Hyperpop: What a niche music subgenre can tell us about the music industry,

the Internet, and contemporary culture

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Ludic, Ebullient, and Counterintuitive: An Introduction to Hyperpop

Two summers ago, I interned at a music venue in Houston. My title was in "Digital Marketing," but really, I was a runner—carting around bags of groceries, slapping wristbands on concertgoers, changing out posters in the bathrooms, and hoisting tables, really heavy tables, to the hilltop wooden bleachers from Harambe. Harambe was the shed across the street—it used to have a giant cutout of a gorilla above it before the owners of the venue bought it for storage. Unlike the shed, I didn't have a name—I was exclusively "the intern." Some of the time I would be shadowing my boss, a tattoo-clad former-model the same age as me but who had been promoted to the head of the marketing department the previous year—where in addition to being called by your actual name, you get paid. When I wasn't busy, I was listening in on people in the office gripe about how Cuco is a little baby who went to the hospital for a hangover or how Morrissey hates leather belts so no one can wear leather belts.

My involvement slowed down once the summer ended, and completely halted with COVID. Stuck at home, relegated to my daily walks around the neighborhood, I started listening heavily to a band I had discovered on Spotify that previous December—100 gecs. Listening to 100 gecs felt like being over-caffeinated. It was invigorating, intoxicating, pure unadulterated exuberance, excess, sometimes forgoing musicality altogether. It made me love it for its lack of seriousness, for its auditory whiplash, for its unabashed fervor. It was different from the music I had been listening to the year before—more muted, midwestern, folky, indie rock. Music that, in comparison, was honestly a little depressing.

I started listening to other artists like 100 gecs, too; they also sort of led into each other—no doubt the Spotify algorithm was doing the heavy lifting—and it was refreshing. As I listened to more related artists, an ebullient genre term crystallized before me—hyperpop.

Hyperpop, taken at the surface, is the name of a Spotify-curated playlist, created in August of 2019, based on the breakout success of duo 100 gecs. It conglomerates songs loosely based on a maximalist pop aesthetic.

Taken more speculatively, hyperpop is a subgenre of music that has recently developed (primarily within the last year), one that fuses the futuristic electro-pop the likes of Charli XCX, Grimes, Slayyyter, SOPHIE, Kim Petras, and PC Music, and the Soundcloud rap of artists like Yung Lean, Bladee, and Ecco2k. Common binding factors include the Internet, queerness, experimental performances of gender, clashing parody and sincerity, both unlimited exuberance and, more recently, confessional sorrow. *Vice* calls it "a genre tag for distinctly genre-less music."[1] It's also a contentious term, created not by the artists involved but by corporate-giant Spotify, who molded the genre based on user-listening analytics.

In September, when I first really started digging into the sound of hyperpop, I was still unsure what to call it: bubblegum bass? PC Music, after the label that ignited the sound? And I had other questions: How does the sound differ from just plain experimental pop? If it's truly an exaggeration of pop music as the word implies, what parts of pop is it exaggerating? How does it differ from other, associated "microgenres" like glitchcore? What does it *mean*?

In September, a Wikipedia page appeared for "hyperpop." However, it promptly disappeared after a brief and turbulent stint. It was then relegated as a subcategory on the Wikipedia page for the record label PC Music, and then, in November, the page was back again—albeit shorter and with more "credible" sources—the *New York Times* and *Vice* provided

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[1] Eli Enis. "This is Hyperpop: A Genre Tag for Genre-less Music," *VICE*, 27 Oct. 2020.

that backbone with their articles focused on the genre in late October/early November.[2] A lot of discourse around hyperpop also occurs on Twitter, on Reddit, in online student newspapers, and in the comments sections on YouTube videos. While this discourse has since taken a more established form in published album reviews and in other online publications, there's still something unfinished about what hyperpop is and what it does, and naturally, like any genre, it's evolving.

It seems almost misguided to apply serious critique to music that can be so ludic, and on top of that, is "genreless"—to affirm that there's some sort of social commentary taking place (like more than one media outlet has asserted) when the artists themselves declare that they're being entirely earnest, or eschew the label of "hyperpop" altogether. But artists don't have to be explicit in either their motives or the effects of their music for critique to take place—in fact, I would say good art is rarely explicit. Combining these flowing conversations with established critical works also seems weird—but there's something about hyperpop that invites these types of speculations, even if there seems to be something antithetical to it.

PC Music, Charli XCX, Spotify, 100 gecs: Who, exactly, created hyperpop?

Right now, the biggest songs aren't being determined by what's being played at the parties and the clubs (as they usually are) but, mainly, by what music is popular on TikTok (Fleetwood Mac's "Dreams" recently throttled to the top of the charts in a cyber-induced

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[2] Ben Dandridge-Lemco, "How Hyperpop, a Small Spotify Playlist, Grew Into a Big Deal," *New York Times*, 10 Nov. 2020; Enis, "This is Hyperpop."

renaissance).[3] Charli XCX's album *How I'm Feeling Now*, inspired by the COVID-19 quarantine, was created in collaboration with fans over public Zoom calls.[4] Other hyperpop artists are also making use of the tools at their disposal—Zoom, Instagram live feeds, Twitter—to make a space for the genre. While other genres may currently struggle to stay relevant, hyperpop flourishes through the relative safety and escapism created by cyberspace.

Last September, I attended a virtual concert run by artist and producer A.G. Cook. A number of artists from his label, PC Music, "performed," as did other acts, both big and small—Planet 1999, Fraxiom, Me&U2, Aaron Cartier, Dorian Electra, 100 gecs, Charli XCX. The event was called AppleVille.

Appleville. Apple. A.G. Cook, whose then-upcoming second album was called Apple, chose the word for its infinite connotations: Apple, like the software company. Apple, like the Beatles' record label. Apple, like the "apple" that Adam and Eve ate.

Ville. Like, a community—a place you can be. In the concert's description, the concert is described as: "an infinite green field where you can watch some of your favorite musicians grapple with the limitations of time & space." The contradiction here is clear. How can something "infinite" also contain time-space limitations? After the event, A.G. Cook tweeted: "Appleville is my ideal musical landscape. Thank u everyone for watching, moshing & taking part." Again, there's some sort of liminality present. A finite-infinite-ideal-yet-real pseudo-location.

The entire concert, as far as I could tell, peaked at around 5000 viewers, give or take a couple hundred. The amount of strobe warnings I got was a lot. Shuttery, blinking visuals were a

[3] Marianne Garvey, "Fleetwood Mac's 'Dreams' returns to the charts, thanks to viral TikTok video," *CNN*, 22 Oct. 2020.

[4] Claire Shaffer, "Charli XCX Announces 'DIY' Quarantine Album 'How I'm Feeling Now,'" *Rolling Stone*, 6 April 2020.

hallmark of the concert. After each set, the sound of clapping and crowd chatter would fill the screen. As the sets progressed, the sound would get choppier, restart, stutter, bringing attention to its fabrication. It becomes abundantly clear that all the performances are not meant to simulate a real concert at all—it's something entirely different.

Among the visuals presented were Dorian Electra alone in a backyard with a soundboard, duo 100 gecs carrying around a laptop playing the movie *Ratatouille*, and artist Charli XCX jumping in a pool while holding the camera. Midi tones bounced around in the background as digitally altered voices from the band Me&U2 said, "We are officially sponsored by the McDonald's Corporation" or "Fifteen people have died listening to this music" or "All this music was produced on the XBOX." An artist by the name of Ö began their performance with a bit of ballet before morphing into a strobey experimental vertigo-inducing apparition. The few artists holding acoustic guitars felt out of place. Artist Quiet Local's set, featuring a dreamy fish eye effect, felt more like a picnic in your brain rather than the overwhelming feeling of guzzling Red Bull and battery acid through your ears and eyes, which is what most of the other performances were like. Fraxiom goes so far as to make fun of actual, real guitars in their set.

Halfway through, however, I did feel that "Zoom fatigue" setting in—the feeling of having stared at a screen for too long and needing to go outside. I walked around my apartment with my headphones in, listening to the music while stretching my legs and eating. It's pretty clear that audience involvement is harder to accomplish in this medium, though there *was* a virtual moshpit. Though moshpits are typically known for the bruises they leave and the adrenaline they create, this one was different. Twice during the concert, the screen flashed the words "YOU ARE IN A MOSHPIT" before showing an aerial view of a giant crowd at an outdoor concert, then populating the screen with Zoom windows of people dancing, all live

attendants of the concert. It had other perks—being able to change your Zoom background, for one, or being able to show your pets, or for a few brief seconds, having an audience of 5000 looking at you wildly wave around in your bedroom. It's a new type of rush.

