

Embracing the Digital: Expressive Artifice in the SoundCloud Digital Underground

Honors Thesis in Modern Culture and Media

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Introduction

one: SoundCloud and platform capitalism

For the past 16 years, if you wanted to find the internet's newest and most exciting music, SoundCloud has been the place to look. Founded in Berlin in 2007 by Swedish sound designer Alexander Ljung and Swedish electronic musician Eric Wahlforss and launched in 2008, SoundCloud is an online streaming platform known for hosting upcoming and semi-professional artists. One of the most interesting scenes on the platform to emerge in recent years is what I am calling the SoundCloud digital underground. The SoundCloud digital underground is less a definite genre and more a collection of internet-based young artists making music combining electronic and trap influences using digital production software. I argue that the SoundCloud digital underground does not just use this software, but actively harnesses it by making digital technology central to its practice and refusing to conceal it.

SoundCloud has long been a particularly generative space for sonic cultural production and experimentation because of its social emphasis and low barrier to entry, but it is not without its problems. For example, buffalobang, a white Swedish artist who is part of the underground collective Boys Nights Out, remarks that SoundCloud “played a huge part” in the development of the underground in general and for him specifically, continuing, “i wouldn't know where else to post music when i first began as a 15 year old, its like the only platform you dont need a distributor for so i think it helped shape a lot of scenes, it allows any kid to just post whatever. i made all of my closest friends and collaborators through our music on soundcloud.”¹

¹ buffalobang, email message to author, October 31, 2023.

buffalobang's testimony speaks to the fact that SoundCloud has in some respects democratized the ability to get your music out there to a wide audience.

Over time, SoundCloud has moved away from its “producer-oriented” origins and become more “platformized,” or streamlined into a monetizable service.² SoundCloud began in 2007 as “something that would enable artists to share and connect through music,” according to its founder, Alexander Ljung, but has since moved away from this focus under the pressure to become a profitable company.³ A large part of what made SoundCloud popular in the first place was its emergence as a hub for DJs and other electronic music producers, many of whom took advantage of the platform's lax policies on copyright enforcement to upload unauthorized remixes and compilations of other artists' music. This practice fell within the lineage of other, older music sharing modalities such as pirate radio. SoundCloud intentionally fostered this environment to establish itself as a hub for underground music production and has absorbed many years of financial losses; in fact, it recorded an annual profit for the first time in 2023.⁴

However, SoundCloud's attempts at monetizing its platform have undermined its claims to accessibility and alienated many of its early supporters. Sociologists David Hesmondhalgh, Ellis Jones, and Andreas Rauh explain that “the sense of a demotic and interactive abundance that underpins the service is doubly compromised: first, because of the problematic ‘culture of connectivity’ and data-mining that underpin social media and other platforms with social-media features, and second, because it must manage conflicts of interest between its users and

² David Hesmondhalgh, Ellis Jones, and Andreas Rauh, “Soundcloud and Bandcamp as Alternative Music Platforms,” *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 4 (October-December 2019): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119883429>.

³ Hesmondhalgh, Jones, and Rauh, “Soundcloud and Bandcamp,” 3.

⁴ Elias Leight, “Soundcloud Has Been Preparing to Sell for over a Year,” *Billboard*, January 8, 2024, <https://www.billboard.com/business/streaming/soundcloud-preparing-to-sell-1235578246/>.

rightsholders.” For example, SoundCloud introduced the repost feature in late 2012, which allowed users to promote other users’ tracks on their profiles. The feature was widely abused to artificially boost streams and was reviled by many users.⁵ The ability to repost tracks made SoundCloud more competitive and gamified, as creators vied to earn reposts from other popular creators, and an informal economy of buying and selling reposts formed.⁶ In 2014, SoundCloud introduced ads and a paid subscription to avoid them, marking its first major attempt to monetize its then 350-million-users-per-month strong user base.⁷

Reposts and subscriptions contribute to the “culture of connectivity” that Hesmondhalgh, Jones, and Rauh describe, where users are constantly attempting to raise their status on the platform through alliances and data analytics. This is extended by SoundCloud’s practice of mining user listening data and selling it back to artists in the form of “Insights,” a page on artists’ profiles which shows listening trends but is mostly paywalled behind the “SoundCloud Next Pro” package, which costs \$99/year. The authors also detail how once SoundCloud began making licensing deals with major labels, they started to crack down on copyright violations, undercutting the community of artists and listeners who had nourished the platform in the first place.⁸ This made SoundCloud inhospitable for many producers and remixers. As a result of all of these policies, music journalists Dani Deahl and Casey Newton argue that “making it on

⁵ Dani Deahl and Casey Newton, “How Soundcloud’s Broken Business Model Drove Artists Away,” *The Verge*, July 21, 2017, <https://www.theverge.com/2017/7/21/15999172/soundcloud-business-model-future-spotify-streaming>.

⁶ Deahl and Newton, “Broken Business Model.”

⁷ Lara O’Reilly, “Soundcloud Introduces Ads,” *Marketing Week*, October 15, 2014, <https://www.marketingweek.com/soundcloud-introduces-ads/>.

⁸ Hesmondhalgh, Jones, and Rauh, “Soundcloud and Bandcamp,” 6.

SoundCloud came to be seen as a stepping stone, not the end goal” for emerging artists.⁹ In recent times, artists who succeed in gaining a following on SoundCloud move to “streaming,” the community’s name for Spotify, Apple Music, and other dominant streaming platforms; notably, SoundCloud is not included in this category. But this is partially why SoundCloud is such an intuitive home for the underground: it is an incubator for new talent and sounds that have not yet hit the mainstream, and many artists intentionally use it as such.

two: the SoundCloud digital underground and its scenes

“Everyone get your phones out!” says mayh3mp, a friend and musical collaborator of capoxxo, the Seattle-based hyperpop/glitchcore artist who is headlining the small underground show I’m at with my girlfriend and a close friend of mine. may is shirtless, wearing a top hat and sunglasses in the dark venue, and is making horse noises, a reference to his favorite drug, ketamine. Far from rejecting the phenomenon of concerts becoming social media spectacles, may is encouraging the audience to broadcast the show, widening the horizons of the intimate space to connect with fans all over the world through the medium that brought them together in the first place: the internet.

After two hours of opening acts of varying quality (shout out to xaviersobased, the highlight of the openers), capoxxo has finally entered the stage, flanked by mayh3mp as well as fellow artists dreamcache and keyblayde808. Trans-Pecos, the small self-described “avant music” venue where capo is playing, is packed with bodies and kinetic energy. capo is wearing a white fur headband, a black crop-top with the words “boy doll” on it, a studded black belt, and ripped black jeans. A few songs into the set, I hear the opening notes of “ouueeoueou,” the

⁹ Deahl and Newton, “Broken Business Model.”

definitive capoxxo track named after its earworm retro synth lead. The song is wistful and self-possessed, and capo's nasal vocals along with the whining synth are endlessly compelling. It takes me back to the countless times I listened to it alone in my room during the height of the pandemic lockdowns, and I marvel at how I'm now experiencing it in person, surrounded by fellow fans.

capoxxo and mayh3mp are part of an exhilarating music scene and burgeoning subculture that I am calling the SoundCloud digital underground. Cultural theorist Will Straw defines scenes in the context of cultural studies, writing:

Scenes, I suggest, might be seen as all of the following: as *collectivities* marked by some form of proximity; as *spaces of assembly* engaged in pulling together the varieties of cultural phenomena; as *workplaces* engaged (explicitly or implicitly) in the transformation of materials; as *ethical worlds* shaped by the working out and maintenance of behavioural protocols; as *spaces of traversal and preservation* through which cultural energies and practices pass at particular speeds and as *spaces of mediation* which regulate the visibility and invisibility of cultural life and the extent of its intelligibility to others.¹⁰

Straw offers us multiple perspectives on what constitutes a scene, centering around the methods of cultural exchange that scenes deploy. The SoundCloud digital underground can be examined through all of these lenses. It consists of a collectivity of young people drawn to the creation and consumption of music that is heterogeneous but could generally be described as basing itself in a confluence of hip-hop, EDM, pop, and electronic music, with other inspirations specific to certain artists and subgenres. It brings these young people together, sometimes physically as in

¹⁰ Will Straw, "Some Things a Scene Might Be," *Cultural Studies* 29, no. 3 (July 30, 2014): 476–85, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09502386.2014.937947>, 477.

the Trans-Pecos concert, but most often digitally on platforms like Discord, Instagram, TikTok, and SoundCloud itself. As a space of assembly, it serves as a place for the different subgroups of internet musicians to gather and exchange sounds and ideas. It is a decentralized virtual workplace forged in the flames of COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, linking thousands of artists making music using DAWs (Digital Audio Workstations) in their bedrooms together through the internet. The ethical world of the SoundCloud digital underground revolves around online interactions and vernacular, its own pattern of sociality. It is primarily a space of traversal rather than preservation, rapidly evolving and discarding obsolete elements as fast as it generates them. Finally, the SoundCloud digital underground is a space of mediation, surfacing a subset of lived experience to a wider audience while also remaining largely submerged and imperceptible.

The SoundCloud digital underground as I see it dates back to around 2019, but really blossomed in 2020 with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, as a generation of young people stuck in their rooms with nothing to do except use the internet began to come together and make music. It is composed of a variety of subgenres that are themselves evolving and often overlap, including digicore, hyperpop, glitchcore, and scenecore. All of these subgenres are characterized by electronic production and heavy vocal modulation, and they are grounded in intense affect and a level of overstimulation that is difficult to listen to at first, but difficult to stop listening to once you're used to it. I have named the SoundCloud digital underground as such not just because SoundCloud is the primary platform on which its artists release music, or because it's relatively unknown and occurs on the internet, but also because its aesthetic identity is actively centered around embracing digital technology and experimenting with its capacities to a greater extent than mainstream artists.

“Mainstream” from the perspective of SoundCloud digital underground artists refers to popular music of the late 2010s and the 2020s, which is mainly pop and hip-hop. Even more than any particular genre label, “mainstream” is an amorphous designation. Cultural theorist Sarah Thornton points out that the best performing singles at any given time are an agglomeration of “the buying patterns of many taste cultures, rather than a monolithic mainstream,” and there really is no one sound that defines the mainstream.¹¹ With that being said, the term “mainstream” is a useful proxy for the dominant musical styles that SoundCloud digital underground artists are outside of, and “mainstream” music certainly exists as a cultural concept even if not as a stable category. Mainstream in this context refers to wildly commercially successful music which thrives on streaming platforms like Spotify and Apple Music, as opposed to SoundCloud.

SoundCloud digital underground artists’ approach to aesthetics is markedly different from that of mainstream artists in their use of vocal processing and video editing software with no intention to conceal them, and in fact, making the intensified and obvious use of these effects key to their styles. A typical digicore track, a name that itself signifies the inherently digital nature of the scene, consists of sung vocals that are maximally AutoTuned and strewn through with quick vocal chops known as glitches, laid over and/or woven into a beat that draws equally from trap percussion (the key element of the trap music genre, which originated in the southern United States at the turn of the millennium and centers around hard-hitting synthetic drum sequences) and EDM synth melodies. The main vocal line is usually accompanied by harmonies and ‘ad-libs,’ short phrases or vocalizations occurring during or at the end of each line or ‘bar’ of the lyrics which also derive from trap music. YouTube videos in the digital underground are heterogeneous, but often feature off-kilter filters and overlaid images and animations drawn from

¹¹ Sarah Thornton, “The Social Logic of Subcultural Capital,” essay, in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton, 1997.

anime, cartoons, and video games. They also incorporate elements of other existing media, such as clips from live streams and social media.

Hyperpop is considered both a current subgenre and a progenitor of the SoundCloud digital underground because it is a multifaceted designation with multiple groups of artists that arguably fall into it. Of course, all genre labels are socially and corporately constructed conventions – “hyperpop” was popularized as a term because Spotify used it as the title of a playlist – and it is an uphill battle to definitively categorize artists into certain genres and subgenres. In light of this, I take common usage as my lodestar for making these classifications.

Hyperpop originally and most prominently refers to a group of artists clustered around or inspired by English music producer A. G. Cook’s PC Music label, which hosted SOPHIE and Charli XCX, two pioneering artists in the genre.¹² Carrie Battan, writing for *The New Yorker*, described PC Music in 2021 as a group that “latched onto the most exuberant and absurd elements of pop, making cutesy, theatrical songs that sounded a bit like children’s music, but with an unsettling aftertaste.”¹³ 100 geecs, an American music duo that consists of Dylan Brady and Laura Les, is a group that is also associated with this initial wave of hyperpop, and is most responsible for hyperpop’s rise to prominence. 100 geecs’ music was described by Will Pritchard for *The Independent* in 2020 as “full-blown aural assaults that take hyperpop to its most extreme, and extremely catchy, conclusions: stadium-sized trap beats processed and distorted to near-

¹² Will Pritchard, “Hyperpop or Overhyped? The Rise of 2020’s Most Maximal Sound,” *The Independent*, December 17, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/hyperpop-genre-2020-charli-xcx-rina-sawayama-b1775025.html>.

