

Can Electronic Music Be Subversive?

This study analyzes the rise and development of the German journalistic discourse around the use of electronic synthesizers, sequencers and samplers by pop-music artists. A discourse analysis reveals the changes in attributions of virtuosity, authenticity and subversion taking place from the '70s to the '80s as a result of the new electronic means of artistic expression. A complementing interview analysis reveals that the resulting order of discourse is still relevant for the identity of contemporary electronic music artists.

Ambra Cavallaro (*1987), B.A. Cultural and Linguistic Mediation, M.A. Media and Communication Studies with focus on Audio Communication Studies. Since 2016 she has been leading researches concerning the historical and contemporary interdependence between Music Technology, Music Culture and Music Journalism.



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Analyzing the development of the journalistic discourse about authenticity and subversive potential of electronic music

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Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Kann elektronische Musik subversiv sein?

***Eine Analyse zur Entwicklung des journalistischen Diskurses bezüglich
Authentizität und subversivem Potential von elektronisch-populären
Musikstilen in Deutschland
in der zweiten Hälfte späten des 20. Jahrhunderts.***

Die Verwendung von elektronisch programmierbaren Instrumenten in populärer Musik ab dem Beginn der 1970er und die damit verbundene Entwicklung neuer tanzbarer elektronischer Musikgenres (Disco, House, Techno) hat kulturgeschichtlich zu deutlichen Veränderungen der ästhetischen und kulturellen Bewertungsmaßstäbe von Musikproduktionen und Bühnenperformances populärer Musik geführt, sowohl für die Künstler als auch für das Publikum bzw. für die Hörer. Gerade in den 1970er und 1980er Jahren wurde elektronisch-produzierte populäre Musik oft noch wegen ihrer "maschinellen Ästhetik" und vermeintlich mangelnder subversiver politischer Botschaft beschuldigt, einem oberflächlichen massentauglichem kapitalistischen Utopismus sowie dem Verlust der Authentizität bzw. Aura in den Klängen und den damit verbundenen sozialen Praxen zu Vorschub leisten (vgl. Garcia, 2014).

Mittels einer kritischen Analyse des impliziten und expliziten Mediendiskurses (CDA) auf diesem Feld in den Jahren von 1975 bis 1985 möchte die vorliegende Arbeit eine Antwort auf die Frage finden, wie es zu solchen weitverbreiteten gesellschaftlichen Zuschreibungen kommen konnte und ab wann und auf welche Weise ein klarer Zusammenhang zwischen handgespielter Musik und Authentizität bzw. Subversion diskursiv konstruiert wurde. Das Datenmaterial für diese Analyse besteht aus 50 Artikeln der Zeitschrift Musikexpress (Interviews und Bandvorstellungen), die sich mit dem

Debüt von Populärmusik-Künstlern aus diesem Zeitraum befassen und, in denen Fragen zu elektronisch programmierten Musikelementen direkt angesprochen wurden.

Neben der Diskursanalyse zur historischen Entstehung dieser Zuschreibungen wird in der Arbeit zusätzlich die zeitgenössische Situation (ab etwa dem Jahr 2000) der durch Computer-Software steuerbaren elektronischen Musik in den Blick genommen, welche in gewissem Sinne eine Wiederkehr der handgemachten Live-Performance auch in diesen Genres erlaubt, wodurch sich erneute Veränderungen bei der diskursiven Zuschreibung von Subversion- und Protestpotential ergeben könnten. Zur Analyse dieser Vermutung werden drei Interviews mit gegenwärtig aktiven Künstlern aus unterschiedlichen Bereichen der elektronischen Musik ex-novo geführt, um entsprechende Unterschiede zur vorherigen „programmierbaren Ära“ elektronischer Populärmusik herauszuarbeiten.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen, wie die Kulturindustrie ihren hegemonialen Einfluss auf den kunst- und musikbezogenen Diskurs mit Hilfe massenmedialer Publikationsorgane und Pop/Rock-Intellektuellen (Journalisten) ausübt, um die marktbedingten Bedürfnisse zu erfüllen. Für den betrachteten historischen Kontext zeigen die Analyseergebnisse, wie zunächst die meisten betrachteten Künstler wegen ihres scheinbaren Mangels an Authentizität kritisiert wurden. Parallel zeigt das gleiche Medium die Tendenz, eine andere Annäherung zu Künstlern zu haben, deren Karriere im Rahmen der elektronischen Szene schon etabliert ist. Ihnen wird also erlaubt, andere Musiker zu beurteilen, und auch Leitfäden für die Erschaffung „reale“ Kunstwerke zu geben. Die aus den Interviews gewonnenen Erkenntnisse bestätigen diese Tendenz teilweise, obwohl jede/r Musiker/in zeigt ihre/seine Neutralität bezüglich der Vorliebe der Instrumente betont, denn diese sei keine Notwendige Voraussetzung für Authentizität.