The performance ended with A.G. Cook's set. He performed a cover of The Smashing Pumpkins' "Today." A.G. Cook's face was shrinkwrapped onto an apple sitting atop a digitized body running through a virtual field of flowers while apples fell from the sky. "Today is the greatest," A.G. sung, as the flowers glitched around him and he walked off into a black hole.

His performance (and all the performances) took advantage of their digital landscape to present an entirely new experience to the audience—one that combined a variety of disparate artists who used the "infinite green field" to their own purposes, whether it was a simple video of them playing a guitar or a mess of bright colors and autotuned vocals.

It's no stretch to say that A.G. Cook's enigmatic record label PC Music laid the groundwork for the hyperpop genre. When producer A.G. Cook—now acclaimed as "the godfather of hyperpop"—founded the label back in 2013 in London, I was a middle-schooler in a suburb of Texas obsessively listening to Icona Pop's hit single "I Love It," featuring Charli XCX. Charli XCX is an artist that became closely associated with PC Music (A.G. Cook became her artistic director) and probably one of if not the most successful artists to be associated with hyperpop. Six years later, I would rediscover her when my housemates urged me to go to one of her concerts.

In 2013, however, A.G. Cook was taking "friends, often with little or no musical experience, and turn[ing] them into recording artists, growing their sound and brand."[5] PC Music was not so much a label in the traditional sense as it was a loose collective of artists collaborating over the Internet. In fact, they hadn't all been in the same room together until

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[5] Wolfson, "PC Music: the Future of Pop."

performing their first showcase at SXSW, Austin's mid-March mega festival. The label went over a year without offering any of its music to the public for purchase—instead posting singles on SoundCloud, a free music sharing platform that would later shape another emergent influence on hyperpop. The perfectly polished artists to come off the PC Music label, with overblown personalities and glitzy music to match, looked like they descended from some alternate, futuristic world.

When the label emerged, it was really weird. But deliberately weird. Publications alternatively called the artists "digital phantasms" or "conceptual cyber droids."[6] Which wasn't really a far stretch for the label in those early years, when thematically, the label dealt mostly in consumerism, cyberspace, and exaggeration to the point of absurdity and almost unpalatability. There was a lot of ambiguity surrounding the label: interviews were sparse, and artists straddled the lines between real and fake and hyperreal.[7] Photoshop, glossy headshots, bright colors, and fluid identities defined these first few artists.

Beyond the pyrotechnics of PC Music's lavish imagery, we have the music itself. A lot like fireworks, PC Music can have big, abrasive booms, or bright and glittery tones—usually in the same song. Just looking at PC Music's second compilation album, the listener is presented with grating noises and unsettling whispers sandwiched between saccharine lovelorn dancey pop tracks.[8] In 2015, *The Guardian* had this to say about the label: "Its releases are some of the most deeply idiosyncratic sounds to emerge in the recent history of British music: part intellectual response to the prevalence of marketing in popular culture, part antagonistic refreshing of the most critically ridiculed music from the past decade, and packaging it as the future."[9]

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[6] Simon Vozick-Levinson, "PC Music Are for Real: A. G. Cook & Sophie Talk Twisted Pop." *Rolling Stone*, 22 May 2015; Sam Wolfson, "PC Music: the Future of Pop or 'Contemptuous Parody'?" *The Guardian*, 2 May 2015.
[7] Wolfson, "PC Music: the Future of Pop."
[8] *PC Music, Vol. 2*. Various Artists. PC Music, 2016.
[9] Sam Wolfson, "PC Music: the Future of Pop or 'Contemptuous Parody'?" *The Guardian*, 2 May 2015.

PC Music established specific themes that informed the hyperpop sphere—first of all the key exaggeration of pop music and its themes, and that special brand of pseudo-ironic earnestness, and hyperfemininity, and cyberculture, and consumerism and gender. PC Music is so definitive of this nebulous genre that it almost emerged as the genre label, what would've been a bottom-up term that makes sense for the approach and sound of these artists. But the acts that have come to be associated with the label are more glitch than glitz, less pop and more all over the place.

Artist SOPHIE was among the first to collaborate with A.G. Cook directly on music. She focused on producing what she called the "loudest, brightest thing" but also made identity—and the way it exists in cyberspace—a key theme in her music.[10] As a trans artist who came out with her debut album *Oil of Every Pearl's Un-Insides*, SOPHIE was among the first to use vocal modulation to alter the tone of her voice, and the technique has since become a defining feature of hyperpop.[11] SOPHIE's recent death (in late January 2021) has cemented her not only as a defining influence in hyperpop, but in experimental electronic music as a whole. Her tragic and untimely death shook up the hyperpop community and catalyzed numerous tribute pieces that deservedly spotlighted her contributions. Kim Petras and Slayyyter are similar proto-hyperpop artists who used their music as an expression of a hyperfeminine aesthetic and as a grounds for identity curation. Overall, queerness was and is still a fundamental aspect of hyperpop, as are deliberate performances of gender—nonbinary artist Fraxiom, genderfluid artist Dorian Electra, Laura Les of 100 gecs are just some notable examples of queer artists working within the hyperpop sphere. Hyperpop up-and-comer ElyOtto (whose song, "SugarCrash!" blew up on TikTok around March) called hyperpop "a very trans sounding genre."[12]

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[10] Vozick-Levinson, "PC Music Are for Real."
[11] SOPHIE. *Oil of Every Pearl's Un-Insides.* MSMSMSM, 2018.
[12] Zoya Raza-Sheikh, "ElyOtto is the trans TikTok star taking on the music industry" *Gay Times*, 29 April 2021.

Another notable artist who I've already mentioned, Charli XCX, is one of the most mainstream artists to be associated with hyperpop—undoubtedly, as multiple publications and fans have put it—the queen of hyperpop. Charli's popularity, collaborative capacity, and sound prepared the way for a new genre—especially her 2017 mixtape *Pop 2*.[13] Just the name of the mixtape, *Pop 2*, gives the impression that pop has gone and died, to be replaced by a new and improved, updated and refurbished version. Reviews of the mixtape claimed that it sounds "like the future" and yet also acknowledge the influence of decades of preceding electronic and pop music.[14] *Pop 2* features a number of collaborations with other proto-hyperpop artists and is closely linked to the label PC Music, whose producer (A.G. Cook) worked on every song in the mixtape. The sheer number of collaborators and producers on the mixtape—PC Music, Caroline Polachek, Kim Petras, Dorian Electra, and SOPHIE, to name only a small few—and the glitchy, eclectic production, as well as the critical acclaim and popularity of the mixtape, represent a bright spot in the emergence of a cohesive genre.

If PC Music gathered the logs, if Charli XCX laid down the kindling, then 100 gecs was the match that ignited hyperpop. They were the impetus for Spotify to create their hyperpop playlist, and have reached far enough into the mainstream with their polarizing sound that I would bet a good portion of Gen-Zers have at least *heard* of them. They sound nothing like the bubblegummy, squeaky tracks of Hannah Diamond or Kim Petras. Whereas these tracks bounce around in my head like a colorful DVD logo savescreen from 2010, 100 gecs just rattles around in there like an empty Mountain Dew can. 100 gecs introduced a more hodge-podge approach to music, combining a variety of genres, while also crafting lyrics that are so vapid they're almost embarrassing to listen to, but end up leading to genuine enjoyment.

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[13] Charli XCX. *Pop 2.* Asylum Records, 2017.
[14] Megan Garvey, "Charli XCX: Pop 2 Album Review" *Pitchfork*, 20 Dec. 2017.

As one of the most popular music streaming platforms, Spotify plays a big hand in what people listen to. In addition to user-focused, algorithm-run playlists, Spotify hosts a series of curated playlists that lead to other types of music discovery—like Fresh Finds, a discovery-focused playlist that has made superstars out of relatively unknown artists. Its genre-bending playlists like "POLLEN" and "Lorem" challenge traditional ways of categorizing music—not based on instruments or tempo or song structure but with more of a marketing approach, looking at users' listening patterns and demographics.[15]

If Spotify can challenge traditional genres, surely they can mold *new* genres. However, when Spotify created the hyperpop playlist, they were co-opting a genre that already existed, albeit by a few different names—abrasive, exaggerated, ironic tunes alternatively called bubblegum bass or PC Music after the influential record label. However, the meaning of "hyperpop" soon began to change—it no longer meant maximalist pop music, but rather, a genreless conglomeration of sounds that can more or less be divided into two camps: PC-influenced and a newer strain of online-emo-rap.