¹³ Carrie Battan, “The Brash, Exuberant Sounds of Hyperpop,” *The New Yorker*, August 2, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/08/09/the-brash-exuberant-sounds-of-hyperpop>.

destruction, overwrought emo vocals and cascades of ravey arpeggios.”¹⁴ The ascendance of 100 geecs directly led to the popularization of “hyperpop” as a term and a genre, as it prompted Lizzy Szabo, an editor at Spotify, to create the official Spotify “hyperpop” playlist in August 2019.¹⁵

The second wave of hyperpop is closely related to the SoundCloud digital underground. It refers to a group of young artists who collaborated mostly on the virtual community platform Discord and released their music on SoundCloud starting in around 2017. Artists like ericdoa, d0llywood1, glaive, and angelus are associated with this second wave of hyperpop. However, some of these artists disagree with their placement under the hyperpop umbrella, and this group is often referred to as ‘digicore.’ SoundCloud digital underground artist and writer Maria Kate, also known as mars, describes the genesis of digicore: “Back in early 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic forced young people to be online and indoors even more than they already were, and one result was new music genres popped off from artists’ bedrooms. Most notable was the fusion of hyperpop and SoundCloud rap, which transformed what had been swirling as ‘the scene’ or ‘the underground’ into a genre some call digicore and others hesitate to put a name on.”¹⁶ Kate’s description speaks to digicore’s more hip-hop based song structure and vocal style as compared to hyperpop proper, and its in some ways more raw and playful sound versus the more explicitly experimental first wave of hyperpop.

¹⁴ Pritchard, “Hyperpop.”

¹⁵ Ben Dandridge-Lemco, “How Hyperpop, a Small Spotify Playlist, Grew into a Big Deal,” *The New York Times*, November 10, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/10/arts/music/hyperpop-spotify.html>.

¹⁶ Maria Kate, “Blackwinterwells on Her New Album, Anime, and Catching the Drain Flu,” *Finals*, April 29, 2022, <https://finals.blog/posts/blackwinterwells-on-her-new-album-anime-and-catching-the-drain-flu>.

The taxonomic debate over what qualifies as hyperpop is itself political and interwoven with questions of representation in the music industry. Writing about digicore in 2021, music journalist Sophie Walker summarizes and quotes ericdoa:

To neglect the scene by lumping it in with hyperpop on a playlist is far more than splitting hairs, but an issue of representation. Digicore, unlike PC Music which is largely white, is defined by artists of color who are at risk of being drowned out. “Oh yeah, we get mad,” says ericdoa. “They’re the face of pop music, they’re getting the articles, and sometimes we get left behind. Not everybody wants to give people who look like us a chance to be in the spotlight. Pop music has been run by people who are not people of color for a while, but that’s okay, because slowly we are getting representation as the originators of something different.”¹⁷

Walker and ericdoa argue that the conflation of digicore and hyperpop erases the uniqueness, sonically and demographically, of the chronologically and generationally younger digicore scene. It reflects the need for capitalism to classify and designate social phenomena into marketable and commodifiable units. Even the digicore label is synthetic in nature. Walker quotes Billie Bugara, an intermediary between SoundCloud and the digicore scene, “[recalling] being approached by SoundCloud to begin curating a playlist that captured the scene’s essence, mirroring the creation of hyperpop as a defined genre. ‘I literally told them, “They don’t want to be called anything, we can figure out a different way.” But they insisted that they needed to categorize this scene, they needed to call them something.’ Digicore was agreed as a formality, but it would never be instrumental to their identity; they want to create music as vast and lawless

¹⁷ Sophie Walker, “404 Error, Genre Not Found: The Life Cycle of Internet Scenes,” *Complex*, November 4, 2021, <https://www.complex.com/pigeons-and-planes/a/sophiewalker5/life-cycle-of-internet-genres-scenes-hyperpop-digicore-cloud-rap>.

as the internet itself, where rebellion isn't a radical act, but the norm."¹⁸ Walker draws out the subversive quality of the SoundCloud digital underground, its disobedient attitude towards mainstream music industry mores and its desire to capture something about mediation and digitality.

Image 1: screenshot from Paper Rad's "Welcome To My Homepage"



Regardless of whether 'hyperpop' is an accurate appellation for the SoundCloud digital underground, it is certainly *hyper*. The basis of its aesthetic is hyper-fragmented intensity. Its aesthetic is reminiscent in this respect of the work of Paper Rad, a Providence-based digital art collective active in the 2000s known for their net art experiments. Paper Rad made animations overflowing with bright colors, original and borrowed characters, and repetitive patterns, accompanied by original 8-bit soundtracks. They blitz the viewer, operating at such a frenetic frequency that it is impossible to comprehend everything at once on the first viewing, or even the

¹⁸ Walker, "404 Error."

second or third. For example, their 2002 video “Welcome To My Homepage,” features overlaid animation clips of animals, monsters, whirring machines, pixel art castles, and a dancing Bart Simpson. The video contains humor and a kind of celebration of the childish joy to be had with cultural symbols, but it is also critical of mass media iconography. Paper Rad member Jacob Ciocchi described Paper Rad’s attitude towards mass media as such: “Corporate companies make this garbage and then send it out into the world, and then culture makes sense of it and uses it productively.”¹⁹ “Welcome To My Homepage” is discordant, sometimes sweet and sometimes grotesque, and the music follows the vibe, fluctuating between exuberant euphoria and a more plodding and menacing beat. Throughout the video, the sense of visual information overload persists and accelerates, amplifying this uneasy ebullience.

Cultural theorist Fredric Jameson has characterized such fragmented aesthetics as postmodernism.²⁰ Jameson identifies two defining characteristics of postmodernism as pastiche and schizophrenia. By pastiche, he means parody without the sense of humor, an inability to imagine possible futures and a retreat into past forms, a theme that cultural critic Mark Fisher has expanded upon at length.²¹ By schizophrenia, he refers to a “breakdown of the relationship between signifiers,” following Lacan’s linguistic theory of psychosis.²² This breakdown also results in a “far more intense experience of any given present of the world than we do, since our own present is always part of some larger set of projects which force us selectively to focus our

¹⁹ “PAPER RAD,” *NET ART ANTHOLOGY*, accessed March 14, 2024, <https://anthology.rhizome.org/paperrad-org>.

²⁰ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” essay, in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Washington: Bay Press, 1983), 111–25.

²¹ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zer0 Books, 2009).

²² Jameson, “Postmodernism,” 119.

perceptions.”²³ Because the schizophrenic in Jameson’s account cannot make sense of the sensory stimuli they encounter, they perceive them as overwhelming and in fact consciously receive more sense impressions, as they cannot narrow down their perceptual field by focusing on what is important and relevant to them.

Paper Rad’s practice embodies both of these attributes and raises them to extremes. Their work presents a pastiche of 1990s’ “lo-fi” aesthetics, and it dramatically parades a flood of decontextualized signifiers in a digital void that highlights their absurdity. Beyond just niche artistic practices, Jameson sees the logic of postmodernism at play within the wider social landscape; the salience of artists like Paper Rad is that they expose and self-consciously play with this logic to expose the acceleration of the symbolic field in tandem with the expansion of the global economy that has taken place in the post-WWII world. Artists in the SoundCloud digital underground participate in this project of exposure through their musical and visual practices and hyper aesthetics.

three: SoundCloud and the digital underground

The scene that I am calling the SoundCloud digital underground uses hyper aesthetics and other digital-technology-enabled experimental practices to question and dispute the notion of authenticity in music and media as a whole. The SoundCloud digital underground is part of a lineage of artists experimenting with sound and visuals to tackle questions about the potentiality of technology in their practice since the 1960s, from pioneering video artist Nam June Paik to post-conceptual digital artist Cory Arcangel and Paper Rad themselves. Significantly, artists in the SoundCloud digital underground, who are almost all in their teens or early twenties, have

²³ Jameson, “Postmodernism,” 119.

come of age in a milieu in which these postmodern styles are the status quo, and are almost taken for granted as a starting point. The music and visuals of SoundCloud digital underground artists reflect this sociocultural positioning by working entirely within the digital field and pushing the boundaries of the accepted use of these technologies.

I argue in this thesis that artists in the SoundCloud digital underground dispute authenticity and experiment with the digital and artificial in order to express themselves, and in doing so highlight the constructedness of all media. They do this in two main ways. First, their music stretches the limits of the digital audio workstation (DAW) technology that they create music in by using it to distort and manipulate their vocals, undermining traditional narratives of vocal authenticity. Second, their visual aesthetics challenge authenticity, both through their replacement of cinematic immediacy and immersion in music videos with self-referential digitality by incorporating clips from social media and other digital video platforms, as well as their channeling and recontextualizing of older genres and styles which uncovers the contingency of subcultural aesthetics.

In Chapter 1 of this thesis, I show how the SoundCloud digital underground is characterized by a practice of *expressive artifice*, a form of cultural production which prioritizes unfettered expression that goes against established norms and utilizes specifically ‘artificial’ techniques and tools. I follow from subculture scholar Dick Hebdige’s studies of post-war British youth culture to theorize expressive artifice, which discards the notion of authenticity, which is itself artificial and constructed.²⁴ SoundCloud digital underground artists primarily enact expressive artifice through their vocals, modulating and multiplying them in ways that derive from traditions like the “vocal queering” used by trans and nonbinary artists as discussed by Max

²⁴ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Methuen, 1979).

Schaffer and Black R&B artists' experimentation with digital technology and virtuality in recorded vocals.²⁵

In Chapter 2, I examine two music videos from the SoundCloud digital underground in conjunction with new media scholars Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's notions of hypermediacy and remediation and their relationship with immediacy.²⁶ I find that music videos in the SoundCloud digital underground exhibit what I call *hyperremediation*, the incorporation of contemporary media forms into each other in a manner that disrupts immediacy and transparency and foregrounds the constructedness of the media object in question, and, by extension, all media objects. I also explore the SoundCloud digital underground subgenre known as scenecore, theorizing it as a product of *rhizomatic remediation* which emanates from the volatility of internet-based encounters combined with the automatic opportunism of the spread of commodities. I find that scenecore instantiates the SoundCloud digital underground's rejection of authenticity by disregarding the impulse towards creating immersion through its clear borrowing from an earlier subculture called scene. Finally, I discuss how SoundCloud digital underground music videos incorporate participatory culture and engage fans, engaging with the work of cultural theorists Henry Jenkins and Michel de Certeau to show how these videos promote and demonstrate the value of interconnectivity in the SoundCloud digital underground.²⁷ I discuss

²⁵ Max Schaffer, "Modulation & the Chaos-Trans Voice," *Max Schaffer*, December 9, 2019, <https://maxmadethat.com/publishing/transvocalmodulation>; Alexander G. Weheliye, "'Feenin,'" *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002): 31. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-20-2_71.

²⁶ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999).

²⁷ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), 24; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 174.

how this pushes back against the impulse for mastery long present in Western art and culture that originates in the Cartesian dualist framework.

In the conclusion to this thesis, I return to my discussion of SoundCloud as a corporate platform, and grapple with the news released during the writing of this work that SoundCloud has been put up for sale. I discuss how this relates to the state of the SoundCloud digital underground today, bringing in its newest incarnations and questioning what its future holds in the face of the vicissitudes of technocapitalism. The objective of this project is to describe and analyze the SoundCloud digital underground, a sorely understudied and wildly generative phenomenon, in order to tease out its subversive and innovative qualities as they relate to the state of the music industry and postmodern digital creative practice. I draw from a mix of popular and scholarly sources, as well as my own experiences as an artist in the SoundCloud digital underground, to demonstrate that the SoundCloud digital underground represents a new phase in cultural production in which young artists use contemporary digital tools to reject the veneer of authenticity in recorded music and experiment with new modalities of expression.

Chapter 1: Vocal Modulation and Expressive Artifice

track one: nocturnal DAWn

It's 3 a.m. and I am gripped with inspiration. I open up GarageBand, my digital audio workstation (DAW) of choice. GarageBand is a humble DAW, lacking the full functionality of the more expensive and commonly used FL Studio and Ableton, but it comes free with all Mac computers and it is what I'm used to. It does the trick for my purposes, allowing me to record vocals on various beats I find for free on YouTube. GarageBand, like most DAWs, is modeled after the multitrack tape recorder, which was invented in the 1950s to allow recording of multiple sounds at different times and playing them back synchronously, and features an interface with tracks that you can record vocals and digital or analog instruments into.

