
Soundcloud Rap and Alien Creativity

Transforming Rap and Popular Music through Mumble Rap

ABSTRACT In this paper I argue that the SoundCloud rap movement of the 2010s signalled not only a crisis of the rap-image (the specific ways in which rap had been traditionally represented and produced), but also a moment of intense aesthetic creativity and experimentation. Following Luciana Parisi's notion of alien thinking and Kodwo Eshun's work on Afrofuturism, I see the SoundCloud rap movement as exhibiting a type of alien creativity, existing outside the human but having real effects upon the human aesthetic experience. Through techniques such as Auto-Tune, mumbling, repetition, ad-libs, triplets, rappers were able to create a radically new aesthetic form that pushed the limits of digital music production and listening. I present SoundCloud rap tracks as virtualities of aesthetic origination, with rappers and producers playing with the alien, the unknown, the incomputable and the incomprehensible, which are provided to them via cybernetic technologies. These virtualities become ways of bringing forth the alien in the form of new syntaxes, new meanings, new aesthetics and new modes of being, pushing the bounds of rap and popular music.

KEYWORDS SoundCloud, Mumble Rap, Alien Creativity, Virtuality

INTRODUCTION

SoundCloud rap was a microgenre of rap music that emerged on the online audio streaming platform SoundCloud in the 2010s. It was a movement that was consistently dismissed as a degradation of rap's form and technique. For this it was given the pejorative name *Mumble Rap* by many in the rap and popular music mainstream. The term referred to SoundCloud rapper's unclear vocal deliveries (*mumbling*), as well as lack of lyrical content, absence of *message* and inconsistency of *flow*. To rappers of another era these new rappers were hardly rapping at all.

The SoundCloud rappers did not seem to care. The whole movement seemed to be about a radical break or a transmogrification rather than a respectful continuation of Rap Culture. When radio hosts asked these young rappers to freestyle, they simply responded with a spontaneous outpour of "Uh", "Yeah" or "Huh?" Most of these "rappers" did not even consider themselves rappers. Lil Uzi Vert was "a Rock Star" and Lil Yaughty was "I dunno. I would say artist. But, then—I'm just here." These rappers were not influenced by rap. They did not listen to Pac or Biggie. As Lil Xan said, they are "boring." Instead, they cited Pop Punk, Nu-metal, Chris Martin and Adele as their influences. The rap

media, which consistently ridiculed and dismissed this popular movement (coining the derogative phrase *mumble rap*), were completely unaware that the entire game had changed.

SoundCloud rap grew out of Gen Z culture, particularly that relating to the Internet. This was a culture of consumption that did not follow strict stylistic boundaries. There were no longer set tribes of genre; just an *all you can eat* buffet open to all. Rappers were no longer rappers. Instead, they were “just here,” which meant that they were existing only momentarily in one form, before quickly transforming into another. From rapper to Rockstar to fashionista to influencer, all within a lifecycle completely determined by the consumption patterns of Gen Z and, more importantly, the technologies they used to perform this consumption. It was within this new Internet-based matrix of consumption that SoundCloud rap emerged.

SOUNDCLOUD RAP'S STYLE

With SoundCloud rap there was an emphasis placed on melody over lyrics and rhyme, as well as a freedom of flow, where artists such as Lil Uzi Vert or Trippie Redd moved effortlessly from rapping and singing to yelling or sighing. Here, the flow was more like a musical instrument than a medium for a message.

Lil Uzi Vert's flow was smooth and laid back and moved between quick sputters (like an Uzi gun) to smooth Auto-Tuned guitar-like riffs. Here, the lyrics were completely overcome by the melody, which existed as a form on its own. Here, the medium *is* the message. The *feeling of the flow* was what was important, rather than the delivery of *the message* (which seemed to belong back with Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five).

This free play of flow was supported by the opening up of the track itself, where the beat was redesigned to be more spacious in order to allow both the melody and the popular triplet flows to dominate. The four-on-the-floor rhythm pattern was exchanged for a more drawn-out spacious *trap* pattern. Here, the snare no longer appeared on beats two and four, but instead was accented on beat three. This snare sound was usually produced by a Roland *TR-808* drum machine plugin. Often the 808 drums would also play a melodic bass line, such as heard in Lil Uzi Vert's *XO Tour Llif3*. Here, rather than acting as a synthetic drum kit, the 808 plays a bass line and gives both sub-bass and extra tonal content to the track. The bass line often does not simply accent the first beat of the bar, but also plays around with the beat in a contrapuntal fashion. These layers play with the temporal structure of the track.

With the beat opened up the rapper had more space for triplets to appear with added emphasis or for the melody to seep in and saturate the track. Often the rapper would rap in triplets, which would be complemented by hi-hats that had been programmed in a similar triplet pattern. At the same time, the hi-hats were often chopped up and made to move in and out of spitfire triplet patterns and then back into a standard quarter note accenting.

The importance of triplets cannot be overstated.¹ A triplet occurs when three notes are played over one beat. A triplet is a tuplet, which is an irrational rhythm that is introduced into a bar, but which is not usually permitted by the time signature. The origins of the triplet flow in rap goes back to Lord Infamous in the late 1980s, but most people point to Migos' *Versace* for its increased popularity. In fact, most people now refer to the triplet flow as *the Migos flow*.

1 2 3 4 - 4/4 beat
1&a 2&a 3&a 4&a - triplet rhythms

Rather than looking at *Versace*, we can look at a triplet flow in Lil Uzi Vert's *XO Tour Llif3*

Stackin' (1&) my (a) bands (2) all (&) the (a) way (3) to (&) the (a) top (4)
All (1) the (&) way (a) 'til (2) my (&) bands (a) fallin' (3) over (4)
Every (1&) time (a) that you (2) leave your (3) spot (4)
Your (1) girlfriend (&a) call (1) me (&) like (a) "Come on (3) over" (4)
I (1) like (&) the (a) way (2) that (&) she (a) treat (3) me (&) gon (a)
Leave (4) you (&) won't (a)
Leave (1) me (&), I (a) call (2) it (&) that (a) Casa (3) nova (4)
She said I'm insane yeah
I might blow my brain out.

