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Spotify, Genres and the Illusion of Categorisation

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§ 1 - The Theories of Yesterday, The Problems of Today

Theorisation around genre is at least as old as Aristotle. Initially concerned with literary genres more than anything else, in time genre theories have come to cover other fields as well, including cinema and popular music (see Merlini 2020). Since in the context of art music the genre of a musical piece describes the form of composition (e.g. a symphony or a sonata, see Holt 2007; Moore 2001), it is not until relatively recently that music genre theories have accounted for social and industrial factors involved in the process of defining what is usually understood not as an objective quality of a musical item, but as a discursive construct that has a lot to do not only with music, but with specific subcultures, practices and business models as well. Regardless of what we might think of genre theories or even of genres themselves, it seems inevitable for us to use them consistently (Brackett 2016) and by doing so we keep them alive, and thus allow them to influence our way of understanding music. Simon Frith has written that genres are able to "organize music making, music listening and music selling" (Frith 1996: 88) and this is still true to this day, despite the music industry has changed quite drastically in the meantime. What needs to be stressed further is perhaps that when the systems that *sell* music become so powerful to impose their classifications to millions and millions of people, incorporating them in streaming apps' UIs and algorithms of music recommendation, such forces can become strong enough to change not only our conception of single genres but even the way we engage with the very idea of music genres. The power that "center collectivities" – described by Fabian Holt (2007) as groups of people responsible for the ongoing discursive (re)definition of genres – seems to be now largely

monopolised by streaming platforms, in a context where it becomes even legit to ask ourselves if young people still care about genres at all, or if the musical omnivore theorised by Peterson and Kern (1996) has finally become reality.

In such a fast-changing situation, it becomes vital for popular music studies to reconsider genre theories in light of the present streaming-led industry. This also requires new methodologies, capable of dealing with the core of our issue, which as of today is not only musical nor only social, but digital as well. In this paper, we present the idea of genre as “socio-technical musical imaginary” (SMI) and how digital methods could become useful tools to investigate it in the age of streaming, to then focus on how this relates to the rise and fall of Spotify’s “genrefication” strategy. We believe that this can contribute to a better understanding of how the “illusion of categorisation”, however ethereal as it may seem, still has a very concrete grasp on the way we engage with music today via streaming platforms.

§ 2 - The Socio-Technical Musical Imaginary

One potential avenue for reframing the concept of genre is to draw upon the notion of the imaginary. This notion can be defined in the following terms: "[a] collectively imagined forms of social life and social order reflected in the design and fulfilment of nation-specific scientific and/or technological projects" (Jasanoff & Kim 2009: 120). The application of this definition in light of the current media context seems to be useful for critically approaching the concept of genre as a possibility of organising and designing a collectively imagined order, in our case cultural and musical, that has an impact on the design and realisation of a project. Furthermore, the algorithmic imaginary "does not merely describe the mental models that people construct about algorithms but also the productive and affective power that these imaginings have" (Bucher 2017: 41). This consideration allows us to describe the impact that platforms have on both producers and consumers of musical objects. In other words, it is a

matter of reflecting on how and to what extent "platforms' affordances shape and are shaped by users' everyday cultural practices and imaginaries" (Caliandro et al. 2024: 6).

If the interferences of the music industry, algorithms, and platforms become manipulative elements that remediate the genre at their pleasure, the notion of imaginary allows us to hypothesise a possible alternative to exclusively top-down scenarios. The concept of the imaginary allows us to consider users/listeners' adherence to a more widely disseminated notion of music, as well as to track the evolving characteristics of platform-based music, which the initial definitions do not fully encompass.

The affordances of digital platforms, as multifaceted digital objects, allow to concentrate in a single place the production, sharing, and consumption of different media objects, obviously also of a musical nature. They also allow for the creation of an infinite number of categorizations – virtually even more than one for each user –, while giving users the opportunity to create clusters that are expressions of imaginaries shared with other users on a – theoretically – individual basis and with a very high degree of granularity. In doing so, they bring the focus back to the processes of meaning formation; as Holt states: "Popular music genres have been constituted by people who have shared codes for defining a particular kind of music and built a social network" (2003: 84).

These elements, if included in the definition of imaginary, make it even more functional in describing the current state of music consumption. It is through the establishment of social networks on platforms that meanings are shared in a multitude of ways and possess varying degrees of interpretation. Each listener can have their own listening habit that goes beyond the normativity of the genre construct and, indeed, makes it a construct almost entirely alien to historical and contextual contingencies. In this way, new ways of connecting and creating clusters of cultural objects are crystallised, based both on simple consumption and on the sharing of elements that are organic to the functioning of the platforms.