After finding and downloading a beat, I plug my microphone, an Audio-Technica AT2020, into my computer using an adapter and select my vocal preset, 'swag preset.' This is a 'chain' of effects including a hard low cut EQ (equalization) which cuts out the majority of the lower frequencies of my voice, 'PlatinumVerb' (reverb), 'Stereo Delay' which creates echoes of my voice that bounce between the listener's left and right ear, 'Chorus' which creates doubles of my voice with slightly different pitches, a compressor called OTT which lowers the louder frequencies and raises the lower ones, and, of course, Pitch Correct, GarageBand's native AutoTune. I lay down some vocals in a one-take freestyle, then refine the lyrics and re-record until I'm satisfied. Once the recording is done, I cut up the audio files, represented visually as rectangles with waveforms in them, and copy and paste small fragments to create glitches and stutters. All of this takes about an hour, give or take, and it is all made possible by the DAW, an incredibly powerful tool for making music that allows anyone with a computer to record and

process vocals or create groundbreaking instrumentals in their bedroom. Digital media theorist Alexander R. Galloway states, “the computer is not an object, or a creator of objects, it is a process or active threshold mediating between two states,” and the DAW is no exception to this.¹ DAWs act as a way for artists to bring their own creativity and ideas into the world through digital means, mediating between the creative process and the musical product. What makes artists in the SoundCloud digital underground special is that they twist and amplify the interventions made possible by the DAW, foregrounding the process of mediation.

Artists in the SoundCloud digital underground go through routines just like mine to create beautiful and boundary-pushing works of art that embrace digitality and artifice to express themselves using the materials they have available. Mainstream artists have access to expert producers and the most up-to-date and advanced DAWs, while SoundCloud digital underground artists often approach the technology as amateurs and can only use free trials of DAWs or ‘cracked’ – pirated – versions of them, which are often out of date and lack full functionality. Most of these artists learn how to use their chosen DAW from YouTube tutorial videos and trial and error. Although this constrains their ability to make use of the DAW to some extent, particularly at the beginning of their musical career, it also encourages them to coopt the software for their own purposes, using it in experimental and unconventional ways. For example, SoundCloud digital underground artist blackwinterwells used her voice as a pluck sound on the outro of her track “IRIS,” essentially sampling her own voice and routing it into a virtual instrument channel so that she could “[play] it like it was a piano.”² buffalobang did something

¹ Alexander Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2012), 23.

² Eli Enis, “A Look at Hyperpop Production with Angelus, Blackwinterwells, and Alice Gas,” *Splice*, February 19, 2021, <https://splice.com/blog/look-at-hyperpop-production/>.

similar on his track “Softly (As Ever),” using the sound of his humming as a pad, or mellow ambient synth.³ These creative uses of vocals are one part of SoundCloud digital underground artist’s experimental ethos, as they test the limits of the DAW to unlock new potentialities and modalities of music-making.

SoundCloud digital underground artists also ‘overuse’ features that other artists may use to some extent, leaning into ‘artificial-sounding’ effects such as AutoTune, chorus, and compression, as well as techniques like harmony and glitch. To create a glitch/stutter effect, the artist cuts a section at the start of a word or phrase and copy-pastes it repeatedly before the original vocal, as I did on GarageBand. It is a practice so ubiquitous in the SoundCloud digital underground that it names its own microgenre, ‘glitchcore.’ English music journalist and theorist Simon Reynolds wrote in 2011 that “compared with the analog hardware that underpinned early house and techno, the digital software used by the vast majority of dance producers today has an inherent tendency towards maximalism.”⁴ He explains that this is due to the ability of an artist using a DAW to create as many layers of audio tracks as they want, as well as their capacity to infinitely tinker with the settings of each track or audio clip independently.⁵ This tendency has been seized on by SoundCloud digital underground artists, who carefully intersperse glitches and edits throughout their vocals and stack effects on each vocal track while also creating multiple layers of vocal lines. I will show that these artists go beyond previous uses of glitch by centering vocal glitches and finding new methods of utilizing them beyond just as a gimmick.

³ buffalobang, email message to author, October 31, 2023.

⁴ Simon Reynolds, “Maximal Nation,” *Pitchfork*, December 6, 2011, <https://pitchfork.com/features/article/8721-maximal-nation/>.

⁵ Reynolds, “Maximal Nation.”

I am interested in how these effects and techniques work to highlight the constructedness and inherent virtuality of vocal performance, rejecting authenticity as a salient category altogether. In this chapter, I will survey examples of this practice in music from the SoundCloud digital underground, review a history of the idea of authenticity in music as well as scholars' reactions to it, and present a theory of what I am calling expressive artifice to describe the work that SoundCloud digital underground artists are doing.

track two: *ihonestlymightjustgiveup* [paradigmatic remix]

“B-b-but I don’t trust you at all!” rings through my head at random times, a memory of glorious oversaturation and digital emotion. The affective and melodic peak of Black Louisiana-based former digicore artist d0llywood1’s standout 2020 track “*ihonestlymightjustgiveup*,” this line encapsulates the ethos of the SoundCloud digital underground’s approach to vocals. Buttressed by a bouncy synth bassline, thin but rich pads, a subtle driving sub bass, and energetic plucks, courtesy of producer Vagex, d0lly’s vocals are awash with plenitude, filling up the mix with multiple harmonic layers and preternaturally clean due to the deliberately maximal use of AutoTune and EQ technology available in the DAWs that SoundCloud digital underground artists use because of their convenience and potential. d0lly’s vox – a slang term/abbreviation for vocals – are flawless, excepting the moments she allows her unautotuned voice to shine through; they might strike an unfamiliar listener as exceedingly unnatural due to their clear modulation. Her vocals are also shot through with stutters/glitches, with almost every line starting with the first syllable repeated rapid-fire in a staccato fusillade. The overall effect is chill but lush, cybernetic but warm, modulated but emotional.

In “ihonestlymightjustgiveup,” d0lly sing-raps about putting more into friendships that she is getting out of them, musing on how even as she misses her friends, they are talking behind her back. The delivery in her main vocal line is laid-back and reserved, exuding a kind of resigned frustration mixed with ennui, while the background vocals feature higher-pitched harmonies and atmospheric choral ad-libs (backing vocals that deviate from the main line). The refrain that appears in the middle and end of the song consists of the line “And it’s pissin’ me off” repeated eight times in two sets of four, with each repetition within the set featuring a different pattern of glitches. Novelty is created within the monotonous through digital manipulation, with the repetition of certain words or syllables mirroring the feeling of being stuck on a sense of dissatisfaction. The song as a whole has a strong expressiveness even as it feels mired in artifice.

“ihonestlymightjustgiveup” is a paradigmatic – or paradigmatic – example of the “digicore” wave, or transitory genre, that emerged around 2020. It speaks to the SoundCloud digital underground’s negotiation of authenticity and creativity, and will serve as a jumping off point to analyze the way that vocal manipulation in the SoundCloud digital underground, pioneered by queer and Black artists, interacts with these concerns. In this chapter, I will interrogate “ihonestlymightjustgiveup,” along with German non-binary digicore artist 5v’s “b4 u go,” in conjunction with existing literature about authenticity, vocal manipulation and glitch. These artists are strong examples of the creative use of digital technology characteristic of the underground, as well as representing the centrality of Black and trans voices in the scene. I will show that artists in the SoundCloud underground use digital audio workstation technology to manipulate and multiply their voices through time and space, in an expansive practice of what I will call expressive artifice.

track three: historico-authentica

Popular discourses herald authenticity as a prime value in music.⁶ Vocal performance is a privileged site of the production of this authenticity, and as a consequence, the rise of AutoTune pitch correction software has been perceived as a threat to authenticity in popular music. The name ‘AutoTune’ refers specifically to an audio processor plug-in for DAWs first released in 1997 by the company Antares Audio Technologies, but it has come to stand in for any pitch correction software, much like Band-Aid now refers to any adhesive bandage. The technology automatically shifts the pitch of each note in a vocal recording to its nearest correct pitch, ‘artificially’ smoothing out the vocal and making it more harmonically ‘correct.’ This quality has led many musicians and critics to oppose AutoTune, seeing it as degrading the authenticity of vocal performance.

Artists and critics have vocally decried the harms that they believe AutoTune has perpetrated on the music industry. American indie rock band Death Cab for Cutie was so incensed by the rise of AutoTune that they declared “war on AutoTune” at the 2009 Grammy awards, which *Guardian* journalist Sean Michaels characterized as the “fighting the ‘authentic’ fight.”⁷ *The Today Show* ran an article on their website in the same year entitled “Oh, my ears! Auto-Tune is ruining music,” explicitly contrasting music that uses AutoTune with “more

⁶ Simon Frith, introduction, in *Taking Popular Music Seriously: Selected Essays* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), xi.

⁷ Sean Michaels, “Death Cab for Cutie Declare War on Auto-Tune Abuse,” *The Guardian*, February 11, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/feb/11/death-cab-for-cutie-auto-tune>.

authentic sounding music.”⁸ Music critic Neil McKenzie encapsulated the sentiment behind these protests in a BBC article in 2013, bemoaning, “the singer is the human connection with the song...it's the soul and the heart, and it's the thing you lose when you correct every possible defect... A lot of my favourite singers, like Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen, don't have beautiful voices. They have character in their voice, and pitch correction is anti-character.”⁹ Underlying this appeal to ‘character’ is the conceptualization of the voice as a direct connection to the artist’s interiority and unique mode of expression, which AutoTune is thought to destroy.

A separate criticism of the use of AutoTune is that it allows artists with less vocal talent to become successful, devaluing the importance of virtuosic performance. Mixing engineer Alex Tumay points out the flaw in this argument by advocating for the power of AutoTune to “[open] the door for so many creative people to hit the notes they hear in their head.”¹⁰ He questions AutoTune’s detractors, “You'd rather only people born with a natural ability to sing to create music? Such a weird elitist view.”¹¹ Taken together, these comments reveal some of the tensions and possibilities that AutoTune has introduced, destabilizing traditional conceptions of musical value while enabling new forms of self-expression and creativity. SoundCloud digital underground artists throw these fears of the denigration of vocal authenticity to the wind, choosing to wholeheartedly adopt AutoTune in their creative practice.

⁸ Tony Sclafani, “Oh, My Ears! Auto-Tune Is Ruining Music,” *TODAY*, June 2, 2009, <https://www.today.com/popculture/oh-my-ears-auto-tune-ruining-music-1c9424663>.

⁹ Nick Holmes and Kevin Core, “Pitch Perfection? The ‘flawless’ Vocal and the Rise of Auto-Tune,” *BBC News*, May 17, 2013, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-22514705>.

¹⁰ Rose Lilah, “Young Thug Engineer Alex Tumay Destroys Any Anti-Auto-Tune Argument,” *HotNewHipHop*, September 26, 2022, <https://www.hotnewhiphop.com/86801-young-thug-engineer-alex-tumay-destroys-any-anti-auto-tune-argument-news>.

¹¹ Lilah, “Young Thug.”

While many commentators have decried the use of AutoTune as inauthentic, critic Matthew T. Phillips has celebrated the purported artificiality of AutoTune. In a piece about ‘SoundCloud Rap,’ a precursor to the contemporary SoundCloud digital underground with standout artists including Lil Uzi Vert and Lil Yachty, he writes that the “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.”¹² He argues that this creates a type of “alien creativity” which challenges the “established sensory order” which pushes popular music forward.

While Phillips raises salient points about the transformative power of vocal modulation, he assumes that authenticity is a coherent designation in the first place. Popular music theorist Simon Frith explains that “popular music is popular not because it reflects something, or authentically articulates some sort of popular taste or experience, but because it creates our understanding of what popularity is.”¹³ Frith is referring to authenticity in a broader sense than just the vocal context, but his argument can be applied to vocal performance as well. Artists’ vocals define their own terms of engagement, rather than being ‘authentic’ because they are ‘true to themselves’ in some metaphysical sense. All vocal performance is just that – a performance – a mediated construction of auditory stimuli; the imagined transparency of interiority to exterior expression is merely a mirage, propagated by the music industry to sell records.

¹² Matthew T. Phillips, “Soundcloud Rap and Alien Creativity: Transforming Rap and Popular Music through *Mumble Rap*,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 33, no. 3 (September 1, 2021): 130. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jpms.2021.33.3.125>.

¹³ Simon Frith, “Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music,” in *Taking Popular Music Seriously: Selected Essays* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 261.

Alexander G. Weheliye, a cultural theorist who has written extensively on Black musical forms, introduces another perspective on the illusory nature of vocal authenticity specific to recorded vocal performance: “no recorded performances, not even live recordings, are ‘real’— or even representations thereof. Rather, they are virtual productions created through interactions of musicians and listeners with recording and reproduction technologies.”¹⁴ He explains that in spite of this, many genres of popular music “attempt to erase their technological mediation and embodiment, remaining mired in the myth of what Ted Gracyk terms ‘recording realism,’ which insists on the authenticity, integrity, and naturalness of the recorded performance.”¹⁵ Weheliye examines R&B artists’ embrace of the artificial, foregrounding how Black artists have historically been fetishized for the ‘naturalness’ and ‘authenticity’ of their vocal performances while simultaneously being denied access to the category of the human subject. He finds that:

By embracing new technologies such as remixing, scratching, and sampling, black popular music producers and performers persistently emphasize the virtuality of any form of recorded music. Acknowledging the effects of these technologies on these musical practices, black popular musical genres make their own virtuality central to the musical texts. Instead of pulling the strings in the background—that is, being disembodied—these producers, who plug the performers into the technological apparatus, take front and center stage with the artists. This creates a composite identity, a machine suspended

¹⁴ Alexander G. Weheliye, “‘Feenin,’” *Social Text* 20, no. 2 (2002): 31, https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-20-2_71-21.

