundCloud is a music and podcast streaming platform.

21 SYX files contain data to create music with Elektron’s electronic music instruments.

22 Korg is a Japanese electronic music instruments company.

23 See <http://www.squarepusher.net/midi-sans-frontieres/index.html>, accessed 09/15/2019. This link archives all creations made with the MIDI sans Frontières project.

misinterpretation and serendipity (24).

Furthermore, this never-ending process of transformation also reminds us of animism. The artifact, glitch, sample, or modified machine passes on through its own modification a part of its maker. This might explain the vintage fetishism of old synthesizers and recording tapes. Underground labels use tapes, cheaper than CDs or vinyls, to promote themselves. Some of their tapes are filled with animistic designs. While Gjöll uses runes, mythology, and DIY modular synths in all of his work,²⁴ Vito Lucente sends semi-precious stones with the tapes of his *Udghitha Of the Dogs* EP.²⁵

The chaos of this electronic stream seems organized upon different principles. Firstly, we saw the divisions of interpretation, samples, and their link with chaos. Then we saw how glitch artifacts are related to interiority and the past. Finally we studied the practice of bricolage in intercreativity and the use of mythical thinking. To understand more closely the implications of these primary practices in electronic music, we will now study regression in performances.

2 – Performative regression: puppets, masks, archetypes.

Puppets

HEM can have a link to the practice of puppeteering. Puppets, in the context of our work, are seen as an extension of the animator (Bensky 1971, 20). They are also defined as regressed bodies in a state of early development, unfinished in their evolution. In HEM's iconography, they are often represented as fetuses, children, freaks, robots, or uncanny bodies.

Childhood is one of most obvious symbolic representations of regression in HEM. Numerous examples support this idea, like Arca and Jesse Kanda's video for "TRAUMA Scene 1",²⁶ Four Tet's "Pablo's Heart",²⁷ or our own work with Ruby My Dear and the promotion of his album *Brame*.²⁸ Our example develops the interaction between embodiment and technology.

In R. James Healy's videoclip for Clark's "Herr Barr",²⁹ the act of birth is presented as a surreal situation. Birds with hand-like wings fly all around. The painting "In the Hold" by David Bloomberg,³⁰ which fragments a picture into geometric shapes whilst retaining the dynamic of the original scene, was the director's main inspiration (Healy, Vimeo description, 2001). The video is heavily pixelized on purpose to give the audience the ability to interpret the scene freely. A balance is found

24 See <https://ez-rec.bandcamp.com/album/a02-seidhr>, accessed 09/15/2019.

25 See <https://perfectaesthetics.bandcamp.com/album/udghitha-of-the-dogs>, accessed 09/15/2019.

26 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAPVOHrbhqq>, accessed 09/15/2019.

27 Four Tet, "Pablo's Heart", *There is Love in You*, Domino, 2010.

28 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0Ov94WRhfg>, accessed 09/15/2019.

29 See <https://vimeo.com/21671333>, accessed 09/15/2019.

30 David Bloomberg, *In the Hold*, 1995 x 2355 x 63 mm, 1913-1914.

between interpretation, the sensual quality of the handed birds, and technological fragmentation of the pixels.

HEM's mechanical and repetitive sounds work on bodies to transform them. Bodies become quickly objectified to follow micro rhythms, and turn into deviant forms like monsters or robots.

In Bonobo's video for "Cirrus",³¹ Cyriak, the director, works with the same process by using archived videos from the 50s. At the beginning of the clip, the archived samples of American commercials, housewives, and little girls are untouched. However, the framerate escalates and the samples start to agglutinate. Swiftly after, the screen becomes overloaded, and all the bodies become fragments of an enormous kaleidoscope. As a result, the screen is filled with bodies and objects, creating surreal geometrical shapes.



Cyriak, *Cirrus*

© Ninja Tune, *Cirrus*, frame from videoclip created by Cyriak, music composed by Bonobo, Ninja Tune, 2013.