As the genre has become more expansive, the themes have gone a different direction. In a strange reversal, hyperpop may have been a better descriptor for PC Music's early releases, and PC Music a good term for the type of music—like 100 gecs—that is associated with the genre now. While their music can most definitely be described as hyper, there isn't much of a "pop" element at play. Sonically, hyperpop fits the bill of "Personal Computer" music—wild synths, midi tones, and auto-tuned vocals are only a few of the elements that are employed to produce the industrial-sounding tracks characteristic of the genre.

The Spotify hyperpop playlist has since molded the genre into something new—now hyperpop seems to have developed from two separate sources—not only PC Music, but the

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[15] Joe Vitagliano, *How Spotify, 'Fresh Finds' Discovers The Next Big Thing, " American Songwriter*. 31 Aug. 2020.

emo-influenced Soundcloud rap of the mid-2010s. The latter camp is more serious in tone and influenced by the sound of artists like Bladee and Ecco2k—lo-fi hip-hop combined with electronic tones. What the *New York Times* calls, "a far cry from the winking parody of PC Music."[16] These artists, like glaive and osquinn, tend to be younger, representing an up-and-coming layer of hyperpop.

Many artists also deliberately eschew the term "hyperpop"—whether they be Charli XCX, whose music has long been a staple of the "genre," or glaive, whose popularity skyrocketed after he began producing music after the COVID lockdown began. (The COVID era, it should be mentioned, has also had an impact on making hyperpop what it is. Some of the biggest and youngest artists on the hyperpop playlist only started producing music when the pandemic kicked into gear in March—glaive, for example. Charli XCX released an album produced entirely in quarantine. Rico Nasty's single IPHONE, released last August and produced by Dylan Brady of 100 gecs, has a line that says "I forgot to put my mask on" which has mistakenly been thought to be an allusion to the pandemic when the line itself was written before the pandemic.[17])

Lilly Szabo, the main curator behind the Spotify hyperpop playlist, calls hyperpop a "parody of pop"—which it is—but goes on to say that "as time has gone by and you have a lot of younger creators experimenting within this sound, it naturally, just like any genre, is evolving."[18] A.G. Cook has described "PC Music"—not as a sound, but as an ethos.[19] The *New York Times* agrees: "outside of a collective allegiance to gaudy auto-tune, hyperpop's identity is less rooted

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[16] Dandridge-Lemco, "How Hyperpop, a Small Spotify Playlist."
[17] Rico Nasty. "IPHONE." *Nightmare Vacation,* Sugar Trap, 2020.
[18] Enis, "This is Hyperpop."
[19] Joe Vitagliano, "A.G. Cook is Changing Popular Music As We Know It." *American Songwriter,* Sept. 2020.

in musical genetics than it is a shared ethos of transcending genre altogether, while still operating within the context of pop."[20]

 As the genre is evolving and perhaps filtering into the mainstream, some reservations have come up. One student magazine in January 2020 worried, "Hyper pop started as a movement for queer inclusivity in the music industry—will growing critical acclaim homogenize the sound and rid it of creativity?"[21]

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[20] Dandridge-Lemco, "How Hyperpop, a Small Spotify Playlist."
[21] Ilana Slavit, "Is Hyper Pop the Future of Music?" *Daily Emerald*, 6 Jan. 2020.

How Not to Kill a Song, and How Spotify Ate the Music Industry

On April 16, 2021, I was scrolling through Twitter. That fact by itself is not particularly interesting, and actually scrolling through Twitter is a pretty mundane, regular thing for me. But on Twitter that day Charli XCX was also answering questions from fans. One person asked what her favorite book was. Although she didn't have an answer, she did describe a book she was reading at the moment, "disagreeing with a lot of it" but nonetheless enjoying it. That book is John Seabrook's *Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory*. Curious, I picked it up. In it, Seabrook describes how and why producers and artists chase smash hits and what that has meant for how the music industry functions.

One of the points Seabrook makes concerns exactly why the songs we hear repeatedly on the radio tend to grow on us, even if we despise them. This is the same experience my friends had listening to my hyperpop playlists, which I force-fed them on car rides in my Jeep Cherokee.

Seabrook describes it like this:

The more I heard the songs, the more I liked them. How could that be? If you dislike a song the first time, surely you should loathe it the tenth. But apparently that's not how it works. Familiarity with the song increases one's emotional investment in it, even if you don't like it...This happens gradually, in stages. The initially annoying bits...become the very parts you look forward to most in the song. You quote lines like "No lead in our

zeppelin!" as if they are hoary oaths. In the car, I steel myself against hearing the same

song yet again, but once it starts, I feel oddly elated.[22]

This is due to your brain eventually being able to predict what comes next in the song, causing a sense of anticipation that makes you feel like you're singing along—what's called "virtual participation."[23] The same science applies to why people don't enjoy genres they aren't familiar with, and why you might hit repeat on your favorite songs on Spotify.

There are some songs, however, that you'll despise no matter how many times you hear them—especially songs with simpler melodies that tend to rise to pop prominence faster than more complex songs. Studies have shown that the more complex a song is, the more you may like it over time—which may explain why, after months of hearing me play 100 gecs and Slayyyter and food house in the car, my friends like about as much if not more than I do.[24] *The Independent* points out "Bohemian Rhapsody" as a complex song with a long lifespan, and Eurovision contest winners as basic pop songs catchy only for a short duration.[25] The latter is just not sufficiently stimulating.

The same principle might explain why some pop hits of the past—like Fleetwood Mac's "Dreams"—are still well-known today. Some pop hits of the past, however, have remained there.

Hyperpop, which tends to be jam-packed with layers of pitched-up vocals, random sound effects, disjunctured melodies, and bass so powerful you can feel the skeleton in your body, might have the sort of longevity described above, but like with any song you glut yourself on, you can kill its charm if you listen to it too much. Striking the right balance is hard.

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[22] John Seabrook. *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory.* New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 2015.

[23] Katie Sharp. "The Science Behind Why We Listen to Our Favorite Songs on Repeat." *Mic*, 25 Sept. 2014.
[24] Sharp, "The Science Behind Why We Listen."
[25] Sharp, "The Science Behind Why We Listen."

Maintaining the listener's interest is not only something hitmakers strive for—it's something Spotify, and really any streaming service, has to do in order to make money. Spotify just happens to be quite good at it.

Spotify tracks its listeners' habits in order to serve them up exactly what they desire, based on data like time of day and location—Seabrook quotes Brian Whitman, co-founder of Echo Nest, a music intelligence platform owned by Spotify, who says, "We've cracked the nut as far as knowing as much about the music as we possibly can automatically, and we see the next frontier as knowing as much as we possibly can about the listener."[26]

Spotify's ability to create genres (like hyperpop) highlights not only its particular impact on the music industry, but the impact of streaming as a whole—it is now the most profitable arm of recorded music, accounting for more than 83 percent of total industry revenue this past year.[27] Streaming is relatively new, however, only picking up steam in 2015 or so. But its rise makes sense. The reason Spotify initially succeeded was because it capitalized on the free-music-for-all model spawned by the file-sharing service Napster, the service that killed the music industry in the first place. "Napster...began the cataclysm that caused worldwide revenues to decline from a peak of $27 billion in 1999 to $15 billion in 2014."[28]

At the turn of the century, the music industry was the most profitable it had ever been—mostly due to the purchase of CDs, which made up over 95% of profits (the other 5% consisted of cassettes and a slim interest in vinyls).[29] CDs were cheaper to manufacture and priced higher than vinyls, and on top of that, much more popular:

[26] Seabrook, *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory.*
[27] Igor Bonifacic. "Streaming music made up 83 percent of the record industry's revenue in 2020." *Engadget*, 26 Feb 2021.
[28] Seabrook, *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory.*
[29] Nick Routley. "Visualizing 40 Years of Music Industry Sales." Visual Capitalist, 6 Oct. 2018.