¹⁵ Weheliye, “‘Feenin,’” 31.

between performer and producer that sounds the smooth flow between humans and machines.¹⁶

Weheliye's history of Black digital experimentation provides a backdrop for a discussion of the SoundCloud digital underground's own digital experimentation and exploration. While Weheliye highlights this practice with the example of the use of vocoder technology in R&B, we can see a similar process in the SoundCloud digital underground, often championed by Black artists like d0llywood1. d0lly exploits the potentials of the DAW in "ihonestlymightjustgiveup," cranking up the AutoTune and creating multiple vocal layers, only to dramatically cut the AutoTune at the end of the song. More broadly, artists experiment with pitch correction in multiple ways, sometimes individually bending and transforming certain syllables to create explosive runs of robotic vocalizations. It is only because of the history of Black artists' forays into deliberate cybernetic musicianship that the digitality of the SoundCloud digital underground is possible.

Perhaps the biggest scandal surrounding vocal authenticity in music history is the story of the late 80s German-French R&B group Milli Vanilli. While the group publicly consisted of Rob Pilatus and Fabrice Morvan, two Black European dancers and models, they in fact did not sing on their records and lip-synced at their performances.¹⁷ This fact was dramatically revealed – although there had been suspicions beforehand – at a concert they held for MTV in 1989, when the hard drive playing the backing track glitched and caused it to loop on the line "girl you know it's–" for about 30 seconds. Pilatus and Morvan faced widespread opprobrium, and their careers were ruined. It's fascinating to note that it was a hardware glitch, which created a glitch/stutter in

¹⁶ Weheliye, "'Feenin,'" 31.

¹⁷ Andrea Warner, "Girl You Know It's True: The Rise and Fall of Milli Vanilli 25 Years Later," *CBCnews*, March 6, 2014, <https://www.cbc.ca/music/read/girl-you-know-it-s-true-the-rise-and-fall-of-milli-vanilli-25-years-later-1.5007687>.

the playback of the backing track, that revealed Milli Vanilli's inauthenticity and precipitated their fall from grace, as it shows how glitch is commonly considered artificial and disruptive.

Beyond AutoTune, another core feature of the SoundCloud digital underground is glitch, also known as the stutter effect. Stuttering as a vocal affectation has been present in music for over a century, starting with Geoffrey O'Hara's 1918 song "K-K-K-Katy" about a World War I soldier who has a stutter.¹⁸ It has also been used in rock music throughout the 20th century in songs such as Buddy Holly's 1957 single "Peggy Sue" and The Who's 1965 track "My Generation." Glitch and deterioration have been explored by various artists in the 80s and 90s, such as in artist Christian Marclay's 1985 piece *Record Without a Cover*, an album recorded on vinyl and shipped without any protective packaging, allowing the process of transport and handling to degrade the record and introduce glitches. Marclay said that he wanted to ensure that "you can't ignore the medium," demonstrating how glitch works to disrupt authenticity and force the listener's attention towards mediation.¹⁹ Sound artist Yasunao Tone also brilliantly captured the aesthetic of malfunction in his 1997 release *Solo For a Wounded CD*, a 45 minute composition emulating the sound of a damaged CD glitching, skipping and scratching. The German electronic group Oval were the first to incorporate this glitch aesthetic into a non-experimental context, as they defaced CDs with felt pens and then sampled the resulting glitched audio and used it in their songs in the early 90s.²⁰ Other electronic artists such as Aphex Twin began to use non-analog techniques to develop a glitch sound around this time, and stuttering as

¹⁸ "Stutter Effect (Stuttering)," *InSync*, May 19, 2006, <https://www.sweetwater.com/insync/stutter-effect-stuttering/>.

¹⁹ Thomas Grill, Till Bovermann, and Almut Schilling, "Embracing the Temporal Deterioration of Digital Audio: A Manifesto," *Electronic Workshops in Computing*, May 2018, 2, <https://doi.org/10.14236/ewic/evac18.22>.

²⁰ Sean Cooper, "Oval Biography," *AllMusic*, <https://www.allmusic.com/artist/oval-mn0000897181#biography>.

a specific digital effect was pioneered by American DJ and electronic producer BT in the 90s. In 2000, German label Mille Plateaux released a compilation album of glitch music called *clicks_+_cuts*. Glitch music has continued to be an important subgenre of electronic music, with artists such as edIT continuing to produce songs in the style.

Stutter vocals using digital editing became common in popular music in the early 2010s, with artists such as Coldplay, Drake, and Katy Perry using them in their songs. This usage of glitch is distinct from the electronic experiments that preceded it because it is used for vocals and as such is more focused on modulating the presence of the voice rather than the sonic atmosphere in general. SoundCloud underground artists' usage of vocal glitches takes the vocal glitch in a new direction by making it central to their style and form of expression, rather than an ornamental and unnecessary addition that ultimately reinscribes non-glitched vocals as the norm and ideal. They stretch the limits of glitch by using glitched vocals as their own sonic elements and taking the rhythmic innovations of electronic glitch artists and incorporating them into the vocal sphere while also maintaining an infectious and enjoyable sound.

SoundCloud digital underground artists' manipulation of the atomic elements of vocals opens up their creative practice to a kind of 'hacking' in which vocals become their own malleable medium, surfacing the fact that they were always already mediated. This aligns with how digital media theorist Michael Betancourt and curator and theorist Legacy Russell have conceptualized the glitch in other contexts. In his analysis of glitch art, Betancourt argues that glitch art's "shift in focus from the periphery to being central to the work is a particular attempt to counter the tendency to ignore the glitch, to cast it out of consciousness"²¹ This casting out of

²¹ Michael Betancourt, "Introduction," in *Glitch Art in Theory and Practice: Critical Failures and Post-Digital Aesthetics* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2017).

consciousness of the glitch intends to erase the mediated nature of contemporary technologically-enabled reality, convincing us that the glitch is just an epiphenomenon, irrelevant to the process from which it emerges. Following Derrida's problematic, we must account for the 'marginal' or 'parasitic' elements of systems as essential to their functioning rather than peripheral and inessential.²² In her Black queer feminist manifesto *Glitch Feminism*, Russell argues for the glitch as an ontological intervention that embraces the "error in the algorithm" that Black queer bodies are conceived of as in order to contest the violence of categorization and naming that hegemonic order imposes on such bodies.²³ Betancourt's and Russell's generative theorizations of glitch opens paths to viewing SoundCloud digital underground artists' vocal modulation and manipulation as a similar practice of breakage and elevation of error.

SoundCloud digital underground artists' use of the glitch follows and expands upon these interventions, intentionally foregrounding the glitch as an aesthetic that reveals the virtuality of contemporary recorded music and celebrates it, as well as experimenting with how the extremes of vocal glitch can be made euphonic and facilitate expression. This is in line with their embrace of AutoTune, as both take previously marginalized sonic strategies and bring them into the realm of direct apprehensibility while pushing them even further.

track four: expressive artifice

Popular music has for the most part continued to attempt to erase its mediated nature. It uses AutoTune and glitch sparingly to avoid detection and refrains from drawing attention to the technical tricks that make it possible in order to appeal to a mass audience that still, at least in the

²² Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," *Marges de la Philosophie*, 1972, 325-327.

²³ Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2020), 147, 149, Kindle.

minds of the tastemakers and executives that control its production, craves authenticity and immediacy in the music it consumes. When these tricks are highlighted, like in Cher's 1998 song "Believe," the first example of heavy AutoTune use in popular music, it is as a gimmick, intentionally flashy, thereby granting *more* legitimacy to the unmediated model of musical production. The difference comes when you use maximalist AutoTune, vocal processing, layering, glitch and other forms of vocal manipulation as your starting point, rather than a stylistic flourish.

The way that this digital technology is used makes the SoundCloud digital underground distinct from past and contemporary mainstream popular music. "ihonestlymightjustgiveup" reveals how far the use of modulation has come since Cher platformed it in 1998. Rather than performing mainly without AutoTune and using it as an accent on the chorus, d0llywood1's vocals are almost entirely autotuned. The exception is the ending of the song, where d0lly sings a kind of warbling chorus without AutoTune. The effect is inverse to Cher's "Believe"; unadulterated vocals have become the shocking highlight, the gimmick. d0lly's use of harmony and glitch further contribute to the thorough digitality and creativity of her music. Her experiments with vocal performance and manipulation generate new avenues for expression unbounded by any concern with maintaining a sense of naturalness or authenticity.

Even more contemporary uses of AutoTune are distinct from the way the SoundCloud digital underground uses it. Florida singer-songwriter T-Pain is often credited with popularizing the use of heavy AutoTune in pop and hip-hop, having used it extensively in his hits from the late 2000s such as the 2007 tracks "Buy U a Drank (Shawty Snappin')" ft. Yung Joc and "Bartender" ft. Akon. In interviews, T-Pain has said that his goal in using AutoTune was to "add

the flair” to his vocals and “to make [him] different.”²⁴ Los Angeles pop singer Kesha, another artist famous for their use of AutoTune in the same time period, would selectively crank up the AutoTune on certain parts of her vocals, somewhat similarly to how Cher used it. Both of these artists used AutoTune in an attempt to stand out, thereby reifying the hierarchy of ‘natural’ versus ‘artificial’ vocal performance. In addition, both have taken great pains to persuade audiences that they are ‘genuinely’ vocally talented, with Kesha stating in a 2010 interview that “the one thing I’m most confident about” is “that I have a really good voice,” and T-Pain performing without AutoTune on *NPR*’s “Tiny Desk” concert series in 2014 to prove he “could sing.”²⁵ This can be compared with artists in the SoundCloud digital underground’s attitude towards vocal authenticity, which is that it is entirely irrelevant.

A similar phenomenon can be observed with the use of glitch. In 5v’s 2020 track “b4 u go,” their vocals are so thoroughly glitched out that the rare unglitched lines come as a surprise. The song is an example of glitch par excellence, with a spacey, twinkling beat produced by Pressure that 5v fills in with vocals that start out in a similar disaffected tone to d0lly’s, but soar into a digitally-enabled falsetto as the song continues. They sing about being betrayed as well, but in a more abject and less self-confident manner than d0lly. Their ad-libs are fragmentary glitched vocalizations, abstracting from the subject matter of the song itself to create ambience and convey a fractured consciousness. These glitchy ad-libs are treated with delay that creates echoes that pan back and forth, bouncing between the ears of the listener and filling out the sonic

²⁴ Heran Mamo, “T-Pain Is ‘Unapologetic’ About His Signature Auto-Tune in New Ad,” *Billboard*, March 12, 2021, <https://www.billboard.com/music/rb-hip-hop/t-pain-interview-ruffles-campaign-auto-tune-9539178/>; Leila Fadel, “Rapper T-Pain Has a Simple Message for People Who Think He Can’t Sing – Shut Up,” *NPR*, April 1, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/1167297060>.

²⁵ Nitsuh Abebe, “Ke\$ha: ‘I Have a Really Good Voice,’” *Vulture*, October 14, 2010, https://www.vulture.com/2010/10/does_keha_want_to_be_an_indie.html; Fadel, “Simple Message.”

space to foster a sense of immersion and disarticulated presence. 5v also ‘glitches’ their vocals in an additional manner besides the cut-and-paste stutter technique; they pitch-shift individual words and syllables using advanced AutoTune functionalities, creating an implausible melodic line that jumps within and between tonal registers. They croon “Change my identity / I can't trust nobody-y-y” in an intermittent oversaturated cybernetic falsetto, artificially switching intonations within the space of one line.

