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Lost in the Stream. Concept Album in the Age of Streaming

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We all thought concept album was dead. Not only once, but twice at least: the first time when the supposed death of progressive rock took place in the late Seventies. The origins of the concept album (Follero, 2009; Shute, 2013) can in fact be traced back to the mid Sixties (Beach Boys, Beatles, Zappa), but such an album format has been more widely exploited by prog bands during the following decade, becoming one of the trademarks of that genre (Macan, 1997). What better format could indeed answer to the hunger for sophistication and to the presumed highbrow intents of many progressive artists, than a kind of album that – using Lori Burns' words – «sustains a central message or advances the narrative of a subject through the intersections of lyrical, musical and visual content» (Burns, 2016)? Yet concept album was not dead, and actually came back multiple times in the decades to follow (think of artists as diverse as Prince, Iron Maiden, Kate Bush, XTC, Dream Theater and Radiohead). The second death of concept album was a very easy one to predict, as soon as it became clear that streaming services were changing our way of consuming music in many ways (Johansson, 2019). It is probably needless to say that there seems to be no place for the concept album format as people are more and more used to listening to individual songs or to song agglomerates that do not respond to the necessity of creating a coherent musical *Werk* by an artist, yet to put together songs created by different authors, which share a mood, a time and place, or a position in the charts. Of course, I am talking about playlists, which are among the major agents of the on-going transformation of our musical consumption's habits (Hagen, 2015). In general, we can say that the battle looks like a worthless one: on the one side there is a struggle to get the listener's attention for a

prolonged amount of time, used as everyone is to the atomisation of music consumption – and this is valid for the album format in general (Olivier, 2018; Wener, 2006); on the other side there is not even a real necessity for labels to continue releasing music in the form of albums, since, after all, what brings most of the royalties is the single hit songs, so all of the surrounding tracks are nothing more than small “extras”. In line with these intuitions, Scott Hiller and Jason Walter’s economic analysis of this matter has demonstrated that the album format is no longer the best kind of investment for labels and artists (Hiller & Walter, 2015), and so – they argue – it is natural to think that the music industry will soon adapt to the new affordances offered by the digital context.

But something peculiar is happening, as some articles on magazines have been highlighting since the very beginning of the streaming era (Lynskey, 2015; Wener, 2006): not only an undying interest for concept albums, but maybe even a new golden age for the same format, since actually many mainstream artists have recently released concept albums – and not rarely very successful ones. Among the most famous artists releasing concept albums in the last fifteen years or so we can find Coldplay, Green Day, Kendrick Lamar, Björk, Beyoncé, Daft Punk and Muse. Of course, a lot of minor artists coming from the post-progressive realm have been releasing plenty of concept albums these days as well, with notably some of the progressive metal main acts – like Riverside and Pain of Salvation – producing almost *exclusively* concept albums throughout their whole careers, but this is less surprising, since it is somehow expected from post-progressive artists to carry on features that are typical (or stereotypical) of their parent-genre. What is probably most important about the reliance on the album format – and this is especially true when it comes to concept albums – is the capability of generating broader narrative worlds surrounding the music. The album is a «world-builder» (Olivier, 2018) and can sometimes inspire a whole «concept spectacle» (Burns, 2016), thus delivering a frame for music videos, short films, live concert sceneries and whatever else one might think of – just like one of the most ambitious conceptual

productions from the past, Pink Floyd's *The Wall*, has taught us. So, this is probably the main reason why concept albums have not given up fighting against the streaming yet – and it is also why they are still capable of fascinating at least a part of the audience.

So, while some articles argue in favour of a resurgence of the concept album format (Lynskey, 2015; Wener, 2006), others are more convinced that such a format is doomed, together with the album format in general (Hiller & Walter, 2015; Olivier, 2018). The lack of scholarly accounts and of precise data on this matter leaves me somewhere in the middle, from where I can only state a persistence of interest for such a format despite all the expectations, and take with me some easily retrievable statistics to reinforce my statement. In fact, with the Google “Trends” utility you can easily find out how frequently a term has been searched on Google within a given frame of time. The results for my query about the term “concept album” demonstrate that, from 2004 to the present, there has not been any significant drop in interest: there are some peaks here and there – especially in 2004/05 – but today's values are not very different from those of 2007/08, for instance. If you confront these results with the “trends” about the word ‘CD’ you get an idea of what a *real* drop in interest is. Curiously, among the related terms we can find BTS, a South-Korean boy band that released several concept albums, demonstrating that even the younger audience is still willing to engage with music that implies a wider narrative or thematic frame.