This iconography sees bodies as corrupted when they come into contact with technology. By contrast, in Yaporigami's video for "PLMS_IV_D",³² the dummy's dance, in an epileptic fashion, is constrained by the rhythms of the sound composition. This kind of embodiment is similar to Hans Bellmer's puppets.³³ The body is only there to serve fantasy and lose its integrity to uncanny forms.

Other examples, like Aphex Twin and Chris Cunningham's collaborations on

31 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WF34N4gJAKE>, accessed 09/15/2019.

32 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sdigk5DMYkI>, accessed 09/15/2019.

33 Hans Bellmer's puppet is also on the cover image of Naked City's album *Absinthe*, Avant Avant, 1993.

“Monkey Drummer”³⁴ or “Rubber Johnny”³⁵ have a fascination for freaks. Every time the bodies follow the impossible music’s micro-rhythms to the dot, their performance goes beyond the capability of a human body.

Such a strange relationship between body and music can also be seen in DJing. Ferreira (2008) explains how DJs and their audience influence each other in an infinite feedback loop. DJs are constantly adapting their mix based on their audience’s reactions. This influence on the body can bring a trance, archaic movements, and a feeling of separation between mind and body.

The link with spiritual beliefs takes place in the puppet’s iconography, showing a will to control bodies and go beyond them. On the other hand, monster’s pictures refer to ancient magical creatures and hybrids, like the one displayed in “Monkey Drummer”. It shows us a regression in mythology. This fascination for objectified bodies and mythical creatures can also be seen in the practice of masks.

Masks

The objectifying process is also used for identity in electronic music. In most cases, the musician’s identity remains hidden. Album covers do not show the faces of artists anymore. Instead, geometrical shapes and strange humanoid figures replace them. Another example of identity’s disappearance are the geometrical shapes increasingly replacing the initial physical performance of the instrumentalists on album covers. As identity is alienated, the face itself becomes easier to manipulate. Such transformative processes reinvigorate an old fascination for strangeness.

Musician and animator David Firth began his work with Flying Lotus on the video for “Ready Err Not”. Chopped bodies, mutants, babies, and decapitation form part of the work, along with the beheading of Flying Lotus himself. Birth and death blend with each other in a surreal way, while the face of the artist suffers several hardships.

For his live performance following the release of the album *You’re Dead*, Flying Lotus wore a mask made by artist and designer Aitor Throup. The mask was composed of a tentacle-like curtain escaping from the mouth and a skull with illuminated orbits. The artist can be perceived as a cross between Charon and Cthulhu. The visual aspect of the live performance mainly consisted of psychedelic illusions linked to the work of Shintaro Kago. This Japanese artist, who has an aesthetic based on chopped and crippled bodies, made the album cover in which Flying Lotus’ face is replaced with a light hole. Spiritual concerns can be noticed in Flying Lotus’ collaborations, as well as an obsession for uncanny horror imagery.

Daïto Manabe’s performance art entitled “stimulus to face” is another instance of this particular point. The experience, documented on YouTube, shows the machine and the artist in opposition through the sending of electrical stimuli. The opposition

34 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5UuFqQXWneM>, accessed 09/15/2019.

35 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-gyf23k26I&t=180s>, accessed 09/15/2019.

of human and machine creates a poetic message suggesting how digital can control and dehumanize.

Anklepants is an artist with a deviant identity, versed in bricolage. His monstrous mask, equipped with an animatronic penis, is used in various performances. It is also featured in videos. The artist, who works in special effects,³⁶ makes his own instruments, including gyrosopic sensors that are plugged into his microphone and control effects. His performances naturally emphasize physicality. The body is brought to the forefront, but is at the same time reduced to a primal, dehumanized function, with a penis for a face comparable to René Magritte's painting "Le Viol".³⁷

Aphex Twin does it slightly differently. He reduces his face to a mask covering everything. With a frightening smirk, his face is visible on the *...I Care Because You Do and Richard D. James Album* album covers. During the performance at the 2012 Paris Pitchfork Festival, cameramen projected faces of the audience onto giant screens, and people could experience their own faces overlaid under Aphex Twin's. Aphex Twin could be perceived as an evil twin, slowly digesting the faces of the crowd.