With this example we can see Lil Uzi Vert's notorious freedom of flow, where Uzi seems to carelessly glide in and out of rapid-fire triplet spits, changing the timing at will, slowing down at certain junctures and then speeding back up, all the while morphing into a sickly sweet croon. As Uzi raps in Migos' *Bad and Boujee*: "Switchin' my hoes like my flows (what?) Switchin' my flows like my clothes (like what?)." The point is not to try to consciously follow each rhythm and analyze each rhyme, but to allow its catchiness to ensnare you effortlessly. In fact, Uzi (like most SoundCloud rappers) does not really rhyme. Instead, Uzi uses repetition to add emphasis ("over" rhymes with "over") or simply pushes passed rhyming all together, focusing on the fluid rhythm and melodic qualities of his flow. Here, rhyming, which seeks to emphasize the meaning of a word or a line, is just as unimportant as *the message* of the track.

This does not mean that SoundCloud rap is meaningless or more so it means that its meaninglessness means something very specific, and this has nothing to do with semantic *meaning*.

THE LACK OF MESSAGE IS THE MESSAGE.

Following Susanne Langer,² I see SoundCloud rap as a perfect example of the essential *meaninglessness* of all music. For Langer, music is not discursive like language and does not

1. Ben Duinker, "Good things come in threes: triplet flow in recent hip-hop music," *Popular Music*, vol. 38, no. 3, (2019): 423–56, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/popular-music/article/good-things-come-in-threes-triplet-flow-in-recent-hiphop-music/99BC46987A0BF369A0A3CCFC54F1CDBB>.

2. Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (US: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953).

convey a meaning or message so much as it unfolds a form of feeling analogous to human feeling.

Jonah Hinebaugh³ equates SoundCloud rap with “abstract expressionism,” stating:

What draws these movements of “mumble rap” and abstract expressionism together is the focus of emotions and raw feelings rather than telling a life story and controlling the beat that realism movements focused on. Both abstract expressionism and “mumble rap” movements draw similar critiques, such as not having a clear message in the work or not showcasing the adequate skill.⁴

Rather than pigeonholing SoundCloud rap as *another type of abstract expressionism*, we could instead see it as revealing of the nature of *all* music and aesthetic forms in general. Following Langer, we can view the aesthetic object as a form of expression that moves away from language or discourse and instead attempts to bring forth “the natural form of feeling,” which is “something language as such—as discursive symbolism—cannot render.” Importantly, this is not the same as saying that the aesthetic is purely *emotional* and detached from logic and therefore *irrational* and *meaningless* in its nonsensicalness. Instead, as Langer notes, feelings are logical forms in themselves. At the same time, they are discontinuous with the logical forms of language.

As Langer notes, the aesthetic object is an unconsummated symbol that does not point towards a meaning beyond itself but instead expresses its own unique form of feeling *through its form*.⁵ Through the aesthetic object the listener is able to reach a level much deeper than any intellectual experience or any experience structured by language.⁶ The aesthetic object in its intertwining with human sentience, is able to work within the vital “life-rhythms” of human beings and in this way reground human experience within its own unique patterns and flows.⁷ The aesthetic object does not reflect a world outside of itself but instead reflects its own virtual world with its own unique form.

Similarly, SoundCloud rap did not just *reflect* the socio-political conditions of *the streets*⁸ nor did it simply *express* a contemporary culture of sex, drugs and fast cash. Rather, it created its own virtual world that the listener was drawn into. It did this not only through its lyricism but also through its music production.

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

SoundCloud rap took many of its aesthetic cues from trap music, a genre of Hip Hop that originated in the southern U.S. Trap (in the slang of Atlanta’s African American population) is a “typical wooden house from Atlanta’s devastated suburbs,

3. Jonah Hinebaugh, “Mumble rap is abstract expressionism for hip hop,” Crows Nest (2017), <http://crowsneststpete.com/2017/11/06/mumble-rap-is-abstract-expressionism-for-hip-hop/>.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 67

6. Ibid., 220

7. Ibid.

8. Michael Waugh, “Every time I dress myself, it go motherfuckin’ viral’: Post-verbal flows and memetic hype in Young Thug’s mumble rap,” *Popular Music* (39), 2, (2020): 208–32.

where drugs and other illegal businesses take place, and where a certain lifestyle is practiced.”⁹ The word trap also carries connotations of entrapment, where the trap can be seen as a place and a life-style that is hard to escape from.¹⁰ Trap music was both about and generated from the trap. The homemade studios where trap music was made were usually funded by the illegal activities that occurred within the traps. Further, it was in the surrounding neighborhood of the trap, at nightclubs, strip clubs and street corners where the trap music was first consumed. Therefore, trap music was deeply connected to the underprivileged community from which it originated.¹¹ At the same time, the music was not only about the trap lifestyle and the general sense of *entrapment* that encompassed it. It also generated this state through dissociative hi-hats, drawn-out 808 bass lines and haunting synthesizers.

Similarly, SoundCloud rap had its roots in the experience of young African Americans trapped in a socio-economic condition of poverty, unstable family systems, gang violence, drug use and juvenile incarceration.¹² Artists like Ski Mask the Slump God and XXX Tentacion actually met in youth detention and decided to make music together with inexpensive music production equipment, such as used laptops and mobile phones.¹³ The artist names they chose referenced the psychiatric medication Xanax, popular among American youths suffering from generalized anxiety disorders. A Slump God is someone who is a god of being *slumped*, referring to a state of slouching or *leaning* (*lean* is another popular narcotic of SoundCloud rappers) after being overtaken by the tranquilizing effects of Xanax.¹⁴ The music itself not only reflected but also generated this state of tranquilization. SoundCloud rappers like Lil Uzi Vert or Lil Xan did not only rap about Xanax, but also created its effects through psychedelic sounds that warped and played with the listener’s sense of temporality. Here, the track itself created a *druggy* experience for the listener. An example of this is in Lil Pump’s 2017 *Gucci Gang*, where there are several temporal planes working together to create a sense of time being warped and stretched, producing what Charlie Harding and Nate Sloan¹⁵ have called a *druggy* state in the music. Harding and Sloan equate the feeling of Lil Pump’s track with his drug of choice *lean* (a drink mixing prescription cough syrup with soft drink and candy). Harding and Sloan say that the blending of temporal planes, from a slow “walk,” as they call it, to a “jog” and then a “run” tempo, creates in the listener a dissociation from “the stop-watch perception of time,” a time of punctuated temporal events occurring in clear successions. They add that Lil Pump’s repetitive “Gucci Gang” phrasing acts like a mantra, further slowing and warping time, as listeners get lost in the repetition.