The high-tech allure of the CD would allow the industry to raise the cost of an album from $8.98 to $15.98...in spite of costing almost twice as much, CDs turned out to be extremely popular with record buyers. Fans who already owned music on vinyl dutifully replaced their records with CDs.[30]

However, as the 00s progressed, CD purchases plummeted due to the launch of Napster, an online music sharing service that allowed users to download music for free. Though Napster only survived for a brief three years—from 1998 to 2001—the seed of piracy had been sown, and other file-sharing sites began to fill the void—what one founder of Napster called a "Whac-A-Mole problem" that the record labels who sued Napster for copyright infringement didn't anticipate.[31] Despite a brief ringtone era just before the advent of smartphones which "injected $1B into the music industry," the music industry was perpetually sliding down. MP3 purchases from iTunes could not compete with the advantages of piracy, especially in the absence of a tangible product.

Because there was no returning to the individual purchase of albums, Spotify capitalized on the Napster model—all music available at once—and made it profitable through the use of ads and a subscription service. Now, the music industry has grown to "$12.2 billion in 2020" in the United States. This growth has been almost single handedly due to "streaming services, with the format generating $10.1 billion in revenue in 2020, up from $8.9 billion in 2019. 2020 marked the fifth consecutive year of growth on that front."[32]

However, Spotify has faced backlash for distributing profits non-equitably, with most of the revenue to the producers and artists of the most popular tracks. Spotify's model, despite who you may personally listen to, will send "90 percent of your subscription fee...to the megastars in

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[30]Seabrook, *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory.*
[31]Seabrook, *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory.*
[32]Bonifacic. "Streaming music made up 83 percent of the record industry's revenue in 2020."

the head." Like it has been with the music industry for years, the smash hits make the majority of profits—"Ninety percent of the revenues in the record business come from ten percent of the songs."[33] The streaming model is no different, paying "out generously to the world's biggest acts but [making] it difficult for smaller and independent artists to make a living off their music."[34] Though this has always been the case, the COVID-19 pandemic has prevented smaller artists from touring, which is typically where they make a significant portion of their profits. While Soundcloud is making moves to transition to a direct payment model, currently, streaming directly benefits only the biggest artists.[35]

This is why, Seabook points out, artists aim to try to write the biggest hits—a hunt for a formula that can turn a song into an earworm, that can entrance a listener, that could blow up on TikTok.

The song "SugarCrash" by ElyOtto has recently reached almost 110 million streams on the platform. Like many fresh faces in hyperpop, ElyOtto is a teen who slingshotted to fame by producing music in his bedroom while under lockdown. TikTok, notorious for creating these sorts of one-hit wonders, flung his single to the charts in the same way the platform has reinvigorated "Dreams" and resuscitated Charli XCX's "Unlock It," prompting her to create a music video for the song.[36]

The number of relatively unknown artists who have been made famous overnight via TikTok seems endless. While today artists may try to "hack" the TikTok algorithm, cracking the code of a pop hit has been a venture as old as pop music itself. Some producers, like Max

[33] Seabrook, *The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory.*
[34] Bonifacic. "Streaming music made up 83 percent of the record industry's revenue in 2020."
[35] Noah Yoo. "SoundCloud Exploring Fan-to-Artist Direct Payment System: Report." Pitchfork, 5 Feb. 2021.
[36] Eric Volmers. "High school student ElyOtto an overnight hyperpop sensation with major record deal." *Calgary Herald*, 21 Apr 2021.

Martin, have been doing it for decades. It is this obsession with the pop hit that Seabrook explores in his book, and that entrances artists like A.G. Cook, creator of the PC Music label.

In a recently published memoir for late artist SOPHIE, producer A.G. Cook states his obsession quite clearly: "In our minds, pop music was going through a golden era in the early 2010s, but all that Max Martin/Stargate craftsmanship was looked down on by anyone cool, and the London scene was fixed on an indie-rock & dubstep revival."

Stargate and Max Martin are the names of just two of the most prolific songwriting masterminds of the 2000s. Seabrook calls these people "hitmakers"—the behind-the-scenes masterminds of many of the biggest pop hits of the 2000s.

It is this obsession that led to A.G. Cook's collaboration with SOPHIE, a working relationship that laid the groundwork for hyperpop. A.G. Cook mentions SOPHIE's vision of the future of music, conveyed to him around a year before she passed:

She was completely disenchanted with the conservative notion of 'the album', and was even more disillusioned with the limited potential of streaming. With a mix of self-aware hubris and total dedication, she sketched out this idea of an extremely generous platform that would give listeners all kind of access to stems, fragments, and revisions of her music. She believed that technology was wasting everyone's time by attempting to emulate vinyl and radio, and that this infinitely generous approach was a logical endpoint for what music was always trying to be. She asked for my opinion. "Do you think it's possible?"

The future of music consumption is largely unpredictable. As artists strive not only for more equitable pay but for a more generous conception of how we find and interact with music, we might find ourselves stepping into unexplored territory. What remains, however, is a

vision—a future in which the music industry doesn't have to rely on the simplest, catchiest melodies which can ascend the charts the fastest, but one where there's room for more complex music to breathe—room for artists to experiment, to strive for more idiosyncratic sounds, and to have the backing to do so.

Despite what it may look like, Hyperpop is *not* ironic: How the microgenre furthers the joyful sincerity of a post-postmodernist agenda

I should admit that I did not anticipate hyperpop to affect my life so much. It seemed like a benign enough topic for a year-long English project--a burgeoning, unclearly defined music subgenre with a small following and really almost no coverage explicitly identifying it as a cohesive thing. Now, it's been covered by the *Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, and numerous music magazines and student publications. It has a Wikipedia page. It's all over my Twitter feed. I hear 100 gecs blasting out of the bathroom as my roommate showers, after she spent the whole fall semester critiquing my "awful taste in music." My friend from back home called to tell me he's "fallen in love with the genre." He said his dad likes it too. I feel the sullen necessity to blast IPHONE by Rico Nasty from any available car speaker, usually at the godforsaken request of some nascent hyperpop fan I converted sitting in the passenger seat.

I feel like I've unintentionally become some sort of hyperpop evangelist, converting naysayers into admirers through my sincere enthusiasm for the genre, despite their initial complaints and groans. But I feel like I've had my fill. Not that I don't enjoy it—I absolutely do. But in my regular listening, I've been catching up on popular music from the past decade and listening to genres I hadn't yet spent much time with. But my friends, newly-minted fans, keep listening.

There's a reason ironic appreciation turns into genuine enthusiasm—partly because the more times you hear an unfamiliar song, the more familiar you become with it, and the more, in

return, you enjoy it. That's what the biggest hits on the radio hope for—that the more you listen

to a song, the more it'll grow on you. Hyperpop, however, is not only wildly unpredictable in

composition, but can be straight up embarrassing to listen to. It's why it makes it hard to believe

Laura Les and Dylan Brady (duo 100 gecs) when they state, as earnestly as skepticism allows,

"We're not being ironic."[37]

There's something invigorating about genuinely liking something when everybody else

hates it, or claims not to understand. If we agree with the claims of New Sincerity, then being

vulnerably earnest is the new leading-edge of culture--the new "cool." And when this

earnestness (and enthusiasm tends to be contagious) spreads to others, there's even more joy in

watching them, to their own horror, start to enjoy the music they despise. Once you cross the

thresholds from disgust to ironic enjoyment and finally to genuine thrill, you know what Laura

and Dylan mean when they claim not to be employing a sense of irony in their music.

This sort of sentiment—of genuine enjoyment under the scrutiny of irony—is a feature of

what might be called a post-postmodernist moment. Post-postmodernism is a reaction to the

cynicism of postmodernism, what has defined our culture for most of the past fifty to sixty years.

Christy Wampole in her 2012 piece for the *New York Times*, "How to Live Without

Irony," forecasts the fed-upness with irony:

> *As a function of fear and pre-emptive shame, ironic living bespeaks cultural numbness,*
>
> *resignation and defeat. If life has become merely a clutter of kitsch objects, an endless*
>
> *series of sarcastic jokes and pop references, a competition to see who can care the least*
>
> *(or, at minimum, a performance of such a competition), it seems we've made a collective*

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[37] Hannah Mylrea, "100 Gecs: "People think we've staked our entire career on the fact that we can be ironic." *NME*, 10 July 2020.

misstep. Could this be the cause of our emptiness and existential malaise? Or a symptom?[38]

She mentions David Foster Wallace's particular response: "The loosely defined New Sincerity movements in the arts that have sprouted since the 1980s positioned themselves as responses to postmodern cynicism, detachment and meta-referentiality."[39] However, she treats New Sincerity as a failure. Jonathan Fitzgerald in *The Atlantic* clapped back, posturing New Sincerity as the forefront of this response to irony. Though once, detachment was the norm (Fitzgerald says, "to be vulnerable or authentic, to be sincere, was death in those days [the '80s]"), it's now cool to be authentic.[40] Wampole herself revised her opinion with a new piece, How To Live Without Irony (For Real This Time), postulating that joyful sincerity is now the norm. She does so on the heels of the 2016 election.