In 2019, at the Rock en Seine Festival, he contracted the nose in a way that made the face difficult to recognize. Numerous French popular figures, politicians, television presenters, and singers were being displayed this way. Even Alexandre Benalla, a former presidential bodyguard caught molesting civilians, was infected. Aphex Twin's identity was a virus with a single goal: to assimilate the local culture and public.

Once again, humanity and technology are seen through the lens of regression. Ancient practices of masks and puppets can bring back the archetypes and spiritual concerns that we will now explore.

Archetypes

Some of the examples talked about above are close to a Lovecraftian aesthetic, mainly focused on the fear of the other and the unknown. The origin of this aesthetic's iconography can be explored by studying its relationship with society and technology. It might explain the omnipresence of the uncanny in several creations of HEM.

Other works such as Holly Herndon's "Chorus",³⁸ directed by Akihiko Taniguchi, are able to have a poetic take on technology and societal phenomenon. The video's sequences explore 3D scanned desktops and digital desktops. The director's intent was to work with the concept of identity. To do this, the artist stressed the importance of desktops and the embodiment of the internet through desktop captures, often seen on software tutorials (Taniguchi, YouTube video description, 2014). Herndon's

36 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MH7bQvJe4E>, accessed 09/15/2019.

37 René Magritte, *Le Viol*, Huile sur toile, 65,3 x 50,4 cm, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France, 1945.

38 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHujh3yA3BE>, accessed 09/15/2019.

intention was to also work with the concept of online stalking (Herndon, YouTube video description, 2014). Desktops, both scanned and virtual seem to melt in strange textures that can remember ruins, their aspect decaying and unfinished.

In “Home”, the lyrics seem to be a serenade to a lover.³⁹ Lines such as “I can feel you in my room”, “why was I assigned to you?”, “I want you to show your face” or “I know that you know me better than I know me”, suggest an ambiguous relationship between the artist and the entity watching her. While a cascade of logos blurs the screen, we notice the NSA and CIA ones. The unknown entity watching is the mass surveillance state revealed by Edward Snowden.

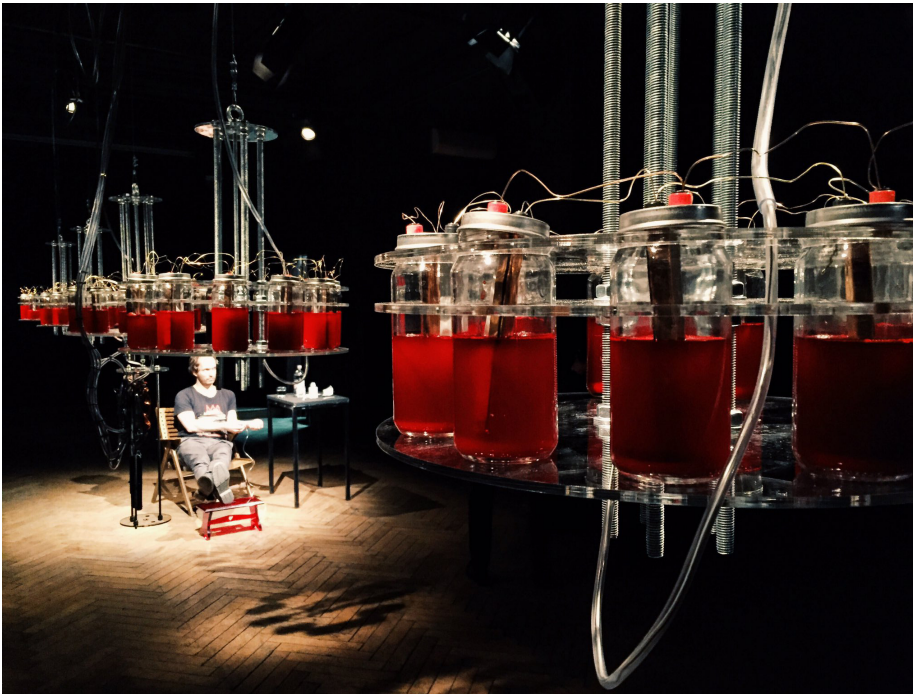
Digital tools are threatening to control our lives. Fear of an unknown future promised by technology and humanity’s limitations seems to be a recurring theme, shown by the monsters in HEM videos. At the same time, HEM tries to link technology with ancient myths and practices. As Holly Herndon said, “There’s a pervasive narrative of technology as dehumanizing. We stand in contrast to that. It’s not like we want to run away; we are very much running towards it, but on our terms” (Herndon, bandcamp description, 2019). Her last album, *Proto*, indeed takes inspiration from sacred harp singing.⁴⁰ It is described as a collaboration between traditional vocalists and an AI which “places an emphasis on alien song craft and new forms of communion” (Herndon, bandcamp description, 2019).