9. Jernej Kaluza, “Reality of Trap: Trap Music and its Emancipatory Potential,” in *LAFOR Journal of Media Communication & Film*, 5, (2018): 25.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.

13. Sasha Leon, “Ski Mask the Slump God,” *Office Magazine* (2017), <http://officemagazine.net/ski-mask-slump-god>

14. Emma Garland, “How SoundCloud Rappers and Xanax Influenced Fashion,” *Vice* (2018), <https://www.vice.com/en/article/59kn3k/how-soundcloud-rappers-and-xanax-influenced-fashion>

15. Charlie Harding & Nate Sloan, “Gucci Gang and the Neural Substrate of Subjective Time Dilation” (2019), <https://switchedonpop.com/episodes/gucci-gang-and-the-neural-substrate-of-subjective-time-dilation>

In many SoundCloud rap tracks time is sped up with rapid-fire triplets. The irregular rhythm of the triplet does not so much create a recurring anchor point within the meter of the track, a sequence that periodizes time in a repetitive movement. Rather, it attacks the metrical structures of the track, filling in the spaces not to cement the track as a cohesive whole but to expand it out towards rupture. Again, the triplets do not form a coherent sequence that perfectly punctuates the 4/4 confines of each bar. This is seen with Migos, who structure their entire flow around triplets. Most other SoundCloud rappers exhibited more freedom and irregularity in their flow. The triplet was just one aesthetic option among many others that the rapper might call upon. The speed of triplet flows mixed with the repetition of lyrics and the morphing among rap, croon and mumble was about the deterioration of representation into a pure experience of the aesthetic itself.

Further, many of the side effects of Xanax, such as drowsiness, dizziness, nausea, mood swings and memory problems were brought forth in tracks where the elements of the track were dissociated from one another and only related through irregular rhythms (such as the kick beat that did not always land on the one and sometimes weaved in and out of 808 bass lines). Also, the rappers themselves tended to mumble their lyrics as if lobotomized or had succumbed to the drowsiness and fatigue associated with Xanax use. Further, the way rappers repeated lyrics over and over, as if they were instantly forgetting and trying to remember the lyrics all at the same time, intimated the memory loss and difficulty in concentration caused by Xanax. Other examples were the out-of-control flow, as well as the way in which the Auto-Tune seemed to overwhelm any lyrical content, as if the rapper were losing all sense of agency over the aesthetic form and was instead becoming overtaken by the “aesthetic consciousness” of the Auto-Tune itself.¹⁶

As Catherine Provenzano¹⁷ has noted, every new version of Auto-Tune seems to come with new functions, such as *Humanize* or *Flex-Tune*, which are said to not distort the singer’s expressive vocal features and allow human emotional expression to flourish, *humanizing* the technological. The interesting thing about SoundCloud rap is that the rappers embraced the distorting capacities of Auto-Tune. Distortion was key to the SoundCloud sound, from Auto-Tune and 808s to the lo-fi production techniques (recording directly into laptop microphones, little to no EQing) that produce a distorted mix. The sound of distortion is the sound of technological malfunction and meltdown, of a machine being pushed to its limit in an attempt to deliver an audio output beyond its maximum capacity. This embrace of Auto-Tune and distortion is an embrace of the non-human, of the alien—that which is ordinarily avoided in popular music as it can *alienate* listeners. This is because, as Provenzano¹⁸ says, Auto-Tune is a type of digital ventriloquism that strikes a nerve in listeners because “it alters the voice, the paradigmatic sonic

16. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (London: Bloomsbury, 1986).

17. Catherine Provenzano, “Auto-Tune, Labor, and the Pop-Music Voice,” In *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music*, ed. Robert Fink, Melinda Latour and Zachary Wallmark (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 159–84.

18. Catherine Provenzano, “Pitch Correction Software and Vocal Ecologies,” (2019), <https://vimeo.com/368364800>

site of communicated intimacy, the ‘natural’ sound that allows listeners direct access to an imaginary human body.”¹⁹ Auto-Tune transforms the human voice, literally distorting the “primary site of musical authenticity,”²⁰ making listeners relate not to a human being but a non-human voice attached to an alien subject. With SoundCloud Rap, it was as if the Auto-Tuned vocals, as alienated from the musical subject,²¹ reflected a different subjectivity, which was the subjectivity or consciousness of the aesthetic form itself, one that could only exist within the virtual world of the aesthetic, what I will call a *virtuality*.

VIRTUALITY

I follow Bruce Kapferer’s²² Deleuzian usage of *virtuality* in relation to his work on art and ritual. For Kapferer art and ritual *as virtuality* turn away from reality in order to act upon the very conditions and vital processes that generate lived reality. In this way the virtual is a creative and generative moment.

For Kapferer, the virtual is to be distinguished from the virtuality of cyber technology or the virtuality of an alternative reality, and is, instead, a term he draws from Gilles Deleuze’s understanding of the virtual as well as Langer’s²³ notion of virtuality in aesthetic processes. Here, art and ritual gather a multiplicity of aesthetic and affective forces that are able to construct a virtuality that is “really real,” “a complete and filled-out existential reality” that is distinct from the reality outside of it.²⁴ The virtuality allows people to pull away from ordinary reality in order to come into contact with vital life processes, the very processes found in the everyday construction of reality.