In the words of music artist Father John Misty, "satire has died."[41] For him, this moment came particularly during the night of the results of the 2016 election. He says:

In that moment, it was like all of the Gen-X humour that I was weaned on had this very cruel orgasm in my mind. In that moment, satire died. We're now in a post-satire world because this is the stupidest thing that could ever happen. It's like bad comedy. I just can't totally verbalise how tragic I think it is. I feel like the boy who cried wolf. All this scepticism and cynicism that I have felt my whole life became so literal.[42]

So we are in a cultural moment in which cynicism and irony have become unbearable. Instead, we desire authenticity, vulnerability, and true, unabashed enjoyment.

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[38] Christy Wampole, "How to Live Without Irony." *The New York Times*, 17 Nov. 2012.
[39] Wampole, "How to Live Without Irony."
[40] Jonathan Fitzgerald, "Sincerity, Not Irony, Is Our Age's Ethos." *The Atlantic*, 20 Nov. 2012.
[41] Dorian Lynskey, "Father John Misty: 'I Get Sick Pleasure out of Reading about How Much People Hate Me'." *The Guardian*, 30 Mar. 2017
[42] Lynskey, "Father John Misty: 'I Get Sick Pleasure."

Postmodernism, the thing to which New Sincerity is responding, is not really a thing in itself—it's a reaction against modernism, like the name implies. Postmodernism emerged in the '60s as a response to the predominant mode of art/architecture/poetry/philosophy/music/film at the time, which involved a desire for grand narratives, for neat and stable meanings. While modernism was once "scandalous," "shocking," "subversive," it became the dominant form of thought—what Fredric Jameson calls "the establishment and the enemy"—what has to be torn down in order to make something new. So postmodernism developed to tear it down—mostly by rejecting it and treating it with cynicism.

While nowadays irony and cynicism are typically treated as the hallmarks of postmodernism, Jameson points out a few other key characteristics, like the erasure of the distinction between "high culture and so-called mass or popular culture" which modernism worked hard to preserve. (Lady Gaga had a similar thing to say about pop music: "Pop music will never be low brow.") Postmodernism is also intrigued by advertisement and by capitalism, which leads to Jameson's biggest point—postmodernism coincides with the economic order of late capitalism. However, Jameson is unsure postmodernism is subversive at all. He says:

> *There is some agreement that the older modernism functioned against its society in ways which are variously described as critical, negative, contestatory, subversive, oppositional, and the like. Can anything of the sort be affirmed about postmodernism and its social moment? We have seen that there is a way in which postmodernism replicates or reproduces—reinforces—the logic of consumer capitalism; the more significant question is whether there is also a way in which it resists that logic. But that is a question we must leave open.*

I don't have an answer for Jameson, and in some ways it seems postmodernism has failed, or at least, come to an end.

While modernism was once "an offence to good taste and common sense," it became the insufferable mode to work against. The biggest indicator of when a period ends, Jameson says, is when that period (here modernism) is "taught in schools and universities—which at once empties them of any of their older subversive power." Postmodernism follows that cycle. First it was subversive; Jameson even begins his essay with the sentence: "The concept of postmodernism is not widely accepted or even understood today." However, that was the late 1980s. Now we are taught about postmodernism in schools. We are all comfortable with the postmodern mode of thinking—irony, self-referentiality. Think of any adult cartoon show—*Family Guy*, think *Deadpool*. It's everywhere we look—and it's boring now, and stifling, and cynical. David Foster Wallace probably explains it best: "the problem is that now, a lot of the shticks of postmodernism—irony, cynicism, irreverence—are now part of whatever it is that's enervating in the culture itself."

While Fitzgerald and Wampole praise directors like Wes Anderson and artists like Frank Ocean for their vulnerability and sincerity (Father John Misty, too, who inhabits the same realm of authenticity-under-satire), artists associated with hyperpop make it considerably more difficult for themselves to be taken seriously. It's more difficult to convince someone you're being absolutely genuine when from the outside you look very, very satirical.

Take 100 gecs' music video with giant trucks and sparkles and fake explosions. Dorian Electra's drawn-on pencil mustache and shoes with swords in them. PC Music's entire roster of parodic-but-not-actually-parodic artists. Fraxiom's neverending allusions to unfashionably anachronistic Internet culture (the celebratory treatment of "cringe" culture in hyperpop can be a

whole entire topic on its own). They take the veneer of irony that we've all come to expect from exaggerated appearances, but instead of being satiric, they're serious, and celebratory. Post-postmodernism can be touched by the absurd. Sometimes, it's camp without the irony.

In everything I looked at, people agree that this New Sincerity, earnestness, or seriousness is not solemn—it's the joyful kind. Alan Kirby calls this post-postmodernism digimodernism, emphasizing the role of Web 2.0 in bringing about this return to sincerity.[43] Kirby also adds another descriptor—infantilism. There's a childish gall to admitting you like to listen to 100 gecs—and that you take it very, very seriously.

To end, here's a really long quote from David Foster Wallace, but I think it's important, not only to hyperpop, but to general trends in Gen Z culture that even allows for such a style of music to gain prominence. Basically the hyperpop/Gen Z creed:

> *The next real literary 'rebels' in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles... Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. Today's risks are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the 'Oh how banal.' To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. Of willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law. Who knows.[44]*

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[43] Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How New Technologies DIsmantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure Our Culture.* New York, The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc, 2009.

[44] David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13(2), Summer 1993, pp. 151-194.

"A very trans sounding genre": Hyperpop and Queer Identities

On a paper for a different class, I wrote about a genre that blew up and fizzled out in the '60s—baroque pop. While I researched the annals of this long-forgotten genre, I stumbled upon an instrument that launched the whole concept of electronic music as we know it—the Moog synthesizer. The Moog was one of the first electronic synthesizers, and though it was originally reserved for avant-garde music, there was one album that ushered it into the mainstream—but it's not the type of music you'd expect.

In 1968, Columbia Records released an album that was really not expected to receive much attention. That album was Wendy Carlos's *Switched-On Bach*, an array of Bach's compositions all played on the then-novel technology of the Moog synthesizer. To everyone's surprise, the album reached number 10 on the US Billboard 200 and won three Grammys. It was the first classical album to go Platinum. Electronic music at the time was reserved for experimental artists—not something the public knew about or was interested in. But here was a classical album composed electronically that reached mainstream popularity.

Part of the album's popularity may have come from the countercultural desire for weird music and a strange irreverence for "high art" that came with the postmodern sensibility of the time. Whatever the reason, Wendy Carlos singlehanddedly ushered the Moog synthesizer, and therefore synth and electronic music as a whole, into a popular consciousness, where it remains to this day.

At the time of the album's release, however, Wendy Carlos was transitioning. Having recently started hormone therapy,

the album thrust Wendy unexpectedly into the limelight, just as she was trying to keep a low profile in order to undergo her transformation. Although Wendy had thought of herself as a woman from well before [Switched-On Bach], her public persona was still Walter.[45]

Wendy Carlos was one of the first public personas to transition—her collaborator and close friend, Rachel Elkind said, "You have to remember this was 1968, there was one transsexual in the whole world that anybody had heard of. That was Christine Jorgensen."[46]

As a result, Carlos couldn't make live appearance and felt like she "lost a decade as an artist." She says:

I was unable to communicate with other musicians. There was no feedback. I would have loved to have gone onstage playing electronic-music concerts, as well as writing for more conventional media, such as the orchestra.[47]

Columbia Records became uninterested in Carlos since she couldn't make live appearances, expressing a need for a "real" artist "they could have in pictures and stuff, and running around concertizing."[48]

Wendy make a single concert appearance with the St. Louis Orchestra—however, it proved to be nightmarish for Carlos.

Just before the show, Wendy "began to cry hysterically" and informed Rachel that she did not want to proceed with the performance. She had arrived at the theater dressed in women's clothing, but now the necessity of getting up in front of all those people as Walter, was, understandably, overwhelming. In what must have been a desperate the

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[45]Trevor Pinch and Frank Trocco. *Analog Days: The Invention and Impact of the Moog Synthesizer.* Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2002.

[46] Pinch, *Analog Days*.

[47] Pinch, *Analog Days*.