Moreover, other artists are trying to reverse the transhumanist ideology. The will of a human to detach himself from his mortal condition to become a semi-living god is fundamental to this ideology. Transhumanism is also built upon myths and archetypes that see humans as defective. By contrast, in HEM, humans rarely appear augmented. Instead, HEM’s aesthetic shapes technology to reach more elementary spiritual and living principles.

Engineer and bricolage enthusiast, Dmitry Morozov is a Russian artist and transdisciplinary researcher. In 2016, his work *Until I Die* displays a powerful hybridization of spirituality and technology. The artistic piece is a sound installation, working with the galvanism process. For his work to function, Morozov had to collect his own blood samples for months. He describes the entire process as an energy transfer, similar to a vital or animist injection (Morozov, official website, 2018). The patterns created by the installation are referred to as Buddhists mandalas. Once the last blood minerals gone, the installation will die.

39 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_3mCDJ_iWc, accessed 09/15/2019.

40 Holly Herndon, *Proto*, 4AD, 2019.



Dmitry Morozov, *Until I Die*

© Miha Fras, *Until I Die*, installation created by Dmitry Morozov, 2016.

From a design point of view, *Until I Die* is reminiscent of baroque candlesticks, with the candles' energy replaced with blood. In a similar fashion, the piece also recalls creatures such as Dracula or Frankenstein's monster.

Body and identity plasticity created through puppets and masks, is added to the chaotic instability of media and creative processes. This regression results in archetypal and mythological representations. This perpetual evolution has to be studied through the concept of alienation. In this final chapter, we will look at what we believe is the foundation of HEM and their link to retro tendencies.

3 – Retro alienation: biomannerism, hauntology, deconstruction

Biomannerism

“Biomannerism”, an 80s and 90s underground painting movement theorized by Stephen Lévy-Kuentz seems to be key to understanding HEM's aesthetic. It is comprised of nine painters, with H. R. Giger as the leading figure. The movement refers to similar themes that pervade HEM's aesthetic, such as regression into the body, dehumanization, and hybridization with machines (Lévy-Kuentz 2009, 100-101). Seemingly opposite concepts such as life and death, movement and petrification, organism and machine, are blended. This dialectic of opposites is present in both movements.

The constant mutations and deviant bodies seen in Biomannerism are also part of HEM's iconography and practices. For instance, bricolage can be seen as a method to mutate and update old instruments. Also, the uncanny Biomannerist interface works with the same principles as glitch. Indeed, we can also notice a dialogue between exteriority/interiority and destruction/creation in both cases.

In addition, dialectics such as hidden/revealed and freaks/humans are important in HEM. For instance "All is Full of Love", directed by Chris Cunningham, represents Björk as a humanized robot. The singer seems to be acting like a cold puppet. However her voice and gestures, focused on love, lead us to believe it is a human being.