Given this general context, I would now like to focus on some case studies capable of highlighting four contemporary ways of trying to keep the unitarity of the concept album as musical *Werk* and world-builder alive. That is: how do artists not just swim against the stream and still create concepts in the age of atomisation, but also take advantage of the digital context to deliver unique musical and narrative experiences? As you shall see, some of the ways I am going to highlight are more alike to acts of resistance, while others are more interested in exploiting the potential of contemporary media – a situation that also reflects a more general duality of attitudes towards the new era we are living in. Yet, with

this final conceptual sketch, I would like to focus more on what the digital era can inspire in the creative minds that are willing to embrace a new world of affordances – instead of singing litanies for a supposedly long-lost golden era of music swapped away by streaming services.

The first form of concept album survival is the intermedial one. Here we need to go beyond the musical text, to take into account other surrounding media that contribute to the world-building process (Corbella, 2015). By doing so, artists are capable of going beyond the single song and offer to the fans intermedial worlds definitely worth exploring. It works the same way Lori Burns (2016) described in her article on Coldplay's *Mylo Xyloto*, but here I am going to use two different examples, probably more linked with the digital dimension. My examples are two because the first is strictly connected with a single album by the British post-prog master Steven Wilson – while the second is more general in its approach, capable of creating a wider narrative frame in which every album of the discography finds its place – and here I am referring to the grotesque lore created by the Swedish band Ghost.

Let's start with Wilson. His album *Hand. Cannot. Erase* (2015) is a narrative concept (in which every song tells a part of a general story) loosely inspired by the story of Joyce Carol Vincent, a British woman who, despite her popularity among friends, died alone in her city apartment in 2003, without anyone noticing her death until three years later (Simon, 2015). Lyrics are not the only mean Wilson decided to use to tell his version of the story. First of all, there were two music videos anticipating the album: the first for the trip-hoppy 'Perfect Life' and the second for the titletrack, which also introduced the main character of the concept, portrayed by the same actress that was also to be featured in many of the videos screened during the live shows – in which of course the album was played in its entirety. Thanks to the collaboration with the Israeli singer Ninet Tayeb, Wilson was also able to make his female protagonist sing on the song 'Routine', thus creating an even more layered representation of the concept. Yet probably the most interesting feature of *Hand. Cannot. Erase*. is its official website (Wilson, 2015), which was launched in the middle of the

promotional campaign preceding the album's publication and was periodically updated with entries from the protagonist's diary in the form of blog-like posts. Some of the entries were accompanied by photos portraying the characters the fans had already met in the videoclips, edited in such a fashion that they really looked like personal pictures the protagonist had taken at different stages of her life. Besides exploiting some of the possibilities offered by the internet to expand the narrative world created by the album, Wilson also thematises a possible problem related with the digitalisation of the reality. In an interview (Simon, 2015), he states that the line «Download the life you wish you had» included in the album's lyrics points to the way in which social networks can often work as anti-social agents, since they only give us the illusion of communication, while we can still be isolated, just like the protagonist of the concept.

Ghost is a band focusing more on the performative level of the conceptual world-creation. Their albums are not really "concepts", but are indeed situated within a wider narrative frame that lives, once again, mainly on the internet and on the stage. Everyone in the band is disguised as a "Nameless Ghoul" (and also credited as such) except for the leader, Tobias Forge (whose identity was actually unknown until 2017), who is disguised as an anti-pope – or, more recently, a cardinal. Moreover, at the end of every "era" (usually an album-tour cycle) the pope is deposed on stage and replaced by his successor (always portrayed by Forge). Lately things are growing more complicated, as the anti-pope – currently Papa Emeritus IV – is being accompanied by new characters as well, like Papa Nihil or Sister Imperator. The absence of identity gives the band the opportunity to play not only with their music, but also with their identities and fictional background stories (Hoad, 2018), building a grotesque narrative world that has recently colonised the world of short films as well. In fact, Ghost periodically release videos on YouTube in which the stories of the characters are further developed, contextually to the launch of new singles or the announcement of new tour dates. As the band's fame is growing bigger and bigger, Ghost's stage production

is also allowing grand sceneries and more sophisticate gags, involving more characters and costumes. A true “concept spectacle” (Burns, 2016)!

