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**Dr. Prog and Mr. Post. Or, A (Draft) Theory of (Postmodern) Music Genres**

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One of the nicest features of research is that sometimes you pursue something, but you get something quite different. This is basically what happened to me, as I was trying to define the fundamental features of progressive rock in contemporary times. Here we shall not focus on that aspect of my research, yet a small explanation is needed, in order to be able to understand how I got to the unexpected part of my research and, in addition to this, it is also useful to have a case study close at hand, to help us to better understand the theoretical insights that came out of my research.

So, let's start from the beginning. Prog is knowingly a very difficult genre to define, mainly because it changed greatly in time and a lot of *very* different kinds of music are now labelled as 'progressive' without any evidence of what they have in common (MIDDLETON 1990:50-51, MOORE 2001:64, WHITELEY 1992:3). Let's take a look to the line-up of the 10th edition of the very relevant German festival *Night of the Prog*: if we compare two songs played by two different bands – even performing in the same festival day, like Kaipa and Pain of Salvation – we can notice that it is possible to be labelled as 'progressive' either if you play music in the style of Genesis and Yes, or if you play music that apparently has nothing to do with that. Such a duality is a challenge for scholars, and so, in my attempt to define the meaning of prog music in contemporary times, I tried to figure out which features were perceived as important for the genre, and which artists were perceived as being part of a 'canon' by the listeners, posting a survey in strategic locations of the internet and doing some research concerning the results of awards, the line-ups of prog festivals, the critic's choices and so on. The results, into which I won't delve further in this occasion, brought me

to a 'canon' and a synoptic grid of features, which I confronted with the results of the analyses of ten songs taken from the canon itself and some thirty other songs from genres that had not much to do with the canon, yet could be situated within a 'limbo' that allows them to sneak in and out of the 'prog zone' depending on how the audience feels about them. I found out that many of those features were not to be found in the canonized music more often than they were in the other examples, apparently unrelated to prog. Moreover, the only feature that was consistently present in all analyses looked like something shared with experimental music in general (MARTIN 1998:99-127): I am talking about an attitude towards progress, a will to push popular music's boundaries further and further, that prog fans often addressed as the main feature of their favourite genre. So, to summarize, I had a frame in which three kinds of music had to share a living: 1. Progressive music; 2. Experimental music; 3. Limbo genres. I needed to further study that 'progressive attitude' in order to understand the differences between those kinds of music.

Thus, I started to define 'content' and 'form' of that attitude, by forging new conceptual tools that may prove themselves useful also in analysing other genres. To do so I drew elements from postmodern theories to first define the *content* of the attitude. The concept of 'simulacrum' (BAUDRILLARD 1981, FRANZINI 2018:151-153, GAMBLE 1998:305, JAMESON 1984) was of particular interest to me. This well-known term basically implies that nothing new can be created in postmodern times, so all we can do is recycling. But there is recycling and recycling, so I compared different popular music genres to find some archetypes. The result is a five simulacra-types model that I shall briefly present now, and that is a vital part of my draft theory. The most important difference between the five types is that some of them are 'integral' simulacra, while others are 'eclectic' simulacra. The meaning of this is quite intuitive: while an integral simulacrum simulates one single style in all of its aspects, often with a special taste for a certain kind of 'vintage feeling' (PANOSETTI 2013, REYNOLDS 2011), an eclectic one draws elements from different styles and sometimes also tries to create

something new from their fusion (although this, strictly speaking, would probably be rejected from an integralist postmodern perspective). So, one of the other discrimination factors is whether there is or not an 'increment' – as I call it – in the final result. An 'increment', from my perspective, is a further level that the simulator can add to the simulated. Basically, it is not only about the music being in some way innovative or not, but it concerns the fact whether it tells us or not something different from what the object of its simulation already tells us, more in general.

The first kind of simulacrum is type-A simulacrum and it is exemplified by vaporwave. In this case the simulation is mainly integral, but there is an increment because vaporwave is a self-reflective genre, that often distorsts music connected with consumerism in order to criticize capitalism (BORN & HAWORTH 2017:640, GLITSOS 2018:102, NOWAK & WHELAN 2018:452, TANNER 2016:xi, KILLEEN 2018:627). In this case, parody is not that 'blank', just as Linda Hutcheon predicted in her debate against Frederic Jameson (TANNER 2016:31). Type-B simulacrum is perfectly represented by another genre in which Mark Fisher's adaptation of Derrida's concept of hauntology (DERRIDA 1993, FISHER 2012, REYNOLDS 2011) is central: synthwave. Think about the soundtracks from movies and series like *Stranger Things*, *Drive* or *It Follows*. That kind of 'retrofuturistic' music integrally simulates a certain kind of electronica typically connected with sci-fi contexts in the Eighties… yet it is just a nostalgia game. No one would argue that synthwave is as 'futuristic' and fresh today as the simulated genre was in the Eighties, nor that it actually adds anything to that music, except for some rare hybridizations – but that's not really the main point of that music, is it? Type-C simulacrum is, after all, just a variation of type-B, but it was important for me to create a distinct category capable of describing neoprogressive, another kind of prog music that I sought to put into the largest frame. Neoprogressive music is basically that kind of prog that actually doesn't really care for progress at all (ANDERTON 2016, MACAN 1997:197, MOORE 2001:67, STUMP 1997:233-235, 254, 265, 277), since it is just a simulacrum of the most famous form of classic