The union between the idea of imaginary and that of network allows us to combine a perspective on genre developed long before platformisation – that of Holt – with a highly contemporary reflection, that of the ex-data alchemist of Spotify, Glenn McDonald. On the one hand, Holt emphasises the community-related aspect of genre, even if his “center collectivities” do not necessarily express a unitary intention: "Thus, my concept of network represents partially shared, diverse, and multilayered ontologies" (Holt, 2003: 84). On the other hand, McDonald explains how the genre categorization system of Spotify is not so dissimilar from the idea of a network as described by Holt, nor from the idea of "imaginary": "we think about genres primarily as communities, communities of artists, of listeners or of practice" (McDonald 2023). The founding idea in Spotify's categorization work is the collective sharing of a listening practice that creates clusters of objects, which in turn are constituted in an imaginary. The latter has as its aggregating centre the listening habits of users/consumers, as they are analysed and mediated by the platform themselves – that is, according to the idea of the aggregated behaviour of users.

The concept of "imaginary" allows us to characterise the former as a useful tool for exploring a media and musical context in constant, rapid, and profound transformation. This becomes even more evident if the concept of imaginary is accompanied by the adjective "socio-technical". The reason for this further specification is suggested by the work of Alessandro Caliandro and his team. The term "socio-technical", according to Caliandro (Caliandro et al. 2024: 17), is useful to emphasise how the imaginary – referring to the consumer in this case - is not only the result of the individual's consumption habits, but rather the result of the interaction and co-creation between the consumer, society, and the technological infrastructures (platforms) to which they have access. Despite leaving the possibility for the individual user to create their own imaginary open, it is clear that platforms, with their interfaces and infrastructures, try to influence the individual's habit by *de facto* inserting them into a community of users/listeners. Even in this case, using the notion of genre would not

allow us to adequately define the complexity of such a process. It would not be able to describe the possibilities of creation and continuous re-definition of the imaginary itself inherent in the two-way relationship between platforms and users.

The socio-technical musical imaginary allows us to connect the normativity of imagination and the materiality of networks: it expresses a collective vision animated by shared conceptions of forms and cultural aggregates that seem to be achieved both through the work of the individual and thanks to the affordances of the media.

§ 3 - Trying to Explore IMS: Digital Methods

A fundamental question remains unanswered, namely whether it is possible to investigate and analyse these socio-technical musical imaginaries. Jasanoff herself proposes a methodology for working on these aspects. "The most appropriate methods for studying sociotechnical imaginaries are therefore those of interpretive research and analysis, which examine the nature of structure-agency relationships through inquiries into meaning-making" (Jasanoff & Kim 2015: 35). It is necessary to reinterpret platforms and digital media in two distinct ways: as a research tool and as a location for research. This dual interpretation makes them an intriguing resource and lens through which to re-examine musical practices. It allows us to re-examine everyday elements that often seem trivial in a new light. This re-examination focuses on: "The term 'quirks of digital culture' refers to those minor online cultural phenomena that are typically overlooked or dismissed as inconsequential. However, when made visible and studied using appropriate methods, they can offer insights into the structure and functioning of the global system of digital consumer culture" (Caliandro et al. 2024: 14). For this reason, we have assembled a toolbox of analytical instruments that enable scholars to examine the data extracted from the platforms themselves, thereby focusing the analysis on the distinctive micromaterial characteristics of platformised music.

It is precisely through the interaction with the data that can be drawn from them that a critical approach to platforms can be structured through the use of digital methods. The investigative process can be conceptualised as an “assemblage” (Langlois 2011; Sharma 2013), whereby a range of social, technical and other factors are integrated into a unified research process. In conclusion, a multi-platform perspective ensures that the micromaterial data of music can be re-examined without favouring any one platform over another. In our view, an investigation of two platforms among many is feasible: TikTok and Spotify.

TikTok offers two primary avenues for data analysis. The first is the platform's own “TikTok For Business Creative Center”, a suite of tools designed to provide users with insights. While this resource is constantly evolving, offering data on how users interact with and repurpose content, its scope is somewhat limited by the platform's control over the information shared. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of user behaviour, external tools can be employed. “Zeeschuimer”, a browser extension, is one such tool. It functions by collecting data on the content users encounter while scrolling the platform. This data can then be further analysed using tools like “4CAT” to uncover deeper insights into how users perceive and engage with specific Sociotechnical musical imaginary. By combining data from both TikTok's native tools and external platforms, for instance, researchers can gain a more nuanced understanding of how users perceive and position themselves in relation to the trap within the TikTok ecosystem.