The second form in which concept albums can find their way to the ears of contemporary listeners is the intertextual one (Lacasse, 2000). Nothing really special going on here, maybe except for the fact that this is also happening in the very mainstream of music. Indeed, last year’s ruler of the Grammys *When We All Fall Asleep Where Do We Go?* (2019) by Billie Eilish is not just a collection of really successful singles like ‘Bad Guy’ or ‘Bury A Friend’, but also a sort of thematical concept album (meaning that all songs are kept together by a common theme) on the monsters that dwell in our dreams: a reflection of our weaknesses and fears (Mench, 2019). I argue that the sense of organicity of the album is strongly reinforced not only by the shared themes, but also by some intertextuality we can witness within songs. There is no need to dig very deeply to find bounds between songs that are as strong as mentioning (totally or partially) the title of one song in the lyrics of another one. For instance, ‘llo milo’ references ‘Bury a Friend’ with the line «the friends I’ve had to bury they keep me up at night», while the latter song refers directly to the title of the album, and the closing ‘Goodbye’ directly mentions ‘All the Good Girls Go to Hell’ and ‘Bad Guy’ (but also several other songs, indirectly), also reprising many of the hooks from the entire album. The songs are thus shouting their proximity to other songs that have to be experienced as well, in order to get the full picture of the world built by the album.

The third way I would like to briefly present is the interactive one, exemplified by the so called “Album Apps”. Like the first way, and perhaps even more, this one really takes advantage of the affordances offered by the digital age, by offering to the listener a kind of experience that was not possible prior to our entrance in the new era of digitised music. It is kind of a contemporary version of the “open work” we could already find in some of last century’s avant-garde music (Sa Dias, 2014), but it cannot as easily be exploited by every artist, because its creation involves competences and budget that go far beyond what most

artists can afford. Of course, cheaper versions of interactivity are possible, like remixing campaigns akin to those launched by Nine Inch Nails (Wikström, 2019) or Pendulum, but this does not necessarily have anything to do with creating narrative worlds or reinforcing the organicity of the album – a thing that is more likely to happen with an album app, which often requires a concept behind its design and its very reason of existence. On the other side, it is more accessible for the wider audience than a traditional open work, and it is thus perhaps possible to predict a future popularisation of the format (Sa Dias, 2014). The case of Björk's *Biophilia* (2011) album app is a good example of how an app can brilliantly serve a concept. The application is actually a container for several sub-apps, one for every song of the album (which was also released in traditional formats), with every one of them offering a different way to interact with the concept and structure of the songs (Dibben, 2013). As there is a “mother app”, there is also a “father concept” that justifies the way in which everything works. Once again, we can define it as a thematical concept album, revolving around the relationship between nature, technology and music (*ibid.*). This link is further developed, since Björk's idea of the touchscreen being a more intuitive way of interacting with music resonates with the thematization of nature and technology, by emphasising the “instinctive” element via the interaction with a piece of highly developed technology (*ibid.*). The way in which the interaction is possible often involves natural elements, like crystals and constellations, in the design of the apps, and of course such choices are related with the lyrics of every song, in a general attempt to increase the interest of people in music-making (Sa Dias, 2014). In addition to this, the album's organicity has been emphasised outside the app's domain as well, namely by the costumes used by Björk on stage, and by the concert film later to be distributed in theatres.

The last way in which the concept album survives in the contemporary scene I would like to present here is the one I call “interstylistic”, and has more to do with the musical material itself. There are certain artists – like the Scandinavian bands Pain of Salvation and

Ulver – that re-create their sound basically from draft every time they release a new album. I am not saying that they do this to *deliberately* strengthen the organicity of their albums (which are always concept albums in the case of Pain of Salvation, but the same cannot be said in Ulver's), but that is actually what happens. Pain of Salvation started the transformation process in 2004, with the album *Be*, a very eclectic album featuring an orchestra. Its follow-up, *Scarsick*, was released in 2007 and featured a more straight-forward selection of influences, ranging from rap and industrial, to punk and even disco music. The two following albums, *Road Salt One* (2010) and *Two* (2011) featured a completely vintage sound, heavily influenced by classic hard rock and blues. 2017's *In the Passing Light of Day* marked the return to more metal-oriented sounds, but in a very different fashion from what the band used to do back in the early 2000s. In such a context, songs from the same album are so different from those taken from other albums, that they almost stick together in an automatic way. They call for a certain kind of organic listening experience – something particularly important since every single Pain of Salvation's album is a concept album. As I said, this is less pertinent when talking about Ulver, since only few of their albums can be considered as concept albums. Yet Ulver manage to take the transformational process at an even higher level, with more diversity involved, creating a strong sense of discontinuity between tracks belonging to different albums. Also, it may be relevant to highlight the fact that one of their latest albums, *The Assassination of Julius Caesar* (2017), which marked one of the strongest stylistic shifts in Ulver's discography, is indeed a concept album, just as it was 1998's *Themes from William Blake's 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell'*, which saw the first major detachment from the black metal style featured in the previous albums. But there was no such thing as a threat for the album format, back then. At this point, we should ask ourselves if today's situation is actually *that* different, or if the streaming is actually only stimulating artists in the task of finding new ways to keep their conceptual offers always exciting and fresh for their audience.

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