[48]Pinch, *Analog Days*.

show-must-go-on spirit, Carlos "touched up his face, which the estrogen had softened.

He pasted on sideburns, stuffed his long hair under a man's wig, ran an eye- brow pencil

over his smooth chin to simulate 5 o'clock shadow," and went on with the concert. After

this experience "Walter Carlos refused to perform in public again.[49]

The music industry—and culture as a whole—has since made strides in transgender acceptance. Take Kim Petras, a prominent hyperpop artist who emulates pop stars like Katy Perry and Britney Spears with her hyperfeminine, bubblegummy music. She began receiving hormone therapy at the age of 12, paid for by German healthcare, and had full gender reassignment surgery by the age of 16. For the New York Times,

"I don't care about being the first transgender teen idol at all," she said, before taking a

final spin on a seat swirled with candy cane colors. "I just want to be known as a great

musician."[50]

Nowadays within the music industry, queerness has become more accepted, thanks to pioneers like Wendy Carlos and Kim Petras, and additionally more mainstream artists like Frank Ocean and, more recently, Lil Nas X. However, hyperpop has emerged as a bright spot—a cohesive grounds for queer artists to express themselves and interact with queer fans.

As one scholar I stumbled across in my baroque pop research states, "genres should not be viewed as lists of musical characteristics but rather as an expression of identity enacted through the interaction between performers and listeners."[51] This expression of identity is largely at the heart of what makes hyperpop, hyperpop—not the scraping sound effects or the sugary melodies.

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[49]Pinch, *Analog Days*.
[50]Jim Farber. "Kim Petras Just Wants to Be a Pop Star." *The New York Times*, 17 Mar 2018.
[51]Sara Gulgas. "Looking Forward to the Past: Baroque Rock's Postmodern Nostalgia and the Politics of Memory," 2017.

In order to help me orient myself in terms of music scenes and how they affect culture as a whole, I looked at Dick Hebidge's 1979 book *The Meaning of Style*.

In the anthology where I accessed this piece, the editor explains, "In many ways, Hebidge is tackling the same questions that take center stage in Judith Butler's feminist work. What room is available for selves to maneuver within the signifying systems that constitute them and the conditions within which they live and act?" This is also one of the big questions I'm tackling with hyperpop—part of the reason Butler's work is so important here, too. Hebidge looks particularly at British youth subcultures of the '70s, notably punk—characterized by both music and dress, and a particularly anarchist agenda. Hebidge opens Chapter 6 by saying "subcultures represent 'noise'"—a deliberate attempt to eschew meaning.

However, the "signifying systems" within which subcultures work almost make it impossible to produce "noise"—to step outside these "signifying practices." Hebidge states that "resignification" of mainstream commodities may be one way to accomplish this—taking the materials of prevailing systems and imbuing them with new meaning. However, mainstream culture also seems to succeed in incorporating and defusing subcultures in the end. While this can be somewhat progressive, since such a process incorporates the radical meanings of the subculture into the mainstream, it also dilutes it in the process. Hebidge seems somewhat pessimistic here—which makes me wonder whether radical subcultures can achieve some sort of effect on the mainstream on their own accord, instead of simply being subsumed, reinterpreted, for the mainstream.

As an emergent genre, hyperpop hasn't yet been subsumed into the greater culture. So, it can still be reactionary and radical, opposed to whatever is mainstream culture. Therefore, it makes sense that hyperpop could be on the cutting edge of whatever is replacing postmodernism,

what has long been the prevalent Western mode of thinking about arts and culture, and which is now, many believe, coming to an end. Furthermore, as a haven for queer artists, hyperpop opposes a greater music industry that is not always receptive to fringe identities, or one that tokenizes them.

In November, one of my favorite hyperpop artists, Dorian Electra, dressed in their most ridiculous costume yet. Dorian, who's known for putting on a variety of hypermasculine personas like the sugar daddy, the business mogul, the incel, among others—dressed as a stereotypical young woman, Starbucks cup in hand, engagement ring in view, cheery scarf around the neck (on Twitter, this look would be referred to as "Christian girl autumn"). I'm not exaggerating when I say this is the strangest Dorian has ever looked. I have never seen someone so expertly make white femininity look like a costume.

This isn't the first time Dorian has parodied a feminine persona—on their 2016 song "Mind Body Problem," they said it was "about femininity as a performance—when being a 'woman' feels like putting on a costume and the costume doesn't seem to come off with the clothes."

Dorian's act, and actually many hyperpop acts, also call to mind Judith Butler's seminal text *Gender Trouble*. A formative text in queer theory, Butler's arguments within the text gather around the take that gender is performance—a repetition of "received meanings" that "construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self." That is, gender is "performed," through imitation, and through this performance, it pretends to be an essential and natural part of identity. Parody, and particularly drag, is used to disrupt and destabilize the received categories of gender, revealing the ruse.

While Dorian puts on the persona of a brawny male who smashes glass on their head in nearly every music video, for Dorian, they are "not a woman dressing as a man. It's more complex."[52] Dorian immediately destabilizes the binary that Butler lays out as insidiously buried through imitation and performance. With vocals that pitch between a stereotypically female range and a masculine one, sometimes within the same verse of a song, Dorian's discography is a prime example of the "parody" that can work to reveal the construction of gender.

Dorian Electra puts these themes pretty succinctly in an interview for *The Guardian*: The core of my being is not gendered at all – even 'gender fluid' is a form of identity that can put somebody in a box."[53] Dorian Electra was assigned female at birth and now identifies as genderfluid, though they perform the hypermasculine male in their variable songs and music videos.[54]

Here, Dorian echoes Butler's sentiments: gender is performance, not identity. Though gender masquerades as an essential aspect of identity, parody destabilizes this notion of the natural. Earlier Butler points out that identity must be disrupted from the inside—

> *The more insidious and effective strategy it seems is a thoroughgoing appropriation and redeployment of the categories of identity themselves...in order to render that category, in whatever form, permanently problematic.*[55]

The "gender trouble" created by queer artists like Dorian Electra is a reflection of Butler's biggest sentiments, but the idea of disruption from the inside doesn't stop at gender. Take Dorian Electra's parodic take on hustle culture in "Career Boy," in which they gloat about "[loving] the pain" of working extra shifts, staying up all night, "hanging out in the breakroom,"

[52] Ben Beaumont-Thomas, "Pop sensation Dorian Electra: 'I'm not a woman dressing as a man. It's more complex,'" *The Guardian,* 12 Jul. 2019.
[53] Beaumont-Thomas, "Pop sensation Dorian Electra."
[54] Beaumont-Thomas, "Pop sensation Dorian Electra."
[55] Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* Routledge, 1990.

and in an act of performative machismo, once again smash glass—in this case a coffee pot—on their head.[56]

       With the Internet, gender performance occurs within a different realm of identity—the Internet persona. In this case, performance becomes even more fluid. The line from SOPHIE's song "Faceshopping"—"I'm real when I [photo]shop my face"—suggests the reality of performance and affirmation that comes with Internet tools such as vocal modulation and photo editing.[57]

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[56] Dorian Electra. *Flamboyant.* Dorian Electra, 2019.
[57] SOPHIE. *Oil of Every Pearl's Un-Insides.* MSMSMSM, 2018.

"Even though we're hyper-connected we're also extremely isolated": How hyperpop resides in cyberspace and critiques Internet culture

You can be anywhere when you listen to music—a feature of contemporary technology that sets music aside from early generations of record players and, before that, live orchestras. But you don't even really need headphones to experience music out and about—department stores, other peoples' cars rumbling by, parties, concerts—all are avenues for impromptu music-exposure.

Music also resides in memory. These situational experiences—of hearing one type of music in a Kohl's department store and another blasting from the Chevy Impala in the next lane over—often fall along specific genre lines, and therefore determine the mental times and places certain songs take us to. But these aren't physical locations. They are types of places; vaults of memory that generalize and alter over time. They are places tied with time. Unlike a painting that exists all at once, music needs time to fulfill itself.

An album on its own can also take you somewhere. Probably the most clear-cut, easy-listening concept album is Kid Cudi's Man on the Moon, which takes you through Cudi's life with narrative moments and storybook-like phrasing. Additionally, ambient sounds in songs—birds, owls, industrial noises, rain is probably my favorite—can put you in a certain places. Just thinking of songs and bands named after places—"Mildenhall" by The Shins, for example, or band Chicago, or Calexico.