Kapferer notes the chaotic and continuously forming, merging and flowing nature of everyday human realities.²⁵ Drawing from Deleuze and Felix Guattari²⁶ (1988), Kapferer uses the term “chaosmos” to get at this chaotic dimension of reality, which is “fractal-like, always changing and shifting, immanent within and structuring differentiating in form, crosscutting and intersecting as persons move through space and alter standpoint.”²⁷ In contrast, the virtuality becomes a “slowing down of the tempo of everyday life” and a “holding in abeyance” of some of the vital processes of lived reality.²⁸ It is therefore

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ragnhild Brøvig-Hanssen and Anne Danielsen, *Digital Signatures: The Impact of Digitization on Popular Music Sound* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2016).

22. Bruce Kapferer, “Ritual Dynamics and Virtual Practice: Beyond Representation and Meaning,” in Don Handelman and Galina Lindquist, *Ritual in Its Own Right: Exploring the Dynamics of Transformation* (US: Berghahn Books, 2004), 35–54.

_____. “Beyond symbolic representation: Victor Turner and variations on the themes of ritual process and liminality,” in *Soumen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society* (2008), 33 (4), 5–25.

23. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 37

24. Ibid., 47.

25. Kapferer, “Ritual Dynamics,” 48.

26. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1980).

27. Kapferer, 48. [“Ritual Dynamics” or “Beyond symbolic representation”?]

28. Ibid.

intimately connected to reality, not through reference or representation, but through its engagement with “the compositional structuring dynamics of life in the very midst of life’s processes.”²⁹ It is not a symbolic model of lived processes but “a method for entering within life’s vital processes and adjusting its dynamics.”³⁰ Art and ritual become technical sites “for entering within the dynamics of reality formation.”³¹ Kapferer uses *techne* in the ancient Greek sense of the word, as the capacity to *bring forth* and “change the very ground of being.”³² Art as *techne* has the power to “(re)orient human beings brought within their dynamic emotionally and mentally to their realities,” opening human beings to “new possibilities and sensibilities of action and understanding.”³³ It is in this way that it has the potential to reconfigure the lived realities of those who find themselves within its hold.

Art does not imitate life nor can life imitate art. Rather, art is fundamentally *other than reality*. As Langer once said, the most immediate impression from a work of art is its “otherness” from reality.³⁴ This *otherness* is art’s *virtuality* from reality, which is its ability to reformulate reality itself.

As Jacques Rancière and Radmila Djordjevic³⁵ note:

The task of art is to undo the world of figuration or of doxa, to depopulate the world, to clear off the terrain, sweep away all that is already on the canvas, on every screen; to decapitate³⁶ . . .

Art is not life. Though it is alive. As Francis Bacon³⁷ once said, “Art is an obsession with life and after all, as we are human beings, our greatest obsession is with ourselves.” Through art we human beings can experiment with ourselves and with our lived realities. Through art human beings are able to delve into the very processes that generate lived reality *outside of life, in art*.

ART AND THE INTERNET

In our current era we are increasingly reorienting and regenerating our lived realities *through* cybernetic technologies. In every mode of life people are surrounded by technologies that are no longer simply mediums for communication or *tools*, but rather integrate themselves intimately into the very processes of life itself. This has deeply transformed the aesthetic experience of music.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid.

31. Ibid., 49.

32. Ibid., 38.

33. Ibid., 4

34. Langer, *Feeling and Form*, 45.

35. Jacques Rancière and Radmila Djordjevic, “Is There a Deleuzian Aesthetics?” *Qui Parle* (2004), vol. 14, no. 2, 1–14, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20686174?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.

36. Ibid., 6.

37. Francis Bacon, “Interviews with David Sylvester (1966, 1971–73),” 1, <https://users.wfu.edu/laugh/painting2/bacon.pdf>.

SoundCloud rap was a symptom of this transformation, emerging almost solely through the Internet and the technologies used to access it. For instance, the lo-fi production of SoundCloud rap, often recorded on mobile phone or laptop in-built microphones, were then listened to via streaming apps on tinny low-fi iPhone speakers.³⁸ Even live SoundCloud rappers, such as Lil Uzi Vert, were known to perform *for* iPhones, moving out into the crowd to perform directly for people’s Snapchat, Instagram or TikTok streams.

Where previously performers were playing to an audience member *through* an iPhone (which they would most likely require the audience member to “turn off”), now artists performed only *to* iPhones, fully aware that the audience was not the audience member but the phone itself, which had instant access to an even larger audience of interconnected phones. Further, the majority of music videos were turning towards vertical displays in which the visual field was structured to fit perfectly within a smartphone display, rather than the horizontal visual field that had dominated television and computer viewing thus far. Everything, it seems, was being made to fit perfectly within the sensory-motor matrix of the mobile phone.

SoundCloud rap was an Internet, and particularly the Internet-as-it-is-experienced-via-the-mobile-phone, phenomenon. It was *rap for apps*—literally spawned on a music-streaming app.³⁹ It was all about followers, likes, trolls and streams, and the power was in the hands of those who were *naturals* on the Internet, i.e., Gen Z (those born between the late 1990s and early 2010s; those born after the Internet’s emergence)

The rapper Pete Rock beefed with SoundCloud rapper Lil Yachty through Twitter like Ice-T (the Law and Order actor and occasional rapper) beefing with Soulja Boy (the YouTube sensation) in 2008.⁴⁰ Yachty posted five short tweets, with the longest being 29 characters. Rock posted one long tweet that looked like a book blurb. Rock used Twitter like a typewriter and Yachty used it like an appendage, like it was second nature.⁴¹ Like Soulja Boy said of Ice-T, Pete Rock was “born before the Internet was created. How the fuck did you find me?” All Yachty needed to say was that Rock was “an old head” and the battle was won. The Internet was Yachty’s home turf.