This uncanniness regarding identity can also be reversed from non-human to human. For example, Flying Lotus' short film *Skinflick*⁴¹ shows us organic landscapes similar to the opening scene of *Alien 4*.⁴² Only at the end of these strange close-ups can we see the face and eyes of Bob Heslip, a friend of the artist who suffers from neurofibromatosis. This short film poetically brings humanity back inside a deviant body. Indeed, Bob Heslip used to participate in freak shows. By showing his smiling face, and finally his love for his wife, after the dehumanizing close-ups of his deformed skin, Heslip becomes human once more.

These aforementioned works depict an ambiguous relationship with a past where the world was essentially perceived as mysterious. Attempts to understand and structure our world in the past were largely reliant on myths and a fascination for otherness. As a result, HEM creates a porous interface between past and future with its fascination for the uncanny.

With several crises looming (ecological, financial, social, and political), our current century seems to be undergoing a paradigm shift. HEM's aesthetic tries to represent this uncanny passage between past and future. It is also a mirror to our own alienation, the fact of becoming a stranger to ourselves.

Giger's work on Ridley Scott's *Alien* can illustrate this hypothesis.⁴³ The painter's creation, used in the movie, is described by several theorists as an uncanny creature alienating people, similarly to a 21st-century mythology of capitalism (Jean-Clet 2014). The alien is a biomechanical parasite, reproducing by feeding off its hosts. The feeling of alienation and uncanniness gets more acute when Ripley, the film's hero, discovers that another crew member, Bishop, is an android pretending to be a human with a specific mission: to bring back the creature to Earth at any cost, including the life of the crew members. The main movie's themes are mechanization and the genetic or technological corruption of bodies (Szendy 2014, 201).

A factual link can be made between *Alien* and HEM. Chris Cunningham initially worked on *Alien 3* and *Alien 4: Resurrection*.⁴⁴ His video for "Windowlicker" unveils

41 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ilhLCXmrCm8>, accessed 09/15/2019.

42 Jean Pierre Jeunet, *Alien 4 resurrection*, Century Fox, Brandywine Productions, 1997.

43 Ridley Scott, *Alien*, Century Fox, Brandywine Productions, 1979.

44 David Fincher, *Alien 3*, 20th Century Fox, Brandywine Productions, 1992.

a face inspired from a Giger sketch, itself named “Windowlicker”.⁴⁵ Once again, this sample from Giger’s artwork seems to be a homage. In addition, the video uses alienation as a principle of creation. Displaying MTV clichés such as bimbos, champagne, and long limousines, Aphex Twin’s iconic smirk covers the faces of the bimbos. This leaves the spectator uneasy about what he is viewing.

Like Biomannerism and *Alien*, HEM’s aesthetic is undergoing mutation. The link between alienation and capitalism has already been theorized by hauntology.



Chris Cunningham, *Windowlicker*

© Chris Cunningham, *Windowlicker*, frame from videoclip, music composed by Aphex Twin, Warp Records, 1999.

We believe that hauntology is an important aspect of HEM.

Hauntology

The term “hauntology” was coined by Jacques Derrida, explaining things that no longer exist but still haunt us like ghosts (Derrida 1993). Like the alien parasite hidden inside the body, hauntology remains hidden and alters the identity. Therefore, the HEM genre, being highly alienated, shares a close relationship with hauntology.

Witch House displays characteristics linkable to hauntology. Moody synths with high pitched voices and Christian iconography seem, for example, to resurrect old identities and create nostalgia (Richardson 2011).

Vaporwave is another musical subdivision of HEM that can be defined by an imaginary kitsch and retro past. Its iconography is mainly composed of Greek sculptures, colourful neons, palm trees, and nostalgic commercials, along with a glitch aesthetic. Its sound identity is often linked with the 80s and 90s through old synthesizers and samples. Vaporwave’s artistic identity is informed by the resurgence of nostalgia and melancholic feelings for these bygone decades.