Abstract

The introduction of electronically programmable instruments in popular music during the '70s led to the development of electronic Dance music (EDM) genre. These brought about major cultural changes in the audiences' appreciation criteria for pop-music artists and performances. Early accusations put forward by music journalists towards the new cultural movements like Disco and House were aimed at its machine-made aesthetics and the supposed lack of a clear and subversive political message. The new genres were suspected of being a superficial vehicle for capitalist utopian-massification, which subsequently lead to a diminished attribution of authenticity of the electronic music artists, their sounds and the socio-cultural practices connected to it.

By means of a critical analysis of the journalistic discourse about electronic Pop music artists in the German mainstream popular music magazine *Musikexpress* from 1975 to 1985, this paper traces back the historic development of journalists' assessment standards for virtuosity, authenticity and subversion in the electronic music age, in order to understand when and how the evaluation standards alongside the technological development in music changed. The sample used for this analysis are interviews and reports issued in the decade mentioned, in which new EDM producers and performers were directly interviewed about their use of electronic instrumentation. The second empirical section will explore how the discourse has affected in the contemporary music scene, mostly characterized by digital and computer instruments. Three professional producers of different electronic music styles, active after the early 2000s, were interviewed and questioned about their relationship with such types of instrumentation.

Results show how some of the mostly debuting bands interviewed, were mistreated regarding their production techniques and also were, with more or less subtle discursive procedures accused, not to be authentic in their sound or

not being artists at all. On the other side the same medium later takes a totally different approach towards musicians which already had established commercial success. The interviews tend to reproduce some of those elements, while all of the interviewed musician underline their neutrality regarding the instruments' choice, as it is not a necessary precondition for a definition of authenticity.

1. Framing Authenticity and Electronic Developments in Music

1.1. Introduction

The introduction of electronically programmable instruments in popular music during the '70s led to the development of electronic Dance music (EDM) genres which brought about a major cultural change regarding the audiences' appreciation criteria for pop-music artists and performances. Despite the growing popularity of those genres and instruments in the '70s, they were heavily stigmatized from the Pop and Rock avant-garde, who, as argued by Richard Dyer in his article "In Defense of Disco" (1979), related it to a vacuous cultural-transmitter of "wrong values", such as capitalistic music production, superficial and escapist utopia, lack of oppositional and political message, excessive emotionality and unauthentic musical aesthetics (Garcia, 2014, p.1). In his essay Dyer conversely praises the new electronic music genres, especially Dance music such as Disco. He changes the point of view and considers them as a new musical approach, which would encourage personal contacts and offering a way out from daily capitalistic life. Hence, he interprets them as expressing a subversive potential in a new shape, bringing about a utopian and escapist space in form of entertainment, along with body-related eroticism and a consequent Disco-Romanticism (Garcia, 2014, pp.2-4).

Other accusations moved by exponents of the Pop/Rock intellectual front towards artists who embraced new techniques were not just related to the socio-political background, but also to their supposed manifest lack of virtuosity. In particular, musicians have been (and still are) widely criticized and stigmatized both by the musical industry and by the Pop/Rock avant-garde about the perceived showiness' scarcity and sterility. In fact, both the two fronts seem to share the opinion that electronic musicians would just act motionless in front of their synthesizers or machines without providing a "real" Rock'n'Roll show during their performance (Reynolds, 2007, para.11), extending their arguments

to an alleged absence of musical and set-up knowledge for the correct use of such automatic-functioning machines (Black, 2010, p.556).

The aim of this paper is to investigate the point in time when the debate about an alleged problem of authenticity and virtuosity of electronically produced and performed music began to proliferate within the discourse about popular music in Germany. It is interesting to understand which evidence has been brought forward to sustain mainstream and Rock avant-gardistic arguments, which discursive strategies toward artists embracing new technologies in their composition's concept were used, with the aim to deduce how mass-media penetrated the public opinion and induce the masses to maintain a pre-given approach to a cultural phenomena.

To fulfill this purpose, I will first frame the theoretical problem giving a definition for the concept of *cultural hegemony*, as formulated by Antonio Gramsci in order to describe how institutional structures impose their ideological power with subtle procedures upon the society without recurring to violence. Then I will focus on the explanation of the concepts of *authenticity* and *subversion* in relation to artworks and cultural goods in the age of mechanical reproduction, as well as on the way these can be applied on the discourse about (electronic) music.

For the sake of understanding the evolutionary path of electronic instruments, as well as their impact on the society and its consciousness, a distinct paragraph will briefly elucidate the history of electronic music. This will begin with its pioneers and early instruments, and, going through early analogue mass-products, will end with a perspective on digital and contemporary software-based instruments, paying attention to the contrast each of those transitions created with the previous generation. Successively, I will take a closer look at Germany within the context of electronic music production, framing the relevance of the research's topic.