All rap beefs would now happen within the framework of the Internet. Tekashi 6ix9ine seemed to beef with everyone, from 50 Cent, Trippie Redd, The Game, Chief Keef, Ludacris and Juice Wrld.⁴² It was impossible to know whether these beefs were based on actual conflict or were just marketing stunts. It did not seem matter. Tekashi lived off pure *clout*. With his face tattoos, rainbow grills, jigsaw Jesus piece and rainbow locks, Tekashi was Gen Z’s version of a Tamagotchi, a digital monster you fed likes,

38. Wayne Marshall, “Treble Culture,” *The Oxford Handbook of Mobile Music Studies* (2014), 2, 43–76

39. Alphonse Pierre, “How Rap’s SoundCloud Generation Changed the Music Business Forever,” (2019), <https://pitchfork.com/levels/how-raps-soundcloud-generation-changed-the-music-business-forever/>.

40. Carl Lamarre, “From Drake to Ice-T, A Guide to All of Soulja Boy’s Biggest Beef,” (2019), <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/8493802/soulja-boy-beefs-tyga-drake-kanye-west>.

41. Ted Simmons, “Pete Rock Doesn’t Approve of Lil Yachty,” (2016), <https://www.xxlmag.com/pete-rock-lil-yachty/>.

42. Michael Saponara, “A Timeline of 6ix9ine’s Controversial Beefs, Behavior & Canceled Shows,” (2018), <https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/hip-hop/8214817/6ix9ine-controversy-timeline>.

streams and clout to, who had been completely incubated within the translucent techno-womb of the Internet. Of course, the only figure he didn't beef with was Kanye West, who moved effortlessly through these circles, from meeting with Tekashi to meeting former President Trump, to featuring in a Lil Pump video. In fact, it could be argued that Kanye actually created SoundCloud rap, from his locked jaw (mumble) rapping on *The College Dropout* to his Auto-Tuned singing on *808s and Heartbreaks*.⁴³ Kanye was key to this freeing up of the human voice in rap, making it an instrument, like a guitar that can have any number of effects pedals plugged into it.

The main difference was that SoundCloud rappers used Auto-Tune in an age where there is less and less anxiety about Artificial Intelligence. When T-Pain and Kanye first started using Auto-Tune it was as if HAL 9000 had mutated through a distortion pedal—with all the techno-dystopian undertones still intact. Auto-Tune was, as Eshun⁴⁴ said of the vocoder, “an antagonistically non-human Voice of Doom.” Auto-Tune is now just another aesthetic device and part of our sonic environment, along with other synthesized voices like Siri or Google Assistant, veritable non-subjects populating our everyday.

SoundCloud rap was intimately intertwined with what is now our current technological condition but not in the way you might think. The force of the movement was not its ability to reflect *the times* but in the ways in which it gathered the various technological forces of the time (for instance, music production and social media technologies) in order to produce a *virtuality* in which the listener's very lived reality was reconfigured. The aesthetic experience of SoundCloud rap gained its full force in an era in which people were becoming *glued to their phones*, in the sense that the ontological *distality*, as Ivan Illich⁴⁵ would have said, between humans and technology no longer existed. This created the perfect situation in which these virtualities could have a greater force over their listeners. This is a situation in which the aesthetic object (the virtuality) is given a structuring agency over the listening subject. The subject-object phenomenological relationship is dissolved, and instead a de-subjectified listener emerges who is completely subjected to the structuring dynamics of the track.

THE TIME-IMAGE

In terms of temporality, it can create a situation similar to what Deleuze⁴⁶ described as a direct experience of the time-image.

43. Marc Lafrance, Lori Burns and Alyssa Woods, “Doing Hip-Hop Masculinity Differently: Exploring Kanye West's 808s & Heartbreak through Word, Sound, and Image,” *The Routledge Companion to Popular Music and Gender*, (New York: Routledge, 2012), 285–99.

See Also:

Julius Bailey, *The Cultural Impact of Kanye West*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

44. Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet, 1998), 80.

45. Ivan Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley*, ed. David Cayley (New York: Anasi, 2005).

46. Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*.

For Deleuze after World War II modern cinema began moving away from movement-images in which the characters on screen were placed through various sensory-motor situations. Instead, in post-war cinema the characters began having their sensory-motor linkages (their ability to act and react and constitute a scene) slackened. Further, they began being presented no longer as subjects but as viewers themselves, subject to states that no longer required their sensory-motor input.

As Deleuze notes:

The character has become a kind of viewer. He shifts, runs and becomes animated in vain, the situation he is in outstrips his motor capacities on all sides, and makes him see and hear what is no longer subject to the rules of a response or an action. He records rather than reacts. He is prey to a vision, pursued by it or pursuing it, rather than engaged in an action.⁴⁷

For Deleuze the sensory-motor situation of the traditional movement-image is “a setting which is already specified and presupposes an action with discloses it, or prompts a reaction which adapts or modifies it.”⁴⁸ But with modern cinema we find an abandonment of sensory-motor connections and the emergence of “a cinema of seeing” that “replaces action.”⁴⁹ The character is subjected to situations *out of their control*, which cannot be intervened upon through sensory-motor links. Further, the audio and visuals in this type of cinema are no longer tied to the character’s actions and reactions. Rather, they become pure optical and sound situations that do not extend into action any more than they are induced by an action.⁵⁰ The character that is no longer the classic cinema *subject* becomes *subjected* to another presence or consciousness that no longer requires their sensory-motor engagement. Here, the character no longer acts and can no longer act. Instead, they can only *see*.