“b4 u go” sounds simultaneously alien and robotic. Its beat suggests isolation on a distant moon, perhaps in the style of *Le Petit Prince*, and 5v’s icy vocals complement this feeling. In fact, the glitchy ad-libs are at times reminiscent of morse code, radar, or other sounds of electronica. It is as if 5v is trying to echolocate the partner that has abandoned them in between lines such as “It wasn't meant to be / Now I don't know what to do” and the titular “Smile at me before you go.” This use of glitch is distinct from previous uses before it because in the SoundCloud digital underground, the vocal glitch becomes a vital part of the vocal line and indeed the composition overall, rather than an accent. For example, in “E.T.” ft. Kanye West by Katy Perry (2011), she uses a simple glitch effect in the hook, singing, “Kiss me, ki-ki-kiss me” and “Take me, ta-ta-take me,” but those are the only two examples of the effect in her parts on the song. West’s verses have some more showy glitch effects, again used for emphasis. In comparison, “b4 u go” features glitches on almost every line, and they are used far more creatively and expansively than in “E.T.” This is not to denigrate Katy Perry’s song, but to point out that glitch has come a long way since the song was released, and has been especially pushed forward and developed in the SoundCloud digital underground.

capoxxo’s 2020 track “i sit here and i cry,” produced by 51five, is another example of the SoundCloud digital underground’s innovative use of glitch. The beat features frantic arpeggiated

synth plucks, synthetic string stabs that feel like they're piercing your heart, a pounding sine wave "wub wub" bass, and a heavy kick hitting every beat. capo's vocals feature complexly rhythmic glitches, again distributed onto almost every line. His delivery is whiny and his vocals are heavily AutoTuned, plaintively expressing a frustration with internet fame in lines like "And I blew up online, hay-hay-hate my hate my life." The song is unsettlingly exuberant and manic depressive, conjuring a rave at the end of the world. The spitfire glitches and the hectic beat complement each other, contributing to the dire stakes of the song, in which capo proclaims "I, I, I-I-I was I was so blind, there's no point to this life." Like 5v, capo uses glitched ad-libs to create texture and evoke a scattered subjectivity.

5v, d0llywood1, and capoxxo's use of glitch and pitch correction techniques reveals the role that these techniques play in the SoundCloud digital underground's negotiation of authenticity and artificiality. The glitch is digitally created and superficially artificial. It destroys any pretense of mimetic aspiration in music, taking its constitutive elements and shattering them into pieces, deploying these pieces to create new aesthetic effects and affects. In so doing, the SoundCloud digital underground creates its own cybernetic expressivity, representing the split subject in an age where digital technology demands constantly furcated identities and performances of self. We can term this new creative modality *expressive artifice*, following English media theorist and sociologist Dick Hebdige.

In his 1979 book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Hebdige undertakes a semiotic analysis of Britain's postwar youth subcultural styles. Hebdige takes inspiration from writer and intellectual Jean Genet, noting that both he and the punks, mods, and teds that he examines pay great attention to the symbolic meaning of objects, like the tube of vaseline for Genet and suede shoes for the teddy boys. He cites Genet's perception of the oppressive nature of everyday

objects and signs to build out an argument for the role of ideology and systems of signification in subcultural style. Hebdige writes: “It is this alienation from the deceptive ‘innocence’ of appearances which gives the teds, the mods, the punks and no doubt future groups of as yet unimaginable ‘deviants’ the impetus to move from man’s second ‘false nature’ (Barthes, 1972) to a genuinely *expressive artifice*; a truly subterranean style [emphasis added].”²⁶ Expressive artifice as Hebdige uses it is meant to connote subculture’s “transformations [which] go ‘against nature’, interrupting the process of ‘normalization’” and “As such... are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the ‘silent majority’, which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus.”²⁷ Crucially, these “artificial” gestures are undertaken in service of expression, of conveying some meaning, even if that meaning is a rejection of other forms of meaning.

Artists in the SoundCloud digital underground’s creative practice can be conceptualized as expressive artifice because they also undermine conventional codes of music-making in order to express their ideas, desires and feelings. Although it is true that expression is not transparent as the notion of authentic music would suggest, that does not mean that there is no expression or expressiveness. In fact, part of the purpose of art is to express something about yourself or the world. It is inconceivable that artists, in this case musicians, are creating something that has no basis in their own experiences and subjectivity; ultimately, our own epistemological and phenomenological standpoint is the starting point for any kind of artistic expression, and it is

²⁶ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Methuen, 1979), 19.

²⁷ Hebdige, *Subculture*, 18.

impossible to create something with no trace of the author, even if after the fact we can presume the author's 'death.'²⁸

SoundCloud digital underground artists use artifice to express themselves with no regard for cultivating the appearance of authenticity. This is not to say that SoundCloud digital underground artists are somehow more authentic than other kinds of artists; in both cases, authenticity only exists as a construction, but the difference is that SoundCloud digital underground artists implicitly acknowledge this fact and discard the expectation of authenticity in favor of an experimental manipulation of the symbolic field.

Hebdige only uses the phrase "expressive artifice" once in *Subculture*, but it is latent within his problematic and underpins many of his concepts. For example, the section within the sixth chapter of the book entitled "Subculture: The Unnatural Break" discusses subculture as an interference in the typical system of representation, and subcultures' concomitant frequent description in the media as "unnatural."²⁹ This can be mapped onto the SoundCloud digital underground by grace of the fact that glitched and modulated vocals are perceived as "unnatural" by mainstream culture, largely because they undermine notions of authenticity in recorded music. For example, Carrie Battan of *The New Yorker* described hyperpop/digicore artist glaive's vocals by saying his "voice is distorted, to sound high-pitched and alien."³⁰ SoundCloud digital underground artists' expressive artifice is inherently subversive because it twists standard musical practices and takes them to the extreme to express something new.

²⁸ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Aspen*, no. 5-6 (1967).

²⁹ Hebdige, *Subculture*, 90-92.

³⁰ Battan, "Hyperpop."

Hebdige explains how subcultural styles depart from and disrupt hegemonic systems of representation in the final chapter of *Subculture*, in which he discusses whether subcultural style is art:

If we are to think in formal terms at all, subcultural styles are more usefully regarded as mutations and extensions of existing codes rather than as the ‘pure’ expression of creative drives, and above all they should be seen as *meaningful* mutations. Sometimes these forms will be disfigured and disfiguring. At such times, no doubt, this will be their ‘point’. They are counterposed against the symbolic order of structured appearances – the syntax which positions the producer over and against that which he or she produces. In the face of such an order, they are bound on occasion to assume monstrous and unnatural features.³¹

Hebdige emphasizes the importance of rejecting authentic purity and spontaneous creation, highlighting how subcultural styles derive from prior aesthetics but meaningfully alter them in order to expose the “symbolic order of structured appearances” – in other words, the illusion of wholeness and immediacy in the dominant system of representation. SoundCloud digital underground artists challenge the positioning of the producer “over and against that which he or she produces” in much the same way that Weheliye argues that Black artists have denied the authority of the artist over their musical product and emphasized the mutually constitutive relation between the musician and the technology that they use to produce. The music they make appears “unnatural” because it denies the illusion of naturalness in order to express something about their interiority, their lives, their conditions, their desires. SoundCloud digital underground

³¹ Hebdige, *Subculture*, 131.

artists dramatically embrace artifice to escape the boundaries that conventional codes of authenticity place artists in.

Expressive artifice in the context of the SoundCloud digital underground describes a practice of adversarial refusal to accede to the hegemonic regimes that demand an uncritical acceptance of the algorithmic control omnipresent in the neoliberal status quo. Alexander R. Galloway draws from philosopher Gilles Deleuze's 1990 essay "Postscript on the Societies of Control" to argue that the apparatus of control in the contemporary, internet-enabled world is protocol, the rules or standards that govern the functioning of a system.³² Algorithms are the instantiation of that control, the programs that enact the technological control that orders contemporary society. These algorithms, taken broadly, are today what govern the "symbolic order" that Hebdige discusses, and are at play in the music industry as in broader culture.³³ SoundCloud digital underground artists resist the attempts of the mainstream to sweep algorithmic control under the rug by taking the glitch and elevating it to the status of a feature, much like the glitch artists Betancourt investigates.³⁴

We can conceptualize SoundCloud digital underground artists' use of glitch as following Russell's proclamation that "[w]e will rearrange and repurpose by any means necessary, rendering what rises from this rebirth unrecognizable from the violence of its original. We will create fissures in the social and cultural algorithm as an active act of advocacy, advocating for

³² Alexander R. Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2004), 6; Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (1992), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778828>.

³³ Hebdige, *Subculture*, 131.

³⁴ Betancourt, *Glitch Art*.

the user, advocating for ourselves and advocating for one another.”³⁵ Queer and trans artists in the underground like d0llywood1 and 5v have enacted this act of breakage through their music, using glitch to literally “create fissures in the [musical] algorithm” and thereby the social and cultural one as well. Like Betancourt, SoundCloud digital underground artists foreground the glitch as a feature and not a bug, an inherent consequence of the digitalization of culture and society.³⁶ They use artificial means to foster their own kind of expression on their own terms, the terms of a generation raised with structurally unlimited access to technology and the Internet, and on a more profound level, a generation submerged and interpellated by the omnipresence of technology and algorithmic control. In this milieu, artificiality *is* a precondition of artistic creation, and as such the use of “artificial” technologies constitutes an affirmative form of self-expression.

The advent of digital production software (DAWs) has only accelerated the glitchiness inherent to recording technology, a practice we have traced back to Marclay’s experiments with the skipping malfunctions of vinyl and Tone and Oval’s elevation of the audio glitches of CDs. Foregrounding the glitch acknowledges this lineage, perhaps unknowingly, by refusing to deny the digitality of contemporary music production and embracing it. It also acknowledges the lineage of Black artists’ usage of new technologies and emphasis on the virtuality of all recorded music.³⁷ SoundCloud digital underground artists use DAWs to continue this legacy by exposing their capacities and abilities rather than hiding them.

³⁵ Russell, *Glitch Feminism*, 149.

³⁶ Betancourt, *Glitch Art*.

³⁷ Weheliye, “Feenin,” 31.

The use of AutoTune and pitch shifting technology also works to produce expressive artifice, particularly as used by queer and trans artists such as quinn, arguably the leading voice in the SoundCloud hyperpop/digicore scene of the 2020s. Maximal AutoTune exposes the constructedness of recorded vocal performance and in doing so inverts it to forge new forms of self-expression rooted in queer aesthetics and what the nonbinary transfemme writer Max Schaffer, who produces research “in the intersection of music and gender studies,” calls the “chaos-trans voice.”³⁸ Schaffer argues that AutoTune, like its predecessor the vocoder, “offer[s] a way to enter the neutral zone of this genderless robotic voice.” In addition, they explain that pitch shifting can be part of a practice of “vocal queering” in which trans artists engage in vocal modulation to escape vocal dysphoria and engage in gendered vocal performance on their own terms. Schaffer gives Laura Les of 100 gecs as a prime example of this practice, writing that she “surpass[es] vocally “passing” and achieve[s] something far more expansive & evolved than a human voice.”³⁹ Trans artists who engage in vocal queering encapsulate the disregard for traditional notions of vocal authenticity that is at play in the SoundCloud digital underground, and underscore the potential of DAW software to enable expressive artifice that transcends the desire for authenticity and highlights the constructedness of all vocal performance.

quinn tweeted in June 2021, “i don’t pitch up my voice because of hyperpop, i’m just transgender.”⁴⁰ This corroborates that Schaffer’s idea of vocal queering is at play in the SoundCloud digital underground. It is important not to take this technique as an essentializing

³⁸ Max Schaffer, homepage, *Max Schaffer*, <https://maxmadethat.com>; Max Schaffer, “Modulation & the Chaos-Trans Voice,” *Max Schaffer*, December 9, 2019, <https://maxmadethat.com/publishing/transvocalmodulation>.

³⁹ Schaffer, “Chaos-Trans Voice.”

⁴⁰ Payton Dunn, “What the f*ck is Hyperpop?,” *The Daily Orange/The Outcrowd*, March 9, 2022, <https://dailyorange.com/2022/03/what-the-fck-is-hyperpop/>.

practice, however. Payton Dunn, a student journalist for Syracuse University student-run LGBTQIA+ publication *The Outcrowd*, writes in a piece on hyperpop that “[t]his form of vocal manipulation may sound uncanny and artificial to new hyperpop listeners, but it’s actually helping those in the hyperpop community create a more authentic version of themselves on the recording.”⁴¹ Schaffer and Frith might push back on this characterization in different ways and for different reasons; Schaffer writes that “it would be a mistake to see all modulation as an explicit attempt to question binaries—it’s the right of an artist to express without intent,”⁴² and Frith would dispute the notion of an originary authenticity that trans artists ‘get in touch with’ by pitching their voices up or down.⁴³ Pitch shifting as queer aesthetics is better understood as a practice of expressive artifice; its very “uncanny and artificial” quality which Dunn describes is what enables it to be expressive, to transcend ordinary limitations in musical production.

track five: outro

The SoundCloud digital underground artists that I have examined in this chapter belong somewhere between the avant-garde and the mainstream. They are experimenting with foregrounding mediation and artifice, but not in as self-conscious a way as, for example, Christian Marclay or Yasunao Tone. Their interventions emanate from the lived experience of youth as exploration and experimentation. There is certainly intentionality in their approach, but as a whole, their music does not take itself too seriously as an intellectual exercise as much as it does as an expressive and creative one. When I make music in GarageBand, I do it to work

⁴¹ Dunn, “What the f*ck.”