For Grafton Tanner, hauntology is “the artistic mode of realizing this failure of the future that was promised in the past” (Tanner 2016, 34). The excessive enthusiasm of Vaporwave, combined with the old commercials and archives of people unaware of

45 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ZT3gTu4Sjw&has_verified=1, accessed 09/15/2019.

the forthcoming crisis, are revealing aspects of the genre when analyzed through the lens of hauntology. Tanner believes that two ghosts are haunting Vaporwave.

The first one is the digital alter ego, the avatar hiding the human, sometimes confused with the bot. Tanner notices the multiplication of bots on SoundCloud, where nicknames are often “user”, followed by a serial number (Tanner 2016, IX). This vaporous community seems like a society of ghosts. Aphex Twin picked up this archaic signature, dehumanized and anonymous, on his own SoundCloud account, under the name “user18081971”.⁴⁶ Consequently, like several HEM artists, he becomes anonymous by altering his own identity.

The second ghost lives inside our collective memory. For Tanner, Vaporwave plays on the memory of the world prior to 9/11. A world without the War on Terror and our current apocalyptic promises.

The division process, happening in all HEM, is particularly interesting in Vaporwave. For instance, fans have created Simpsonwave. Nostalgic edits of the cartoon can be seen online collaged with Vaporwave tracks. Similarly, Trumpwave is another manifestation of the genre’s division, focusing on president Trump’s promise to resurrect the American dream.

The alienation caused by nostalgia and ghosts is theorized by other hauntology scholars. Tanner notes the reluctance of Simon Reynolds, *vis-à-vis* our western melancholic culture and ability to binge music (Tanner 2016, 54). Fisher’s vision of hauntology remains pessimistic about the future. Like Tanner and Reynolds, he describes a melancholic lethargy haunting our music:

While the 20th-century experimental culture was seized by a recombinatorial delirium, which made it feel as if newness was infinitely available, the 21st century is oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion, it doesn’t feel like the future. Or, alternatively, it doesn’t feel as if the 21st century has started yet. We remain trapped in the 20th century (Fisher 2014, 8).

For Chatonsky, digital Western civilization is symptomatically recording everything, like a civilization becoming extinct (Chatonsky, YouTube interview, 2019). Facing this loss of meaning, the apocalyptic tone has increased, collapsology becomes visible and hauntology a major aesthetic movement. Capitalism’s ghost seems to be already here.

The fear of the unknown and how to react to it is everywhere. Hauntology’s induced nostalgia is interpreted as the sclerosis of our Western society. Our hypothesis is that HEM’s aesthetic copes with this fear through deconstruction.

⁴⁶ See <https://soundcloud.com/user18081971>, accessed 09/15/2019.

Deconstruction

Derrida is famous for his philosophical concept of deconstruction. The deconstruction process, as used in our work, is defined as reversing the power dynamics between two dialectics. Secondly, dialectics are reduced to the same importance by hybridizing. In a similar fashion, the hybridization process seen in HEM's aesthetic contributes to the deconstruction of dialectics. For example, Arca's iconography reverses power dynamics between heterosexual and LGBTQIA+ communities through his own community's expression and hybridization. The identity-based tensions in "Reverie" depict the artist as a chimera.⁴⁷ Wearing a toreador jacket, stilts, and a horn that pierces his body in a suggestive manner, he reminds the audience of the Minotaur figure. As a result, the duality is neutralized through the hybridization process.

The glitch process can also be deconstructive by similarly reversing two elements. Rosa Menkman studied the JPEG format by deconstructing it with glitch art. With this practice, she understood how JPEG was compressed and revealed how the image compression format was based on former model Lena Södenberg (Menkman 2017). Without her consent, the model's picture was used to test the JPEG compression format. As a result, JPEG compression could not make correct pictures of black people since the compression is a selective process. Through this example, Menkman unveiled a potential link between technology and inequality.