If the character does seem to act, such as moving a hand, it is an action that is detached from the motor-function of the character. Here, the hand gesture becomes “a pure sensory image,” where “the hand relinquishes its prehensile and motor functions to content itself with a pure touching.”⁵¹ “The hand gesture does not produce an action/reaction (sensory-motor response). Rather, it is used as “a pure sensory image” that can make the audience grasp a situation that outstrips our sensory-motor capacities.⁵² This is a situation that is intolerable and unbearable, which is not necessarily a matter of scenes of terror or horror, but of “something too powerful, or too unjust, but sometimes also too beautiful.”⁵³ This is a situation that cannot be acted upon or perceived by the character’s intentional motor-sensory perception. Rather, the character can only *see* and become subjected to the situation’s unfolding. Deleuze ties in this sense of paralysis and passivity in with a European post-war psychology that disintegrated under the weight of the

47. Ibid., 3
 48. Ibid., 6
 49. Ibid., 9
 50. Ibid., 18
 51. Ibid., 12
 52. Ibid., 18
 53. Ibid.

horrors of World War II. This entailed “a break in the sensory-motor link and more profoundly in the link between man and the world.”⁵⁴

Deleuze also notes that in the cinema beyond the movement-image a new “principle of indeterminability, of indiscernibility” emerges, where “we no longer know what is imaginary or real, physical or mental” in a situation.⁵⁵ This is not because the characters are confused, but “because we do not have to know and there is no longer even a place from which to ask.”⁵⁶ Here, the real and the imagery run into each other and are each reflected in the other. In this type of cinema there are no longer flashbacks or daydreams to the past, which are clearly demarcated from the present situation. Rather, the past intertwines with the present around a “point of indiscernibility.”⁵⁷ The movement-image’s presentation of time, as a succession of shots moving through time and linearly spatializing it (past, present, future), is abandoned and, instead, we arrive at what Deleuze calls the time-image.

As Deleuze notes:

It is this reversal which means that time is no longer the measure of movement but movement is the perspective of time: it constitutes a whole cinema of time, with a new conception and new forms of montage⁵⁸.

In the cinema of the time-image movement no longer produces action/reaction but, instead, becomes captured under the weight of time itself. As Deleuze says, situations “no longer extend into action or reaction in accordance with the requirements of the movement-image.”⁵⁹ Instead, these are situations in which the character no longer knows how to respond through action and “ceases to experience and to act so that he enters into flight, goes on a trip, comes and goes.”⁶⁰ The character is transformed into a passive viewer who cannot act but only *see*. Again, this is “no longer a sensory-motor situation, but a purely optical and sound situation, where the seer [*voyant*] has replaced the agent [*actant*].”⁶¹ Further, in this new cinema of the time-image the camera is “no longer content sometimes to follow the characters” movement, sometimes itself to undertake movements of which they are merely the object, but in every case it subordinates description of a space to the functions of thought.”⁶² This subordination brings out a direct time-image: a presentation of time as it actually exists outside of its spatialization through the movement-image.

For Deleuze, following Henri Bergson, real time is non-linear, where the past coexists with the present as a virtuality that is stored and actualized in the present.

Deleuze sums up this thesis:

54. *Ibid.*, 173

55. *Ibid.*, 7

56. *Ibid.*

57. *Ibid.*

58. *Ibid.*, 22

59. *Ibid.*, 279

60. *Ibid.*

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.*, 23

The past coexists with the present that is has been; the past is preserved in itself, as past in general (non-chronological); at each moment time splits itself into present and past, present that passes and past which is preserved.⁶³

Therefore, for Deleuze, following Bergson, time is split in two and the past (the virtual) and the present (the actual) co-exist.

Deleuze uses the image of the crystal to demonstrate this co-belonging of the present with the past:

Time has to split at the same time as it sets itself out or unrolls itself: it splits in two dissymmetrical jets, one of which makes all the present pass on, while the other preserves all the past. Time consists of this split, and it is this, it is time, that we *see in the crystal* . . . We see in the crystal the perpetual foundation of time, non-chronological time, Cronos not Chronos⁶⁴.

In post-war cinema we get a post-phenomenological *subject* who can no longer exert its natural perception and its ontological positioning as a fixed subject through the sensory-motor situations on the screen. This is what Deleuze called the *crisis of the action-image* that occurred after the war.

SoundCloud rap seemed to produce a similar situation in which a *drugged-out* artist generated a track that would put the listening subject in a state of dissociation and paralyis, all through the internal dynamics of the track itself.

PURPCEPTION

In some ways, this has always been a capacity of music. In the 1960s The Who's Roger Daltry stuttered in *My Generation*, mimicking the stuttering motor skill impairment associated with amphetamine use.⁶⁵ As we have argued with SoundCloud rap, this impersonation actually created the experience of impairment that the drugs themselves induce.

Mods would down Purple Hearts (Drinamyl: a triangular blue tablet of amphetamine/barbiturate) or Black Bombers to fuel all-night parties. The Small Faces released *Here Comes The Nice* in 1967, which made explicit reference to amphetamine use among Mods. Where the Small Faces referenced amphetamines, Daltry actually *put on* a speed user, which created the *experience* of speed. When Daltry stutters "talkin" 'bout my g-g-g-generation . . . " *he is* creating the experience of speed in which the user's mouth cannot keep up with their over-stimulated mind.

Similarly, with SoundCloud rap *the mumbling was the point*—it was all about a lobotomized subject who was unable to announce its presence as a human subject through the human voice and human language. It was about creating this *experience*. With

63. Ibid., 85

64. Ibid., 84

65. Harry Shapiro, "Dances with Drugs: Pop Music, Drugs and Youth Culture," In *Drugs: Cultures, Controls and Everyday Life*, ed. Nigel South (London: Sage, 1999), 17–35.

SoundCloud rap this was the experience of Xanax, Lean and Purp (a potent strain of marijuana with purple *hairs* and deep green colorings).

It was less about perception (i.e., the listener finding their inner emotive life *re-presented* in the aesthetic object or exerting their sensory-motor schema through the dynamics of the track) and more about *PURPception*, where the listener was subjected to the experience of PURP *through* the technics of the aesthetic alone.

The SoundCloud rap track did not always provide a sensory-motor situation (the up/down tensions and releases of a standard three-minute pop song) in which the listening subject was able to exert their intentional consciousness. Rather, the tracks were short (often only two minutes or under) and did not utilize the standard verse-chorus-bridge formulas of pop music but instead relied on repetition and drugged-out technics.