⁴² Schaffer, “Chaos-Trans Voice.”

⁴³ Frith, “Towards an Aesthetic,” 261.

through emotions and try to create something interesting that sounds good, not to make a grand statement about the constructedness of recorded music.

Nevertheless, these artists' practices immanently react to and converse with legacies of musical authenticity. As I have shown, one main way they do this is through vocal modulation and manipulation. Contemporary regimes of representation as well as socio-political administration seek to hide the flaws in the algorithm to create an illusion of omnipotent control, and this tendency is reproduced in much popular music. The SoundCloud digital underground reacts to this by bringing these flaws to the fore and coopting them as a way to express the experience of living under these regimes as well as processing everyday feelings and experiences through the lens of digitality. By recognizing the digitality of contemporary life and working it into the formal qualities of their music, SoundCloud digital underground artists produce expressive artifice as a practice of subversion and cybernetic creativity.

Chapter 2: Aesthetics and Digitality Within and Beyond the Music

one: hypermediacy/remediation/hyperremediation in the SoundCloud digital underground

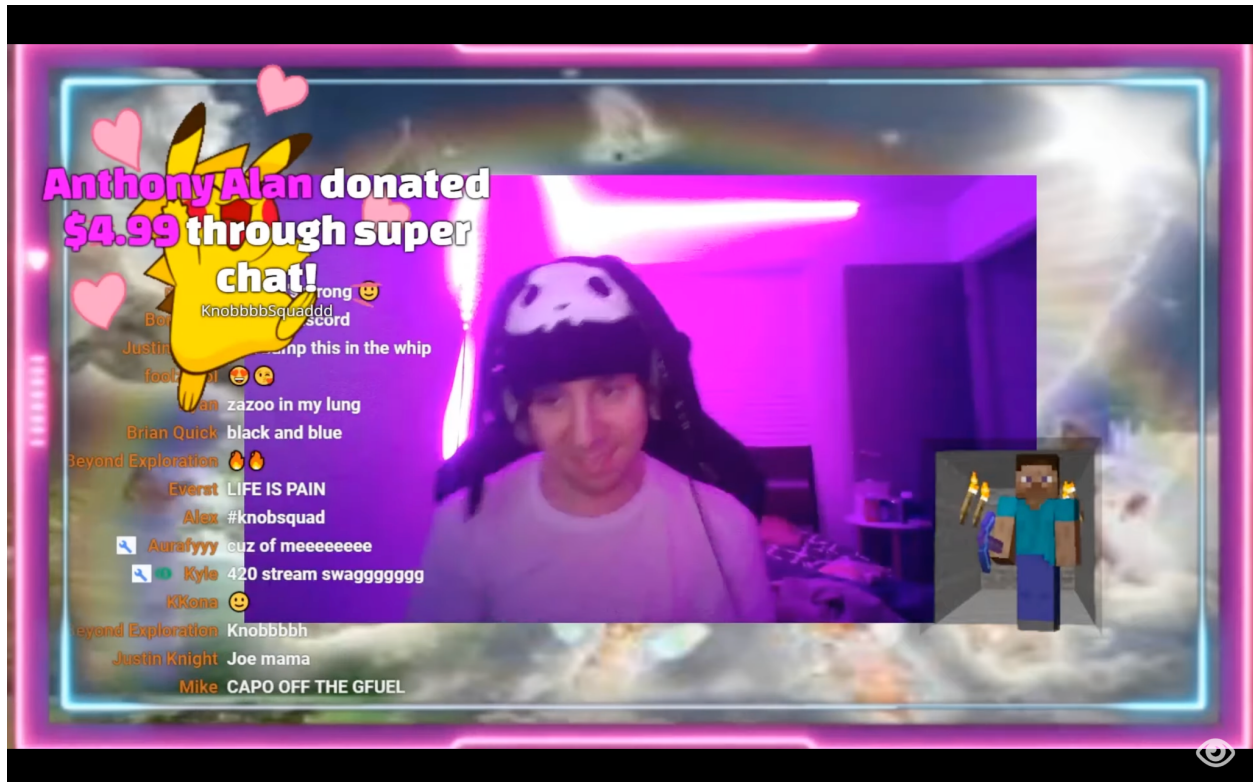


Image 1: screenshot from capoxxo's "doing better" music video

capoxxo's 2021 music video for his song "doing better" is a masterpiece of hypermediacy and remediation, a modern treatise on the potentials of digital platforms and software for creating art that transcends the desire for transparent immediacy in media. The song itself is a hopeful ballad about moving on from a failed relationship. The michaelwarren-produced beat consists of plopping digital plucks laid over a grungy guitar line, and capo's emotionally charged but relaxed vocals, AutoTuned and glitched as per usual, smoothly ride in its pocket. The video is a composite of clips from a Twitch stream that capo conducted with his

fans in which he played “doing better” and danced along to it in his bedroom in a lofi, entirely digital video shoot. When watching the video out of fullscreen, the clips play in a window-within-a-window-within-a-window-within-a-window-within-a-window (a window to the fifth power), those being the Twitch stream, a heavenly-looking backdrop, the YouTube window, the browser window, and the computer screen, respectively. Overlaid on the screen are three components: the lyrics to the song, jumping around the screen with each line with the font size and orientation shifting constantly; the Twitch chat and donation notifications, synced with the clips and constantly changing; and various pieces of clipart and animations including Hello Kitty, Steve from Minecraft, and stock photos tied to the lyrics. capo is wearing a white t-shirt and a black hat with floppy ears and a skeletal but cute creature on the front of it. capo’s “doing better” video’s hyper aesthetics never let you get too comfortable, preventing single-minded absorption while remaining radiantly effervescent.

capo bobs up and down in his gaming chair, making expressive hand gestures along to the song, and at times stands on his bed to dance and gesture from there. The neon lights in his room flicker from light blue to pink with the changing clips, matching the colors that frame the screen. capo smiles and lip-syncs the lyrics, pointing at the webcam when he declares in the song “it’s all because of you” but then turning his finger towards himself as it continues “but it’s really ‘cause of me.” He ‘flexes’ a bottle of G FUEL, a powdered energy drink marketed for gamers (its name means gamer fuel), brandishing it towards the webcam, as at the time capo was in a period of sobriety after getting out of rehab and made G FUEL a part of his artist persona. The Twitch chat is full of encouragement, with viewers commenting “capo making legendary moves,” “historic capo,” “luvvv from croatia,” and innumerable “swag” messages. capo’s

inclusion of these comments in his music video brings his fanbase into his artistic practice, diminishing the barrier between artist and viewer.

The overall effect of the “doing better” video is jubilant and overwhelming, a celebration of capo’s own sobriety and happiness, consonant with the name of the song that the video is for, as well as the joy of forging community and exploring aesthetics through the internet. This jubilation is mirrored by the formal qualities of the video, as its incorporation of other media forms and fan participation celebrates the possibilities of new media to reach beyond itself and become open and democratized. Just as the songs we examined in the previous chapter foreground their construction as digital media productions, the “doing better” video makes its digitality central to its existence as a media object, demonstrating how videos in the SoundCloud digital underground function under their own kind of expressive artifice, embracing the digital and rejecting transparency.

New media scholars Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin write about the phenomena of immediacy, hypermediacy, and remediation, contending that “the practice of hypermediacy is most evident in the heterogeneous ‘windowed style’ of World Wide Web pages, the desktop interface, multimedia programs, and video games. It is a visual style that, in the words of William J. Mitchell (1994), ‘privileges fragmentation, indeterminacy, and heterogeneity and . . . emphasizes process or performance rather than the finished art object.’”¹ capoxxo’s music video “doing better” encapsulates this hypermediated style and certainly prioritizes the process of creation, as it centers around the stream, an inherently processual media form with no real finished product. Indeed, the music video revels in its hypertextuality, remediating the ephemeral

¹ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1999), 31.

stream into a video replete with references to other popular media objects and characters, such as Pikachu from Pokémon, the Japanese anime and card game. Bolter and Grusin contrast hypermediacy with “transparent, perceptual immediacy, experience without mediation” which they trace back to Renaissance aesthetic ideology that sought to grasp the world and in doing so master it.² Related to the idea of hypermediacy is that of remediation, which Bolter and Grusin define simply as “the representation of one medium in another.”³ More specifically, remediation for Bolter and Grusin is the representation of an older medium in a newer one, as their prototypical example of remediation is when “an older medium is highlighted and represented in digital form.”⁴ This is in line with the foundational media theorist Marshall McLuhan’s proclamation that “the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium.”⁵ McLuhan was writing in 1964 in the context of the ascendance of television, but his insight that it is the formal qualities of a medium and not its content that determine its significance remains powerful today.

capoxxo’s “doing better” music video presents an opportunity to see how artists in the SoundCloud digital underground push digital hyper aesthetics forward in ways that uncover the ever-presence of mediation. The video diverges from Bolter and Grusin’s definition of remediation in that it does not take an older medium and represent it in a newer one, but takes a contemporary medium and uses it in another contemporary one. In light of this, we can call what the “doing better” video does *hyperremediation*, as it is at once synchronic and diachronic,

² Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 22.

³ Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 45.

⁴ Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 45.

⁵ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), 1, quoted in Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 45.

nested and flat. Hyperremediation takes the notion of remediation and compresses it, much like the audio compression used on vocals in the digital underground; it brings the varying components of the signal onto the same plane, making each more legible and apparent. Further, it proliferates the media at play, taking the linear progression of remediation and fusing it with the ecstatic multiplicity of hypermediacy. Hyperremediation constructs a hydratic ouroboros of media forms, with media feeding into each other in a constant process of generative cannibalization. Such a process can be seen as well on social media, where a screenshot of a tweet containing a Facebook post can be reposted to Instagram and then discovered in a TikTok slideshow. In theorizing the work of the “doing better” video as hyperremediation, we can uncover the SoundCloud digital underground’s contribution to new media aesthetics and better understand how it subverts cultural narratives of immediacy in popular music.

“doing better” can be fruitfully compared with two popular music videos from the same year, 2021, to bring out its hyperremediated qualities: The Kid LAROI and Justin Bieber’s “Stay” and The Weeknd’s “Save Your Tears.” “Stay” depicts LAROI and Bieber in a city alternately frozen in time and sped up as they perform their verses. It is shot using both traditional video cameras and drones, and has a fast paced editing style (although not as fast as “doing better”). In “Save Your Tears,” The Weeknd, in heavy prosthetics making him look like he has had extensive plastic surgery, performs his song in an upscale ballroom to an *Eyes Wide Shut*-esque audience of masked ball-goers. Both videos are high production value and cinematic, meant to immerse the viewer in the profilmic events and not to draw attention to the medium of the video. Both have some level of narrative progression; “Stay” begins with LAROI himself frozen, then moves to him moving through his frozen environments searching for his lost love, and ends with him finding her, and “Save Your Tears” features The Weeknd pulling a woman

out of the crowd, goading her into shooting him with a gun he had hidden behind his back, and finally pulling the trigger of the gun at his own head, only for it to explode with confetti as the masked audience begins to applaud.

“doing better” has no such narrative, as it continually cycles through various mini-scenes of capo performing the song, quasi-randomly placed. In fact, the video shatters any recognizable chronology besides that of the song itself, another way it highlights the extradiegetic elements of its medium as a music video. capo moves forward and backward in time, and the video exists in a suspended moment, much like the conceit of “Stay.” “doing better” is fundamentally self-aware, with no pretension to transparency. In fact, it’s not even a question of awareness; the formal preconditions for a music video like “doing better” lead to it being constructed in such a way as to lay bare its existence as a mediation. Its hyperremediation of contemporary media forms draws attention to those forms and their relation to the work of all music videos; it shows us that a music video is just as much a digital media construction as a TikTok slideshow.

Hyperremediation coexists with remediation and hypermediacy in the digital underground’s creative ecosystem, offering yet another way to enact expressive artifice. Remediation is the most common of the three, seen across music videos, social media posts, and songs themselves. Artists incorporate older visual and musical aesthetics into their work and personae, semi-ironically reveling in their simultaneous outdatedness and continued relevance. capoxxo’s artist name is itself remediated, deriving from the late Glo Gang rapper Capo and adding some hugs and kisses or an online gaming-type suffix, depending on how you look at it (capo was once a competitive Call of Duty player in 8th grade).⁶ Much of his music is also a

⁶ “The Capoxxo Interview,” Underground Vampire Club, December 29, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190419014620/https://undergroundvampireclub.com/2018/12/29/the-capoxxo-interview/>.

remediation, incorporating musical aesthetics and at times interpolating melodies wholesale from 2000s and 2010s EDM and 8-bit video game soundtracks. For example, in his 2020 track “don’t have much time,” capo uses a beat by producers DEADAT18 and 6 percent that samples the Australian happy hardcore artist S3RL’s 2015 song “Hypnotoad,” which in turn samples soundbites from the popular cartoon *Futurama*. The sample is a frenetic synth line that creates a sense of drama befitting of the song’s lyrics; the title refers to capo’s declaration: “and we’re at the point that we should realize that we just don’t have much time left in life.” What was originally a goofy homage to a niche character in an early 2000s cartoon becomes a dire but reckless meditation on the fragility of life as a young active drug user. Other capo tracks, such as “ouueeoueou” (produced by his late friend and collaborator pvscale), use 8-bit aesthetics to create a warm and nostalgic vibe. Another example beyond capoxxo is kets4eki and nosgov’s “party addict,” produced by kojo, which interpolates the synthetic saxophone lead from Pitbull’s 2009 club banger “Hotel Room Service,” as well as the vocal melody from the song’s hook.