progressive rock: English symphonic prog (ANDERTON 2010). The fun fact is that, when the voters of my survey had to judge the 'level of progressiveness' of two very different tracks, a significant majority of them was more generous with a neoprogressive song than they were with a much more literally progressive one. So there was a contradiction between the value of 'progress' and the actual preferences of a vast part of the fanbase. This music, which I could call 'regressive' indeed, does nothing different from what synthwave does, but while the latter would not proclaim itself 'futurist' today, neoprogressive fans often seem to believe it is progressive to recycle *today* what Genesis or Yes did fifty years ago. This wicked contradiction is what defines type-C simulacrum at its core, and this also introduces the concept of 'ambition' which is often opposed to that other concept that is 'irony'. Some simulacra present themselves in an ambitious and unironic way, just like neoprog does, pretending there is an increment even if there is not necessarily one. The opposition between irony and ambition is indeed what distinguishes type-D simulacrum from type-E, as well. Both these simulacra-types, in facts, incorporate an eclectic kind of simulation, but while type-E is openly ironic, type-D, as an example of ambitious eclectic simulation with actual increment, isn't. Since the focus of my research was type-D – because it is exemplified by that kind of progressive music that I called post-progressive – type-E remains mostly undefined, and I also suspect that further differentiations might be possible. Anyway, I argue that the content of progressive attitude is well described by type-D simulacrum, since post-progressive is basically the opposite of neoprogressive: it does not replicate the semblance of classic progressive rock, yet its original impulse towards progress, and applies it to different musical sources in an eclectic way.

So, how does all of this translate into a theory of music genre? We will get there soon enough, but, before that, let's try to resolve the ambiguity between prog and experimental music using the tools I just presented to you. Keeping in mind that progressive music (or, at

least, that part of it that is not openly regressive) can be interpreted as a type-D simulacrum, the main differences between prog and experimental are three, from what I can tell:

1. Progressive music tries to push the boundaries of popular music *without breaking them*, while experimental music often does. To understand this, we can easily associate reformism to progressive, and revolution to experimental, as two radically different ways of moving forward, in politics as well as in music. Prog usually aims for results that are still appetible for a relatively wide audience, unlike experimental.

2. Progressive music promotes a horizontal differentiation of the output of every single artist that is not necessarily as valuable inside experimental popular music communities. If we consider the variety of sounds and styles offered by many prog artists throughout their whole discographies, it is something much more diverse than what most experimental artists have to offer, in terms of variety.

3. Progressive music is indeed closely related to postmodernism and in particular to the concept of simulacrum. It is part of the game's rules to recycle styles in a creative way and to search for something new inside what is already known, while experimental music often tries to go even further and to play with completely new sounds and musical languages.

So, the experimental issue seems to be solved. To finally understand the relationship between progressive and limbo genres as well, we should now move forward, to the very core of my draft theory. As I tried to further define the *form* of the progressive attitude, I had to borrow ideas from existing theories on popular music genre, especially the ones elaborated by Franco Fabbri, Jennifer Lena and Angel Quintero Rivera respectively. They are very different theories, and this is why I think they are kind of complementary to each other. Let's find out which elements from every single theory were useful to my conceptualization of the progressive attitude:

1. Fabbri defines the music genre as «a set of musical events (real or possible) whose course is governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules» (FABBRI 1982:52). I am convinced by the fact that the acceptance (and the creation) of rules by the audience is a matter of great importance. Moreover, Fabbri argues that new genres are born from old ones when the latter become too predictable and so transgressions of rules are welcomed (FABBRI 1981:51).

2. Lena observes that new genres are indeed often born from old ones, indirectly confirming and further specifying Fabbri's intuition. She argues that, once a genre has reached its peak of popularity its decadence can lead to two opposite results: either the genre enters into the traditionalist phase and fans try to bring back to life the genre's roots and purity, or a new avant-garde genre is formed, usually drawing inspiration from the impulse that was behind original one, yet fostering innovation and hybridization (LENA 2012:52). This is what happened to progressive rock, when traditionalist neoprog and innovative post-prog where born from its supposed death.

3. Quintero Rivera's theory is a key factor in my hybrid draft theory, since he argues that some music genres are something more similar to 'manners of making music' that prevent elements of style from becoming mannerisms (QUINTERO 1998:22). Then, Fabbri's rules can be interpreted in a more fluid way, and the philosophy behind a genre becomes more important than the actual sonic incarnations of it.

But how to explain the closeness between prog and limbo genres from here? Well, this is where my five simulacra-types model steps in once again. As Fabbri argues (FABBRI 1982:52), indeed, conceptualizing genres as mathematical sets is useful also because we can thus easily think about intersections between different sets (or genres). I argue that such intersections can be triggered when different genres share the same simulacrum-type, as often happens with examples from the limbo genres that I analysed. Moreover, whenever those examples also feature some of the other typical traits of prog, which may be more

superficial but still quite relevant to the fans, they can be easily canonized by at least a part of the prog community – as it often happens, for instance, with post-rock music (CHUTER 2015:1-4, 62-63, LEECH 2017:7). Beyond that, there is no real musical distinction between the two. It's just a matter of legitimation by the fanbase.

This is where I thought that, maybe, this model could also tell us something more not only about prog, but on other genres as well, especially the ones that found their birth in the postmodern era, possibly as avant-garde genres raised from the fall of a pre-existing genre. I tried to superficially apply my model to two more genres in particular: post-punk and black metal, and, once again, things seemed to work to me. DIY approaches (HESMONDALGH 1997, MANKOWSKI 2014, REYNOLDS 2005) and heathen influences (GRANHOLM 2011, KAHN-HARRIS 2007:40, VENTURI 2019) respectively seem to play the same role the progressive attitude plays in the context of prog, as they are other «manners of making music». And such manners may also imply the involvement of the aforementioned simulacra-types, that could link them to other genres as well. There is no room here to go deeper into the matter of those specific genres, but I hope that someone with a better knowledge of them will be interested in further testing and developing my theory by analysing other postmodern genres with the conceptual tools it offers.

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