ALIEN CREATIVITY

Here, a type of machinic creativity presides—a mixture of automatism and automaton. Rappers such as Trippie Redd and Lil Uzi Vert have described their creative process as a type of spontaneous expression, all the while being confined within the strict metrical and tonal boundaries of digital music production.⁶⁶ In his 2017 interview with Zane Lowe, Lil Uzi Vert describes how his creative process is all about being “effortless.” He discusses how, unlike other rappers like Jay Z, he does not recite lyrics that he has already formulated before he enters a studio. Rather, like other SoundCloud rappers, he simply comes up with everything on the spot, off the top of his head.⁶⁷ This *Csíkzentmihályian flow state* works over a pre-programmed beat that a producer will provide. The rapper thus *plays* within a space of machinic stricture, not an open canvas but a tight frame. This is sometimes reflected in the finished tracks themselves, with many of the spontaneously generated lyrics being repeated over and over again in a *copy and paste* style reflecting how music production is most often performed on digital music programs such as Logic, Ableton and Fruity Loops. This all occurs within a musical landscape increasingly dominated by not only AI-informed music production and streaming platforms, but AI artistry itself. This is a world in which human beings are increasingly at home with AI technology, effortlessly integrating it into their lives, from sociality to creativity.

As these technologies are given an increasing power over creative processes they are, at the same time, stretching human creativity beyond itself. This is not simply through the infinitesimal speed or incomprehensible capacity of a computational device to process information. Rather, it is, as Luciana Parisi⁶⁸ has explained, the ways in which these technologies are able to think beyond human understandings of logic and rationality and, I would add, creativity. By working through fallibility, randomness and logical

66. Donna-Claire Chesman, “Trippie Redd is prolific, versatile, and never tired: interview,” (2019), <https://dijbooth.net/features/2019-08-19-trippie-redd-interview-prolific-versatile-never-tired>.

67. Eric Skelton, “Playing with Fire: The Science Behind Lil Uzi Vert’s Effortless Flow,” (2017) <https://www.complex.com/pigeons-and-planes/2017/08/lil-uzi-vert-hip-hop-flow-state>.

68. Luciana Parisi, *Contagious Architecture: Computation, Aesthetics, and Space* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2013).

inconsistency, these technologies present modes of thought outside human cognition and beyond human comprehension. As Luciana Parisi⁶⁹ says, cybernetic technologies not only offer means of automated order and control, but also offer a way out of the limits of human reason and rationality. These *alien* modes of thinking, as she calls them, have the ability to create morphogenic spatio-temporalities that are not the building blocks for a physical universe, a human *world*, but are, instead, what we would call virtualities, which “refuse to be fully comprehended, compressed, or sensed by totalities (i.e. by the mind, the machine or the body).”⁷⁰ These spatio-temporalities are crystals or alien chrysalises that exist outside the human but which have real effects upon human realities.⁷¹ These spatio-temporalities, which push us beyond the logical and aesthetic principles of human beings, do not only limit or control us but also, on the contrary, create new opportunities for human creativity.

This is what Kodwo Eshun⁷² discussed decades ago in his ground-breaking manifesto *More Brilliant Than The Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*. In this work Eshun presented Afrofuturism as a type of science fiction music or *sonic fiction* that created “MythSciences from soundmachines: the processes of AutoCreation, AutoCatalysis, AutoDestruction, which cooperate as the secret life of machines.”⁷³ Eshun works through jazz, dub, techno, funk, jungle and hip hop, presenting these as instances of science fiction working with organized sound to create futuristic sonic fictions that push creativity to new limits. As I have discussed Xanax, Lean and Purp, Eshun discusses Weed in relation to the hip hop act Cypress Hill. For Eshun, Cypress Hill’s music perfectly generates the experience of Weed by producing the “dilation effect” of marijuana, which “makes it the time-stretcher, the narcoagent which slows down the perception of object-events.”⁷⁴ The sounds of Cypress Hill “wander without an object. Running amok with no cause at all, sound effects generate environments of objectless ominousness and perpetual imminence.”⁷⁵ The slow motion paranoid music of Cypress Hill is a virtuality that produces this experience of Weed for the listener. This is a “MythScience” that moves beyond “the hermeneutics of the streets,”⁷⁶ a music that sheds traditional hip hop, which is, as Eshun says, “a belief system sure of its past, certain of its present, confident of its future.”⁷⁷ Hip hop as MythScience breaks away from any devotion to roots or authenticity and instead embraces technology, abstraction and shape-shifting to push the music toward new frontiers. *The streets*, which, as Eshun notes, are “widely assumed to be the engine of

69. Luciana Parisi, “Instrumentality or the Origin of Techno-logic,” (2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_IaVln3oRjk.

70. Parisi, *Contagious Architecture*, x.

71. Luciana Parisi, “The alien subject of AI,” *Subjectivity* (2019), 12, 27–48, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1057/s41286-018-00064-3#citeas>

72. Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet, 1998).

73. *Ibid.*, 37

74. *Ibid.*, 47

75. *Ibid.*

76. Kodwo Eshun, “Everything was to be done. All the adventures are still there: A speculative Dialogue with Kodwo Eshun,” (2000), <https://v2.nl/archive/articles/an-interview-with-kodwo-eshun>

77. Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun*, 92

black pop-culture” and produce a “compulsory logic of representation and will to re-
alness,” are transcended through alien virtualities.⁷⁸ These virtualities are divorced from
logics of representation, such as context (*the streets*) and content (*the message*). Like the
SoundCloud rappers I have described, who see themselves as anything but rappers, the
Afrofuturists Eshun describes present themselves as alien mathematicians and engineers,
turning abstract machines, such as turntables, drum machines, synthesizers and laptops
into “War Machines,” which destroy all previous matrices of representation.⁷⁹ Discussing
Eshun’s work, Eugene Brennan notes Afrofuturism’s ability to generate worlds that are
“obscure, not completely perceptible, lying outside established norms and bordering on
the psychedelic.”⁸⁰ This is what we find within the virtualities of SoundCloud rap,
a musical movement that transcends the bounds of traditional hip hop.