Remediation is used in the digital underground as part of its ethic of expressive artifice. By borrowing from prior eras, artists in the digital underground are not trying to create an authentically original persona, but rather are happy to incorporate others’ ideas to express themselves. In this respect, they are similar to fan culture theorist Henry Jenkins’ “textual poachers,” the term he uses to characterize members of media fandoms, inspired by multidisciplinary philosopher and theorist Michel de Certeau’s initial theorization of poaching as a practice of active and subversive reading.⁷ Like these fans, SoundCloud digital underground artists coopt and repurpose media products, fashioning “their own culture built from the semiotic

⁷ Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992), 24; Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 174.

raw materials the media provides.”⁸ However, unlike Jenkins’ textual poachers, SoundCloud digital underground artists are not necessarily invested fans in the material that they poach; rather, they use material on a somewhat ad-hoc basis as it reaches them through the unpredictable information flows of the internet.

Expressive artifice as found in the digital underground is also inherently hypermediated; the sonic qualities of expressive artifice that we observed in the previous chapter can be viewed as expressing an aural hypermediacy, as glitches bounce around the sonic space, usually accompanied by equally energetic synth lines, creating a fragmented and heterogenous sound, just as William J. Mitchell describes. Indeed, if delay is akin to remediation in its use of repetition, and glitches, layering, and modulation reflect hypermediacy in that they multiply and diversify the sound, then the overall effect of digital underground vocal processing is one of auditory hyperremediation.

two: rhizomatic subcultural flows in scenecore [cw: mentions of violence and self-harm]



Image 2: SoundCloud cover art for horrormovies’ “sadgorewatcher”

⁸ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 49.

The SoundCloud digital underground is composed of a number of fluctuating and interlinked subgenres, one of which is known as ‘scenecore.’ Scenecore takes the remediatary tendencies already present in the SoundCloud digital underground and makes them integral to its existence as a genre, and only does so through semi-random internet-facilitated encounters that I characterize as rhizomatic. An examination of scenecore sheds light on the cruciality of the internet as a formal structure for the development of the SoundCloud digital underground. Further, scenecore serves as another example of how the SoundCloud digital underground rejects authenticity and immediacy, bringing out the mediation inherent in music and media as a whole.

Scenecore is, as the name suggests, heavily inspired by the scene subculture that was popular from the mid 2000s to the early 2010s. Scene emerged from emo subculture and distinguished itself through a more colorful and playful fashion sense and more diverse and upbeat musical styles. The signature look of a scene kid is bold colors, skinny jeans, long hair with a forehead fringe, friendship bracelets, studded belts, piercings, and hair dye (either fully dyed or dyed in streaks or zebra stripes). Popular scene bands include Bring Me the Horizon, Asking Alexandria and Pierce the Veil, rock bands with a dramatic and emotional flair and often ‘screamo’ style vocals. Electronic acts such as S3RL were also key to scene. Scene songs often centered around obsessional love or partying, and varied in tone from passionate to lighthearted. Certain cultural touchstones are key to the subculture, such as *Invader Zim*, an early 2000s cartoon centering around a hyperactive and megalomaniacal alien, and Sanrio characters, particularly Hello Kitty and Kuromi, Japanese *kawaii* (cute) multimedia anthropomorphic animals.

In the mid 2010s, scene went out of style, but since 2019 it has been resurgent, leading some to call the 2020s the ‘rawring 20s’ in reference to a common online phrase used by scene kids, ‘rawr xD’ (rawr is a cuter rendition of ‘roar’ as in a dinosaur, and xD is an emoticon meant to look like someone hysterically laughing). The vanguard of this scene revival has been the scenecore genre, which has flourished as part of the digital underground in the past five years. Scenecore draws heavily from the electronic side of scene music in its sound and even more directly from the visual aesthetics of scene for its own ‘look.’ Notably, scenecore is far darker in tone than original scene, as a large portion of scenecore songs center around subjects like self-harm, eating disorders and drug abuse. The scenecore ethos is a disturbing mix of cutesy and macabre, with artists such as horrormovies using images of Hello Kitty covered in blood for their cover art on SoundCloud.

Scenecore artist horrormovies represents the subgenre at its most intense and troubling. Invariably, their songs center around self-harm in the form of cutting; their most popular song, with almost 200,000 streams, is literally called “cutting.” They often sing about watching gore, a type of video found on the darkweb which depicts people being seriously injured or killed with a focus on blood and marred flesh. They broach these dire topics over beats that are heavily EDM-inspired, often produced by frequent collaborator Pixel Hood, a master of epic, frenzied walls of synths. But horrormovies’ music and aesthetics are still unmistakably *scene*, from the iconography they use to the beats they record over. In this way, scenecore artists remediate the subculture that is its namesake to create something new, but unmistakably tied to what came before it.

Crucially, most scenecore artists are in their teens, and could not have been active members of the scene subculture during its heyday. This speaks to the rhizomatic nature of the

flows of subcultural aesthetics in the digital age; ancient (on an internet-age timescale) styles bounce around the web and the world to inspire people far removed from their original contexts. Hello Kitty, originally designed in the 1970s to appeal to Japanese pre-teen girls, finds its way to young adults in America in the 2000s and is embraced for its over-the-top cuteness, then 20 years later that very cuteness is used to contrast with visceral darkness. This is not to construct a teleological account of subcultural flows; the voyage of Hello Kitty was in no way predetermined, and instead settled through the opportunistic spread of commodities combined with the unpredictable encounters facilitated by the internet.

Matt Bluemink, theorist and founder of the online philosophy and culture magazine *Blue Labyrinths*, writes that the internet or ‘web’ can be theorized as rhizomatic, following Deleuze and Guattari’s conceptualization of the rhizome in their 1987 work *A Thousand Plateaus*. He writes:

The internet is in fact inherently rhizomatic in structure: it contains many different nodes that have shoots and connections to a seemingly infinite number of other nodes. Nodes can be thought of as the pages of the web, or the links of hyper text. In the rhizome, and in the internet, there is no central structure but an infinite number of interlocking nodes, many of which are produced from a bottom up, grass roots system that allows for each individual to have a voice. Knowledge becomes saturated, but in doing so becomes democratic, or even anarchistic in nature.⁹

Bluemink connects the hypermediacy of the internet to the organization (or anti-organization) of the rhizome. Beyond the structural analysis he gives, we can view the information contained

⁹ Matt Bluemink, “The Web as Rhizome in Deleuze and Guattari,” *Blue Labyrinths*, July 15, 2015, <https://bluelabyrinths.com/2015/07/15/the-web-as-rhizome-in-deleuze-and-guattari/>.

within the internet as signs which flow erratically throughout cyberspace. Hello Kitty is one such sign, gaining significance from its surrounding signs and untethered by any specific structure. Further, Hello Kitty herself is divided into infinite subsidiary signs, coalescing to form a whole but also with their own interpretive fields. Indeed, the notion of hypermediacy is closely linked to that of the rhizome. Lev Manovich, a foundational scholar of digital media, writes that “In hypermedia, the multimedia elements making a document are connected through hyperlinks. Thus the elements and the structure are independent of each other-rather than hard-wired together, as in traditional media. The World Wide Web is a particular implementation of hypermedia in which the elements are distributed throughout the network.”¹⁰ Because the elements and structure are independent, the structure becomes visible rather than hidden, disrupting immediacy and transparency. Hyperremediation in the digital underground speaks to this quality of digital media, as the incorporation of multiple contemporary media forms into a single work, as in a music video, or the fragmentation and multiplication of sonic elements within a single song, as produced by vocal processing and beats infused with “post-historical electronic overload”¹¹ (a phrase used by Simon Reynolds to describe electronic production at the turn of the 2010s), uncover the mechanics of the media used to produce the works that define the underground.

The rhizomatic remediation that scenecore is a product of also serves to surface the constructedness of aesthetics in music culture in general, as it denies a straightforward immersion in a given aesthetic by directly grounding its aesthetic in an earlier one. Bolter and Grusin write that “The very act of remediation... ensures that the older medium cannot be

¹⁰ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2001), 38.

¹¹ Reynolds, “Maximal Nation.”

entirely effaced; the new medium remains dependent on the older one in acknowledged or unacknowledged ways.”¹² Scenecore artists in the SoundCloud digital underground always (re)produce elements of the original scene subculture in their work, whether it is acknowledged, as when artists directly cite scene aesthetics that they have encountered through the rhizomatic information flows of the internet, or unacknowledged in cases where newer scenecore artists are simply imitating preexisting ones without understanding the original context. In either case, scene remains a visible, rather than transparent, influence on the music and aesthetics of scenecore, disrupting an easy absorption into a genre’s “own aesthetic standard,” which Simon Frith explains is the mechanism for genres’ manufacturing of authenticity.¹³ Scenecore ignores the ideal of authenticity, instead borrowing from scene to enact expressive artifice.

three: hyperremediation and participatory culture

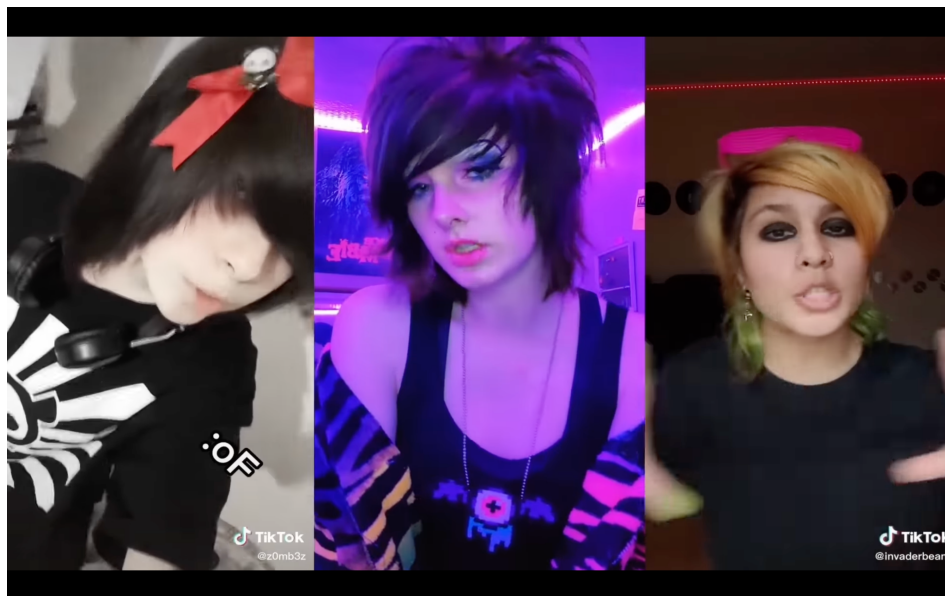


Image 3: screenshot from 6arelyhuman’s “XOXO (Kisses Hugs)” music video

¹² Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, 47.

¹³ Frith, “Towards an Aesthetic,” 261.

The scenecore genre features an example of video hyperremediation that reveals its ability to broaden and interlink the SoundCloud digital underground community. 6arelyhuman, who is from Dallas and calls the music they make ‘sassyscene,’ released the music video for their hit song “XOXO (Kisses Hugs),” featuring horrormovies, in November 2022. The video starts with 6arely, dressed in scene attire with dyed hair and piercings to match, dancing and performing the lyrics outdoors at night. Clip art and animations including blood splatters and guns are overlaid on the screen, and the video rapidly cycles between different shots. After 6arely’s verse and chorus, horrormovies performs their part of the song dressed in a coat with a fur fringe in a dark room backlit by a television playing colorful visuals. The scene has the effect of making their face impossible to make out as they sway along to the song. After horror’s verse, 6arely’s chorus comes back in, and the visuals switch to a collage of videos of new wave, rawring 20s scene kids lip-syncing and dancing to the song on TikTok. Three equally sized TikToks are laid out horizontally across the screen at a time, switching every few seconds to a new set of TikToks.