In the same way, HEM's deconstruction leads us toward a future infused with regression, mythical thinking, spiritual values, and a global communion between people. Unlike hauntology, which states that Western societies are stuck and cannot change, this movement toward the past differs. Its inspiration draws on prior stages of development anterior to the industrial revolution.

William Basinski's *Disintegration Loops* explores the haunting feeling of magnetic tapes.⁴⁸ In this work, tapes disintegrate and are recorded while it happens. Destruction becomes a part of creation. Death becomes life through the recording of the eroding tapes. With this piece, Basinski shows the inherent regression of HEM. Indeed, the recording can be seen as a performance of technological decay.

Guy Ben Arry's take on technological regression is to have a musical doppelganger of himself. His modular synthesizer called *cellf* questions transhumanism's validity in our contemporary times.⁴⁹ It turns the stem cells of the artist into an electrical signal creating sound. The device also allows captured exterior sounds to influence the development of the stem cells. This process allows the musician and the stem cells to interact with each other. In spite of the advanced technology, contrasting with Morozov's work, the past is present through *cellf*'s shape. The synthesizer looks like a gigantic gramophone. Also, the work is not in any way supposed to augment

47 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0WKWZ9y-dvU>, accessed 09/15/2019.

48 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mjnAE5go9dI&t=2544s>, accessed 09/15/2019.

49 See <http://guybenary.com/work/celf/>, accessed 09/15/2019.

the artist. Instead, the machine reduces him to a basic principle: the development of cells and the production of sound.

Fisher said that it was conceptually impossible for his generation to accept the decay of society (2014, 7). However, we believe HEM's aesthetic lays the groundwork to accept Western society's process of decay. Difficult to analyze, HEM's digestions of the past suggest a different relationship with the world, ready to embrace capitalism's fall.

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RETRO TENDECIES, DECAY, AND HAUNTED MEDIA IN HYBRID ELECTRONIC MUSIC (summary)

Many electronic music genres demonstrate an interest in retro tendencies. Between samples and vintage synthesizers, we can distinguish the use of ancient musical artefacts, rituals, and practices. This music leads us to a hybrid aesthetic, mixing past and future, with an uncanny effect. The majority of artists that will be referred to are part of a hybrid electronic music aesthetic. It will be defined and presented as an interface between past and future, formalized with tools, practices, and conceptual ambitions.

Firstly, this article will approach hauntology in electronic music through the means of production. Supported by Grafton Tanner’s theory, we will study how samples, as historical quotations, can haunt music. It can be observed in vaporwave and in many other subgenres of post-digital electronic music trying to push past their creative boundaries. Following Rosa Menkman’s research, we will also see how glitches can be treated like artefacts. Based on the established framework, we will explore sound archetypes through the work of musicians like Boards of Canada, The Caretaker, and William Basinski. Other methods will support our hauntology theory, like circuit bending, Do It Yourself (DIY), vintage synthesizers, along with the enjoyment of old tapes in underground record labels.

Following this train of thought, we will study rituals and practices in both live and audiovisual performances. Holly Herndon’s ghosts, masked artists like Anklepants and Flying Lotus, or puppet shows with Gjöll or Daito Manabe will show an array of rituals and objects of superstition. The exchange between crowds and DJs has also been studied by Pedro Peixoto Ferreira and supports our hypothesis regarding electronic music’s spiritual aspect. This will give us a better understanding of retro tendencies. Dmitry Morozov’s

artwork *Until I Die* will conclude this part with the use of a 19th century technology called galvanism.

The last part of this article demonstrates how the aesthetic of hybrid electronic music grounds itself in decay through, firstly, a porous interface between the production's material and time. Secondly, an uncanny feeling presents itself through errors and organic textures reminiscent of the past. Finally, the relationship between the body and the machine is looked at through a semiological analysis of artists like Jesse Kanda, Aphex Twin, and Guy Ben Arry. Further research in this direction could be of great benefit to the fields of ethnomusicology, music theory, and contemporary art.

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