More expansively looking at genre and scenes, different music scenes can flourish in different places. Physical "scenes" are the hallmarks of some of the most culturally relevant genres of the past (punk, for example). Britrock is British, there's no Nashville without country, no Japanese ska without Jamaica and Japan. Some genres are inextricable from their locations—but more particularly, their locales. Midwest emo is obviously from the midwest—but not just because Ohio and Illinois are physically located where they are, but because of the suburban sprawl and the depressing cold weather and the lack of things to do. Midwest emo can exist even if it's produced in Texas.

Hyperpop, beyond its roots with the British label PC Music in London, doesn't really have a place, or a scene. At least in real life. The scene exists on the Internet—in cyberspace. Cyberspace doesn't exist in actual space—thus the prefix—but it does, indeed, exist.

Cyberspace is a place that is accessible at nearly all times and from any place with a Wi-Fi signal. However, cyberspace has no physical location—meaning it relies heavily on a curated, conceptualized locale to make up for its lack of real-world existence. However, physical places have a stability that cyberspaces do not. Whether "being online" is a stable existence, and virtual concerts will continue to maintain the same appeal once we can once again attend concerts in person, is yet to be seen. As of this moment, however, hyperpop is only growing in popularity.

Hyperpop also has a vested interest in satirizing all the weird parts of Internet culture. Rather than always focusing on a cyber-futurist aesthetic, artists take loads of pop culture references—from the unhealthy masculinity of the Internet "incel" (satirized in Dorian Electra's singles "Gentleman" and "M'Lady") to praise/contempt for nightcore and Elon Musk respectively (in Fraxiom and gupi's "Thos Moser")—and blend them together in eclectic tracks,

resulting in what can be described as the epitome of bad-good taste. Honestly, "Thos Moser" is the most ludic track I've encountered in a long time. It includes endless pop-culture reference after reference in such an irreverent way that I can't even begin to fathom that it has any intent at all besides trying to induce pure mania. It's the farthest thing from serious that I could imagine any one thing being. It's, as one newspaper put it, as if the Internet had a fever dream and it was condensed into this one track.

In October, Dorian reignited that approach with the release of their sophomore album *My Agenda*, a dive into some of the most insular and averted corners of Internet subculture: the alt-right and incelism.[58] In this album, Dorian platforms far-right propaganda on a queer stage, aesthetically co-opting "Neck Beard" fashion to satirize and "reclaim [the] edginess" of far-right Internet communities.[59]

Take Dorian's treatment in "Edgelord" (featuring Rebecca Black—yes, "Friday" Rebecca Black), where, dressed in a Joker get-up (a character which has become a cultural touchstone for the alt-right), Dorian parodies the ambiguous irony—whose function is to provoke and aggravate, while remaining inculpable—used by pro-Trump "shitposters." Or the title track "My Agenda," on which Dorian remixes far-right conspiracies to create an alternate universe in which a militant gay agenda is "out here turning the frogs / homosexual" (a nod to alt-right radio host Alex Jones's comment from 2015 about chemicals in the water "turning the friggin' frogs gay"). "My Agenda" also features vocals from Russian feminist pop-activists Pussy Riot, and additionally, from all-American band Village People (known for having their gay anthem

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[58] Dorian Electra. *My Agenda.* Dorian Electra, 2020.
[59] Nadya Tolokonnikova, et al. "Dorian Electra Has the Gay Agenda on Full Blast for Their New Album." *GAY TIMES*, 19 Oct. 2020.

"YMCA" played in "nearly every straight American wedding" as well as during Trump rallies, in what one critic calls an obvious form of camp).[60]

According to FLOOD Magazine, Electra was pushed to create this album while researching far-right online spaces. This prompted them to "think about the vulnerability of such individuals and how simply dismissing them can be unproductive and in turn aid in reinforcing the political divide."[61] Dorian asks, "What is driving people to do that? How is it that they have so much self-hate or hate toward others?"[62] In discussing the rise of the alt-right within the past five to ten years, multiple aspects are important to note: Donald Trump's 2016 election, for one, which emboldened alt-right sentiments. A second is the provocations that appeal with their "edge" to the straight white men who are often drawn to the radical right. A third is social media algorithms.

One article from the *New York Times* presents a profile on a former-white-supremacist-turned-leftist who found their way to the alt-right by innocuously surfing YouTube, and then being sucked into a rabbithole of right-wing conspiracy theories and propaganda.[63] Far from a rare phenomenon, it's part of the monetary push of YouTube encouraging users to stay on the website, typical of social media and spotlighted on Netflix's documentary *The Social Dilemma*.[64] However, it's also broadly tied to how the Internet functions for community-building as a whole. Dorian reiterates it like this: "Even though we're hyper-connected we're also extremely isolated, and that can also breed really toxic internet communities and internet cultures like incels and the misogyny and self-loathing that things like that can fuel."[65]

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[60] Spencer Kornhaber, "Donald Trump's Reelection Campaign Is Total Camp." *The Atlantic*, 30 Oct. 2020.
[61] Jack Irvin, "On Their New Album, Dorian Electra's Agenda Is to Make You Think." *FLOOD*, 15 Oct. 2020.
[62] Irvin, "On Their New Album."
[63] Kevin Roose, "The Making of a YouTube Radical." *The New York Times*, 8 June 2019.
[64] *The Social Dilemma*. Directed by Jeff Orlowski, Exposure Labs, 26 Jan. 2020. *Netflix*.
[65] Irvin, "On Their New Album."

Dorian also asks the question of how the left "can be better at communicating these concepts to people without pushing them further to the right and making matters worse."[66] In *The New York Times'* profile, Mr. Cain, the young man drawn to the alt-right by YouTube, explains being brought back by leftists who borrowed the tropes of the alt-right—like referring to their particular language used by alt-right creators—and who "hijacked" the YouTube algorithm by talking about the same content as alt-right YouTubers.[67] Dorian describes a similar type of infiltration: say, on Spotify, a Trump supporter includes The Village People's "Macho Man" on a playlist because "it's Trump rally music! ...And then the next recommended song after Macho Man is 'My Agenda' because Village People are on it. You know, it's this idea of infiltrating mainstream culture in a way that can breed openness and acceptance and more inclusiveness and diversity. Like how Village People have."[68]

Village People infiltrated the mainstream through their campy aesthetic in the late '70s. Now, camp has become a hallmark of the right: "It's glaring that as the right wing gorges on camp and campiness, much of the queer-friendly popular culture of the late 2010s has taken a more sober approach."[69]

A recent *New York Times* piece states that Donald Trump's election killed political comedy on the left.[70] According to the article, "in the Trump era, liberals have drifted away from irony even as the right has embraced it—not just as a rhetorical tool but also as a means to advance joke versions of its actual agenda, in ways that make it hard to distinguish between the two."[71] This is the irony characteristic of the "shitposts" used by online alt-right users, the "edgelords" Dorian satirizes, who revise the seriousness of their statements when called out for

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[66] Irvin, "On Their New Album."
[67] Roose, "The Making of a YouTube Radical."
[68] Tolokonnikova,"Dorian Electra Has the Gay Agenda."
[69] Spencer Kornhaber, "Donald Trump's Reelection Campaign Is Total Camp." *The Atlantic*, 30 Oct. 2020.
[70] Dan Brooks, "How President Trump Ruined Political Comedy." *The New York Times*, 7 Oct. 2020.
[71] Brooks, "How President Trump Ruined Political Comedy."

it. For the left, there is no room for the "ambiguous irony" used by the alt-right, spearheaded by Trump himself—the doublespeak that functions both as a joke and as seriousness, depending on audience reaction.[72] Rather, the left must respond with "straightforward indignation" to an already absurd news cycle—"In order to avoid having their jokes mistaken for dog whistles, the 'Daily Show' staff has learned to let the crowd know when it is kidding. Right-wing comedians have made an entire style out of doing the opposite."[73]

Father John Misty puts it best when describing the 2016 election:

We're now in a post-satire world because this is the stupidest thing that could ever happen. It's like bad comedy. I just can't totally verbalise how tragic I think it is. I feel like the boy who cried wolf. All this scepticism and cynicism that I have felt my whole life became so literal.[74]

This sort of cynicism collapsed in the 21st century to let in the New Sincerity of artists like Father John Misty. New Sincerity distinguishes itself from the cynical irony of postmodernism by opting for a sincere, vulnerable approach. However, this sort of sober approach isn't effective in stirring the sort of sentiments that emboldens politics, for example. At least, it hasn't been effective for political comedy, and neither has it been effective for steering those most vulnerable to ideas of white supremacy away from it.