Spotify offers several tools for accessing and analysing its data. “SpotiGeM Hub” (SpotiGeM) is a tool developed by a research group at the University of Milan that allows users to query the Spotify API and visualise public data about tracks within specific playlists. “Every Noise at Once” (ENAO) is a 'music exploration tool' that enables users to explore genres by clicking on them and accessing algorithmically selected representative songs. Spotify Artist Network, a web tool developed by Bernard Rieder, allows users to query the Spotify API and create networks of related artists based on the listening history of the Spotify

community. These tools provide insights into how songs are perceived and tagged by the platform, as well as how listening history can influence the platform's perception and mediation of sociotechnical musical imaginary. For example, data retrieved from these tools can help us understand how Italian trap music is perceived by the platform and its users.

§ 4 - The Rise of Spotify's "Genrefication" Strategy

Keeping these methodological coordinates in mind, let us continue with some further investigations on how genres work on Spotify, starting from a concrete situation that most Spotify users have probably encountered at least once in their lives and will show the power of genres as socio-technical imaginary – especially focussing on the "technical" side. We are speaking of "Spotify Wrapped", a yearly digest providing the user with statistics about their listening habits, including their favourite genres. In December 2022, one of us noticed a very peculiar entry in his "Wrapped", namely "voidgaze" (Merlini 2025). Googling it with no idea of what it was, we almost exclusively found people asking questions like "what the hell is voidgaze?". Soon enough, we discovered that voidgaze was apparently "a fake genre made up by Spotify" related to several other better-known subgenres revolving around post-black metal. Yet we were still curious to know more about this genre and on why Spotify came up with a "fake" genre label.

An important thing to keep in mind is that the music recommendation system located at the core of all that concerns genres on Spotify is based on the "Echo Nest" system, acquired by Spotify in 2014 and aimed at building a "musical brain" that associates with each track metadata acquired both from the acoustic analysis of the track (afforded by the so-called "machine listening tools") and from discursive information gathered from "web crawling" activities on countless internet pages (Albertario 2020; Eriksson 2016; McDonald 2024). As already noted, the man behind the Echo Nest, Glenn McDonald, conceives each genre as "a community of artists, practice and/or listeners" (McDonald 2024). Thus, even collective

listening patterns (like those revealed by the “Spotify Artist Network” tool) could be revealing of latent musical categories, which are then given a name by McDonald & co. (Johnston 2018; McDonald 2023; McDonald 2024), and this is exactly what happened with “voidgaze”. As a made-up genre, it does not meet the definition of music genres provided by the classic theory by Franco Fabbri (1981), according to which genres are sets of musical events governed by five orders of socially accepted norms (formal, semiotic, behavioural, ideological and economic ones). As McDonald himself notes, Jennifer Lena’s (2016) conception of genres is the closest to his view of genres as communities (McDonald 2024). What is interesting in the idea that clusters of artists often seen together in listening patterns might reveal latent genres is the congruence with the description Fabbri provides of the birth of genres, underlining the importance of naming a genre as the “semiotic act” sanctioning its recognition (Fabbri 2012). In this sense, the “genrefication” process (as a socio-technical factor) might lead to interesting results: for instance, we can now find playlists of “voidgaze” music curated by users that apparently found the label useful for defining the music they listen to. The idea is that promoting discourse about latent genres can eventually lead to a process of “actualisation” of those genres and the creation of a human center collectivity (Holt 2007). Once people have the term, it is all up to them!

The odd thing with voidgaze is that only a very limited number of artists labelled by as such were known to us, and this was confirmed by the fact that, when analysing our “Wrapped-related” playlist containing our favourite tracks with SpotiGeM, we could not find artists labelled as "voidgaze" in the resulting graph. But digital methods can provide us with much more interesting information. With “Every Noise at Once” we were able to define voidgaze as more electric than acoustic, texturally dense and sonically related to post-black metal, atmospheric black metal, voidgrind, USBM, forest black metal and blackgaze – but definitely different from cartoon music, vintage reggae, rocksteady and a number of different national children’s music. The same resource also provided us with a list of the most

representative artists (e.g. Numenorean, Wolves in the Throne Room, Blut Aus Nord and Violet Cold…) and a list of the most frequent words featured in the song titles (e.g. “echoes”, “ancient”, “earth”, “silence”…). By processing the algorithmic voidgaze playlist provided by “Every Noise” employing “SpotiGeM” and “Organize Your Music”, we got further sonic information and it was particularly interesting to compare the resulting graphs with those obtained by analysing the “atmospheric black metal” playlist – an actual genre, this time. By doing so, we discovered that the two genres were very similar, and that “voidgaze” was a label very much present in the introductory playlist of atmospheric black metal, and vice versa, given that more than one label can be assigned to each artist.