SoundCloud rap created an alien language for an alien subjectivity,⁸¹ one that existed
beyond the sensory-motor situations of the classical rap-image, as well as popular music in
general. SoundCloud rap pushed the limits of rap and pop, incorporating alien techniques
and technologies into its aesthetic form. SoundCloud rappers seemed random, nonsensical,
sporadic, unpredictable and uncontrollable—like a drunken adolescent—like the
Internet itself. Lost in an *ecstasy of communication*, as Baudrillard⁸² called it, a drunken
stupor of human ideas, opinions and indignities where the only thing communicated is
communication itself. At the same time this randomness and incomprehensibility produced
a creative moment with emancipatory potential. In SoundCloud rap we saw a post-
phenomenological or, as Alexander Weheliye⁸³ would say, a *post-human* subject unable to
exert its subjectivity, unable to sing, unable to speak, unable to create sensory-motor
situations of verse-chorus-bridge tension and release. Here, an alien music emerged, where
80s moved between percussive and melodic pounds, irrational triplets accelerated and
slowed down sporadically, vocals screamed, cried, distorted and broke down or *mumbled*,
all coalescing in an alien subjectivity that twisted and broke through the classical rap and
pop image. It was not meant to *make sense*, in the sense of a reproduction of established
modes of sensibility. Rather, as Rancière⁸⁴ would say, it actively challenged the *sensus
communis*, the everyday partitioning of the sensible and of what is given as *common sense*,
of which mainstream rap and pop music participate in. Through this *dissensus*, Sound-
Cloud rappers revealed the contingency of perceptual orders and were able to generate
a “transformation of the sensory fabric of being together.”⁸⁵ Here, listeners were exposed to
new syntaxes, new meanings, new aesthetics and new modes of being in the world. As
Rancière notes, this has the capacity to reveal an emancipatory community outside of the

78. Ibid., 117

79. Ibid., 32

80. Eugene Brennan, “Hermeticism Contra Hermeneutics: Kodwo Eshun’s Afrofuturism and the Challenges of
Black Abstraction,” (2019), <https://ojs.parisnanterre.fr/index.php/latelier/article/download/544/785?inline=1>.

81. Mark Sinker, “Loving the Alien,” *The Wire* (1992), 30–35.

82. Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1987).

83. Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (London: Duke University Press,
2005).

84. Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (UK: Verso, 2009)

85. Ibid., 56

established sensory order.⁸⁶ SoundCloud rap was such a community,⁸⁷ an alien community detached from the rap and pop establishment, communicating and creating within their own alien modality and pushing the bounds of rap and pop music.

From supraliminal infrasounds⁸⁸ and noise,⁸⁹ to sampling and beatmatching⁹⁰ and a multitude of sonic fictions,⁹¹ the alien has consistently been incorporated into rap and pop music through various innovative techniques and technologies. Many SoundCloud rappers, most notably Lil Uzi Vert and Lil Pump, have made their way into the musical mainstream and have brought along the alien techniques and technologies that encompass their form, in the process adding alien elements to popular music. Further, the technological mediums on which they appeared are changing. Now many SoundCloud rappers are appearing on the short-form video-sharing app TikTok. This app demonstrates a further transformation of the SoundCloud rap aesthetic, with the tracks that appear on the app having an even greater unpolished and lo-fi sound. Where SoundCloud rap produced meme rappers like Tekashi 6ix9ine, TikTok is producing meme tracks. The tracks are often six to eleven second snippets from a larger piece of music, which is cut down and shared on the app, often attached to a video meme and then, if popular enough, sampled in short dance videos by other TikTok performers. Often these short tracks are also mashed up with other tracks to create new TikTok hits.⁹² Here, one-hit wonders cannibalize each other and produce a loop of virality. While scrolling through TikTok, users will be exposed to the same song in 10 different videos, one after the other. For TikTok stars, this is a new type of exposure unseen in Top 40 radio. For musicians

86. Ibid.

87. Delon Alain Omrow, "Mumble in the Bronx: A Socio-Cultural Analysis of 'Mumble Rap' as environmental discourse," *European Journal of Research and Reflection in Arts and Humanities* (2018), 1–12, <http://www.idpublications.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Full-Paper-MUMBLE-IN-THE-BRONX-A-SOCIO-CULTURAL-ANALYSIS-OF-%E2%80%98MUMBLE-RAP%E2%80%99-AS-ENVIRONMENTAL-DISDISCOURSE.pdf>.

88. Steve Goodman, *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of War* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2012).

See Also:

Jorg H. Mühlhans, "Low frequency and infrasound: A critical review of the myths, misbeliefs and their relevance to music perception research," *Musicae Scientiae* 22, no. 3, (2017), 267–86, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1029864917690931?journalCode=msxa>

89. Aaron Cassidy and Aaron Einbond, *Noise in and as Music* (Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield Press, 2013).

See Also:

Paul Hegarty, *Noise Music: A History* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2007).

90. Mark Butler, *Playing with Something that Runs: Technology, Improvisation, and Composition in DJ and Laptop Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

See Also:

Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton, *Last Night a DJ Saved my Life* (New York: Grove Press, 2006).

91. Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun*

See Also:

Alexander Weheliye, "'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music," *Social Text* (2002), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/249880474_Feenin_Posthuman_Voices_in_Contemporary_Black_Popular_Music

92. Alyssa Berezna, "Memes Are the New Pop Stars: How TikTok Became the Future of the Music Industry," (2019), <https://www.theringer.com/tech/2019/6/27/18760004/tiktok-old-town-road-memes-music-industry>.

this is another step in the online democratization of music production and listening, led by streaming apps like SoundCloud and now TikTok.⁹³ As with the SoundCloud rap phenomenon, all you need to be a TikTok star is a laptop or an iPhone and something catchy to spread (i.e., a meme in musical form). As with SoundCloud rap, TikTok is driven by young artists, from largely alienated, underrepresented and disadvantaged minority groups, who have the ability to generate and share new forms of alien music, all via their mobile phones. SoundCloud rap was a moment in this larger movement of the alien making its way into rap and popular music, all driven by a mixture of machine learning and an Internet-savvy youth who are brave enough to experiment with alien aesthetics and share them with the world. ■

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93. Ibid.

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