Again, Dorian says:

[People on the far-right] feel like they have the monopoly on edginess and saying it like it is and being real, whereas the left is like, fascist about language and pronouns and all this stuff. That's kind of the narrative that they've constructed. I feel like the left traditionally had edginess on its side. It was always the left who was the cool

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[72] Brooks, "How President Trump Ruined Political Comedy."
[73] Brooks, "How President Trump Ruined Political Comedy."
[74] Lynskey, "Father John Misty: 'I Get Sick Pleasure."

underground. They were saying things that were inappropriate or not allowed to be said

or being censored. And now people on the right – like radical far right YouTubers who

are being banned from Reddit and stuff – are saying it's contributing to this feeling of

them being oppressed, which is also very dangerous. You know, that like helps strengthen

somebody's political identity.[75]

It's this "edginess" that Dorian most broadly reasserts for the left and for queerness.

I feel like, if we reclaim edginess and reclaim those things that are cool, in a way we can

push by winning over people that are attracted to those kinds of things.[76]

One particular online tool of alt-right supporters that I've already mentioned is shitposting. Shitposting is a tactic to derail discussion by inserting utter meaninglessness, in the vein of ambiguous irony, in order to provoke. It's this sort of action that Dorian satirizes in "Edgelord"—but as Wikipedia points out—shitposting isn't necessarily a one-sided tactic.[77] Shitposting has been described as a sort of Dadaist approach for the right: meaningless, meant for provocation and little else. However, Dorian isn't the only one borrowing flippancy and ambiguous irony as tools for the left and for queerness. If ambiguous irony and a quasi-Dadaist approach can serve as tools for provocateurs on the far right, then it can serve the same purpose for hyperpop artists concerned with more left-wing politics.

Take duo Food House. Composed of nonbinary artist Fraxiom and son of legendary skateboarder Tony Hawk, producer Gupi, Food House is, in few words, utter chaos. Their first album, self-titled, is, according to Paper magazine,

Like shotgunning the entirety of Tumblr, Reddit and 4Chan at the height of the Homestuck

fandom, food house's breakout sounds like mainlining cringe comps and bass-boosted

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[75] Tolokonnikova,"Dorian Electra Has the Gay Agenda."
[76] Tolokonnikova,"Dorian Electra Has the Gay Agenda."
[77] "Shitposting," *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 21 Dec. 2020.

TikToks all while listening to every top 10 pop hit between the years of 2010 and 2013 at

the same time. It's the type of music that makes what we typically think of as hyperpop

look decaf.[78]

Food House sentimentally refers to areas like the parking lot outside of a joint

CVS/Target and a 24-hour Barnes and Noble, while additionally punching the listener with

non-sequiturs like: "I don't wanna die / Hyperpop playlist, Spotify."[79] Fraxiom is just as flippant

when they talk about right-wing conspiracies like "that 5G mind control" among their infinite

references to obscure '10s Internet culture.[80]

It's this type of post-irony, of nuttiness, of edginess, that seems effective at

infiltration—take 100 gecs' smash hit "Money Machine," an extremely ludic, simultaneously

satiric and yet serious piece of music, that blew up hyperpop to begin with.

Hyperpop, to be honest, has a general obsession with technology—vocal modulation,

computers, femmebots, cars, photoshop. Many for good reasons—photoshop can be affirming, as

can vocal modulation, as can inhabiting an immaterial body online, for those who don't identify

with the gender they are assigned at birth . The other side of technology for hyperpop is in the

actual production of the music—not just how it's shared, but its fundamentally electric and

computer-generated nature. Additionally, the online concerts that producer A.G. Cook described

as his "ideal musical landscape" form an important cornerstone for the genre, since the genre has

only blown up within the last year under COVID regulations. Hyperpop wouldn't otherwise

exist. However, Fraxiom raps about an unhealthy relationship with social media on Food House,

"I need to get off Twitter because it gives me fucking mental illness."[81] Yet for as much as I'm on

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[78] Matt Moen, "Food House Turns the Snare Up One More Level." *PAPER*, 6 Nov. 2020.
[79] food house. *food house.* Dog Show Records, 2020.
[80] food house. *food house.*
[81] food house. *food house.*

Twitter, I regularly see tweets from Fraxiom on my timeline. Other artists like Rina Sawayama share the same sentiments, as she expresses on her song "Cyber Stockholm Syndrome." About the song, she says: "the digital world can offer vital support networks, voices of solidarity, refuge, escape. That's what 'Cyber Stockholm Syndrome' is about: pessimism, optimism, anxiety, and freedom."[82]

A principle organizing factor for hyperpop is the Internet; it's integrated within the basic fabric of the genre. There is no outside perspective from which to criticize the Internet for those artists who are indebted to it for their music. As *The Social Dilemma* puts it, "you can't put the genie back in the bottle"—meaning, there is no reversal from the Internet.[83] One approach to the disadvantages of the Internet is accelerationism, or pushing things to their logical end/collapse by heightening them. This makes sense in terms of how hyperpop treats gender, for example. However, accelerationism usually refers to capitalism. Wikipedia distinguishes between the two branches of accelerationism: "Left-wing accelerationism attempts to press 'the process of technological evolution' beyond the constrictive horizon of capitalism by repurposing modern technology for socially beneficial and emancipatory ends. Right-wing accelerationism supports the indefinite intensification of capitalism itself, possibly in order to bring about a technological singularity."[84] It so happens that accelerationism has also been co-opted by an extreme version of the alt-right to argue for an acceleration of racial conflict.

Somehow, the Internet and the alt-right have become mutually supportive endeavors. As left-wing accelerationism intimates, the Internet, as it exists now, is not "socially beneficial" or "emancipatory." It's primarily a money-making machine for corporations, set on selling users'

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[82] Owen Myers, "Rina Sawayama's Glitchy R&B Captures The Realities Of Living & Loving Online." *The FADER*, 10 Nov. 2017.
[83] *The Social Dilemma*. Directed by Jeff Orlowski, Exposure Labs, 26 Jan. 2020. *Netflix*.
[84] "Accelerationism." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 19 Dec. 2020.

attention even if it means pushing them down alt-right rabbit holes. The ways in which the Internet is designated as a means to community is conducive to corporate money-making practices, but in the process it does become a means to a sort of "cyber stockholm syndrome." Hyperpop artists addressing this are essentially co-opting the internet to push a conversation that is antithetical to how the internet currently operates—and in the process, hopefully brings light to its shortcomings, and additionally further jolts the gears for change.

Hyperpop, a fast developing genre that thrives on cyber involvement, is concerned with these same shared online spaces that serve as gathering grounds for the alt-right, spaces that all function by basically the same rules.While talking about the alt-right to such an extent seems to be a divergence from focusing on the critiques of hyperpop, in many ways it seems the microgenre has evolved as a combative opponent to far-right communities. Not only is hyperpop very obviously a politically left-leaning entity, but as a relatively niche online music community, it occupies the same position on the fringes of the mainstream—and the mainstream, whether knowingly or not, gets influenced by these surrounding entities.

Conclusion

At this point, I'm left with one main question: What's going to happen to hyperpop? Will it fizzle out? Be swallowed by mainstream music? Remain a niche, relatively unknown music genre for the rest of eternity? It's hard to say. When the music industry itself is so volatile—one year ago, no one would have guessed that TikTok would be determining the biggest hits; one decade ago, no one could have predicted the advent of streaming—making any sort of prediction seems to be jumping the gun.

What I know for certain is that there's something significant about hyperpop, both in terms of sound and influence. Never before had I heard music that was so counterintuitively addictive, so seriously ludic, so joyfully sincere. Seeing my friends turn from haters to fans has been unexpected to say the least.

Tracking the development of hyperpop—from before it even had a single name—gave me a weird sense that I couldn't rely on hindsight for anything. While I wrote, I had to constantly reassess past conclusions I had come up with and expand my understanding to include newer artists and sounds. It felt like I wasn't working on stable grounds and even now, the sense of the passage of time is apparent in my work. Whether my thinking will hold up in a few months is yet to be seen, and putting a conclusion seems antithetical to the genre when there's so much more that could happen. I did my best to leave things open-ended, to engage in writing about hyperpop in a way that was exploratory, not intending to cement a certain verdict or persuade the reader of a certain take. It feels like all I've written is a beginning—a beginning for a genre that will undoubtedly grow and enter new realms, and therefore interact with the greater culture within which it's situated in new ways.

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