In the end, our best guess was that “voidgaze” was featured in our “Wrapped” top 5 of genres because of its proximity with other labels associated with some of our favourite tracks from that year, like ‘Avfärd’ by the Swedish band Ofdrykkja (labelled as “depressive” and “Swedish” black metal). Perhaps, a more obscure term like “voidgaze” was preferred over a less fascinating label like “atmospheric black metal” because, as McDonald told us in a private communication, “Wrapped” is primarily designed to achieve “viral awareness” (McDonald 2023), so people sharing their bizarre results in Instagram Stories and writing “what the hell is voidgaze?” around are more welcome than people just acknowledging highly predictable results and closing the app. Moreover, “Spotify Artist Network” allowed us to spot the band ColdWorld connected both with Ofdrykkja (not labelled as “voidgaze”) and a whole voidgaze cluster of artists. Surprisingly, we found some Ofdrykkja tracks featuring ColdWorld and thus labelled as “voidgaze” – a fact that convinced us that, after all, Ofdrykkja must have been voidgaze’s trojan horse into our “Wrapped”.

§ 5 - The Fall of Spotify’s “Genrefication” Strategy

Mission complete, one could say. But that’s not quite the whole story. After our conversation with McDonald, we were able to understand the situation much more clearly. In a way, what

he told us could confirm the view according to which voidgaze was there to represent the entirety of the "sort-of-black-metal" part of our listening habits since he told us that "Wrapped" would like to represent the variety of the user's taste, and for this reason overlapping genres are excluded from the top. This still did not explain why voidgaze was preferred over other labels, and here comes the surprising part. He described voidgaze as one of those "genres that are attempting to be a particular little niche" (McDonald 2023), and also confirmed that in his 2024 book, describing it as a sort of (made-up) sub-sub-subgenre of black metal (McDonald 2024). Building niches is indeed useful to connect listeners and artists in the same virtual community called "genre" (be it "real" or "made-up"), and the more precise it is, the more likely everyone in the community will be happy with the app (*ibid.*). During the period separating our "Wrapped" from our analyses with digital tools, the voidgaze label underwent some fine-tuning to accommodate exactly that kind of need, with the result of being removed from a number of artists originally associated with it, thus reducing the noise and making the niche more accurate (McDonald 2023). Probably, it is as simple as this: our much beloved Ofdrykkja were labelled as "voidgaze" in the beginning, and then no more, so we were not able to find straight-forward traces of the clearest justification for the presence of that genre in our "Wrapped". Moreover, McDonald (*ibid.*) told us that there are additional parameters mapped by the "musical brain" and additional "provisional genre labels" that are not accessed via the Spotify API, which provides digital tools with the required metadata. These could also explain otherwise incomprehensible relationships.

This story tells us a couple of important things we should keep in mind. While digital methods are paramount to studying genres on streaming platforms, we must accept the fact that we will likely never have access to the whole mass of metadata, and that even the surface we *can* study is always subject to rapid shifts according to the plans of those in charge of managing the classification system, or even to changing corporate strategies. Sometimes, these strategies can lead to choices that can change very significantly how

genres work and make all our previous work as scholars obsolete in the blink of an eye, as you will learn from the bitter epilogue of this tale. Indeed, just a handful of months after our conversation, we discovered that McDonald's collaboration with Spotify had just come to an end. This marked not only the end of "Every Noise at Once" as we knew it, but also an unexpected change in Spotify's strategies concerning genres. The first warning was our 2023 "Wrapped", where much more straightforward categories were displayed (e.g. soul, rock, electronica). Perhaps even more importantly, the new guys are apparently focussing on the development of some features that were not central when McDonald was there, like browsing playlists organised by genre directly from the app. This is an example of how fleeting these systems are, and if we understand genres as socio-technical imaginaries it is not difficult to understand how huge the impact that these corporate decisions, and the related changes in the strategies and in the UIs, can have on our conception of single genres and of genres as a whole.

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