Similarly to the “doing better” video, this music video repurposes a contemporary medium to reach beyond its own context and create networked connections that fully utilize the modularity of social media. Manovich explains that modularity is one of the five principles of ‘new media,’ writing that “elements are assembled into larger-scale objects but continue to maintain their separate identities,” and that “The World Wide Web as a whole is also completely modular” because elements don’t actually belong to their corresponding websites and can be extracted, constituting a fundamentally discrete and nonhierarchical organization.¹⁴ In this case, TikToks are the modules being assembled and recontextualized. These TikToks would usually

¹⁴ Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 30-31.

be quite individualized, as one would encounter them one at a time while scrolling down their For You Page, the algorithmically personalized central feed that videos play out on on TikTok. Further, you would not see all of the TikToks with the “XOXO (Kisses Hugs)” audio together unless you specifically went to the feed of all videos using that sound. However, the music video places these TikToks in a communal setting, as if constructing its own virtual rave. The TikToks are for the most part synced up with the song, making the video inclusive and participatory, with 6arely’s fans able to perform their favorite track alongside their favorite artist. Credit is given by including the creators’ TikTok usernames in the video rather than cropping them out.

The “XOXO (Kisses Hugs)” music video shows how hyperremediation can create dialogue between artists and fans as much as it creates dialogue between form and content, much like capoxxo’s “doing better” video does. Following Henry Jenkins’ conception of fans as “active producers and manipulators of meanings,” we can view these artists’ incorporation of fan interactions and content into their music videos as the end sequence of the cycle of artist production, fan cooption and artist reincorporation.¹⁵ In capoxxo’s Twitch chat as well as the TikToks made with 6arelyhuman’s sound, fans are recontextualizing their preferred artists’ cultural productions to fit their goals and ways of relating to themselves, the artists, and the world.

For example, some of the TikToks in “XOXO (Kisses Hugs)” feature people dancing to the song in fursuits, anthropomorphic full-body animal costumes, indicating that they are part of the ‘furry’ community, a group who share an enthusiasm for dressing in these costumes and engaging in activities like roleplay and attending furry conventions. Other dancers are dressed more goth or emo than scene, others are in cosplay (costumes modeled after fictional characters),

¹⁵ Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*, 23.

and there is one person wearing a sports jersey sponsored by Hennessy. In short, fans from various subcultural backgrounds embrace 6arely's song and make it their own, dancing according to their personal style and sensibilities, and in turn all are welcomed into the virtual rave held within 6arely's hyperremediated music video. In this way, the connective hyperremediation exhibited in "XOXO (Kisses Hugs)" undermines authenticity by working to dissolve the distinction between artist and viewer.

four: interconnectivity and anti-Cartesianism

Hyperremediation in the SoundCloud digital underground complements expressive artifice by creating another avenue for SoundCloud digital underground artists to dispute the value of authenticity, transparency and immediacy in music and art. These values have been endemic in the Western world for centuries, and are intimately related to the desire for mastery over the external world and the coherence of the subject in a Cartesian dualist framework.¹⁶ Music videos in the SoundCloud digital underground like capoxxo's "doing better" video and 6arelyhuman's "XOXO (Kisses Hugs)" video reject the aspiration to produce smooth absorption and erase the mediated nature of the music video form that characterizes mainstream music videos like The Kid LAROI and Justin Bieber's "Stay" video and The Weeknd's "Save Your Tears" video. In so doing, they invite the viewer to metaphorically participate in the production process of the video, identifying them with the fans who are included in the video rather than a transcendent and omnipotent "view-from-nowhere." The videos do not hide that they are taking

¹⁶ Thomas Lamarre, *Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 113.

place on a computer screen, and instead highlight this quality, incorporating the structure of digital media into their own structure.

The rhizomatic remediation of scenecore also acts in tandem with expressive artifice by allowing artists such as horrormovies to build an aesthetic language with no pretension to authenticity or transparency. Rather, it is always already mediated, as it is inherently predicated and built on previous styles and sounds. To be clear, all music is built on what comes before it, but scenecore is unique in the combination of two factors. First, it foregrounds its reliance on its predecessor, as expressed in its name and the visual aesthetics it appropriates, and second, it is not simply a revival of an older style, as in the blues revival of the 1980s or the teddy boy revivalists that Dick Hebdige describes in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, but a new evolution of the scene aesthetic using increasingly entrenched digitality as its starting point.¹⁷ In this way, scenecore goes beyond the postmodernist tendency towards pastiche and breaks out of the cycle of compulsory repetition and lack of imagination. The fact that most scenecore artists were not involved in the original scene phenomenon underscores the rhizomatic aspect of cultural production in the digital age, wherein the radical connectivity of the internet enables the transmigration of signifiers into new contexts and facilitates a heightened level of remediation that does not rely on direct linear connections but instead operates erratically and opportunistically.

The two music videos we have looked at and scenecore as a subgenre both exemplify the interconnectivity of the SoundCloud digital underground. Artists invite fans to participate in their creative process, breaking the barrier between viewer and performer. Artists also connect via the internet to adjacent media forms as well as prior musical and subcultural phenomena.

¹⁷ Hebdige, *Subculture*, 82.

Interconnectivity is a defining characteristic of the digital age, and artists in the SoundCloud digital underground embrace it and make it an explicit part of their practice, discarding the limits of discrete conceptualizations of art. SoundCloud digital underground artists' promotion of interconnectivity stands against the ideas of mastery and Cartesian dualism that underlie the desire for transparency. Hyperremediation and rhizomatic remediation both allow artists in the SoundCloud digital underground to create art that is not contained within hegemonic paradigms of authenticity and immediacy, bypassing cinematic immersion just as expressive artifice bypasses vocal realism.

Conclusion

Yet again, SoundCloud is in crisis. In January 2024, *Sky News* reported that Raine Group and Temasek Holdings, the platform's owners, have initiated talks with investment banks about a potential auction of the company.¹ This comes after SoundCloud laid off around 10% of its workforce last year in an effort to make the company profitable. It seems like SoundCloud may end up being “cannibalized by a corporation,” as the NYC-based tech entrepreneurship publication *AlleyWatch* prophesied in February 2017, conveniently ignoring that SoundCloud itself was and is a corporation.²

2017 was also the year of SoundCloud's last major crisis, when in July of that year it laid off 40% of its staff. Further sounding the alarm, *TechCrunch* reported that SoundCloud had only 50 days' worth of funding left.³ I remember hearing rumors that SoundCloud was shutting down; I panicked and made a playlist called “keepers” to download all of my favorite songs before they disappeared. At that time, the company managed to raise \$170 million from Raine and Temasek, ensuring it would be able to continue operating.⁴

As SoundCloud potentially moves on to a new phase of its life cycle, things have changed in the SoundCloud digital underground as well. Some artists, like 5v, have continued

¹ Mark Kleinman, “Music Streaming Service SoundCloud Tunes up for Sale,” *Sky News*, January 7, 2024, <https://news.sky.com/story/music-streaming-service-soundcloud-tunes-up-for-sale-13043602>.

² “Crisis Funding: A Lesson from SoundCloud,” *AlleyWatch*, February 23, 2017, <https://www.alleywatch.com/2017/02/crisis-funding-lesson-soundcloud/>.

³ Josh Constine, “Soundcloud Sinks as Leaks Say Layoffs Buy Little Time,” *TechCrunch*, July 14, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170712202252/https://techcrunch.com/2017/07/12/soundshroud/>.

⁴ Shona Ghosh, “SoundCloud's CEO Is Stepping down after the Company Raised a Big Round of New Funding,” *Business Insider*, August 11, 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/soundcloud-ceo-alex-ljung-will-step-down-now-the-company-has-new-funding-2017-8>.

making music that is generally within the digicore style that we've examined, but others have not. For example, d0llywood1 has largely moved past her glitchy and synthetic sound and shifted more towards rap. Additionally, new artists aren't really coming out in the digicore scene.

Digicore's heyday was certainly around 2020-2021, and it has mostly been downhill from there in terms of cultural relevance and internal vitality. Scenecore is doing better, with artists like 6arelyhuman, syris, and skypebf emerging within the past two years and achieving success on SoundCloud and TikTok. But there is a sense that the SoundCloud digital underground, while not dead, has significantly changed. This is understandable for an internet-based scene like the SoundCloud digital underground. Sophie Walker encapsulated the ephemerality of internet subgenres perfectly in 2021:

For the first time, we are watching music scenes and microgenres with life cycles that play out entirely on the internet. Born from the open-source ambiguity of the online world, the last decade has seen genres accelerating from the void at a breakneck speed, chewing up an internet's worth of influences, and spitting them out again. Burning bright and burning out, sprinting to keep up with the all-you-can-eat consumerism that has defined the way we engage with music. Today's cutting edge is tomorrow's lo-fi; what was the sound of the future is already a passing reference point. Pick it up, put it down. Do it because you can; do it because you're bored. In the virtual world, Rome was built not just in a day, but on a school night—but was any of it made to last?⁵

Walker was writing about the “‘death’ of hyperpop,” but her words on the subject are prescient with respect to the “death of digicore” as well. As soon as a style or sound becomes cemented, it

⁵ Sophie Walker, “404 Error, Genre Not Found: The Life Cycle of Internet Scenes,” *Complex*, November 4, 2021, <https://www.complex.com/pigeons-and-planes/a/sophiewalker5/life-cycle-of-internet-genres-scenes-hyperpop-digicore-cloud-rap>.

is seen as ‘played out’ or ‘overplayed;’ the sound loses its luster when it’s been around for too long.

Certainly, though, elements of the digicore sound survive in the genres and scenes that are succeeding it. One such scene is known as jerk/hoodtrap, led by New York rapper xaviersobased’s 1c34 collective. Jerk is broadly inspired by the late 2000s/early 2010s jerk scene, which consisted of “sparse beats, simple melodies, and party-centric lyrics geared towards a style of dance called ‘jerkin.’”⁶ The current jerk sound is characterized by a production style that revolves around short synth loops with repetitive, sharp drums and powerful 808 bass, and often a particular vocal sample of a woman saying “aye” from Pharrell’s 2009 track “That Girl” featuring Snoop Dogg. The types of synths used are heavily inspired by the digicore sound of producers like vagex, shinju, kirvano and yandere, as is the heavy bass. The vocal delivery is more rap-like than digicore, but often uses similar vocal modulation and glitch techniques.

More generally, the current version of the SoundCloud digital underground retains the ethic of expressive artifice that was elaborated in Chapter 1 and the principles of remediation, hypermediacy, and hyperremediation from Chapter 2. Artists continue to use digital technology to reinterpret and resituate past and present styles, ranging from jerk and scene to digicore and hyperpop, foregrounding their constructedness and disregarding any pretension to immediacy. Maximal AutoTune, glitch, and vocal modulation as well as the proliferation of sonic elements and the reincorporation of older styles remain key facets of the SoundCloud digital underground as a whole. The scene itself is inseparable from its digitality, as its *hyper*, *digi*-tal and *glitch*-y nature is almost built into its mode of production using DAWs and other digital software, and its

⁶ “Jerk Rap,” *Rate Your Music*, accessed March 7, 2024, <https://rateyourmusic.com/genre/jerk-rap/>.

experimental ethos centers around pushing the limits of this software to create something new and exciting.

The future of SoundCloud is uncertain. It may be sold and hollowed out by “asset-holding investment companies” who treat it as a “trading card,”⁷ “cannibalized” and stripped for parts, as *AlleyWatch* predicted in 2017.⁸ This may lead to a mass exodus from the platform as it becomes increasingly inhospitable as a place for amateur and semi-professional artists to create and explore. Sophie Walker spoke of “the radical potential of the internet being an ever-renewing form of punk: music, now more than ever, holds the possibility of including anyone, regardless of race, sexuality or gender, because the barrier for entry is nothing more than a wi-fi connection and a .wav file” in 2021, but with the increasing corporatization and platformization of the digital music industry, it’s unclear what the future of the SoundCloud digital underground looks like.⁹ With that being said, I predict that the SoundCloud digital underground, even if it migrates away from SoundCloud itself, will only get more hypermediated and expressively artificial as it continues to thrash against the grip of commodification and the demand for authenticity.

⁷ Dan White, “Is SoundCloud a ‘Unicorn’? Their Investment Group Owners Are Seeking a \$1 Billion Sale This Year,” *DJ TechTools*, January 8, 2024, <https://djtechtools.com/2024/01/08/is-soundcloud-a-unicorn-their-investment-group-owners-are-seeking-a-1-billion-sale-this-year/>.

⁸ “Crisis Funding: A Lesson from SoundCloud,” *AlleyWatch*, February 23, 2017, <https://www.alleywatch.com/2017/02/crisis-funding-lesson-soundcloud/>.

⁹ Walker, “404 Error.”

Appendix

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capoxxo - ouueeoueou (prod. pvscale)
<https://soundcloud.com/capoxxo/ouueeoueou>

blackwinterwells - IRIS
<https://soundcloud.com/blackwinterwells/iris>

Buffalobang - Softly (As Ever)
<https://soundcloud.com/buffalobang/softly-as-ever>

d0llywood1 - ihonestlymightjustgiveup (prod. vagex)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ah_LeQQ_phk

5v - b4 u go (prod. Pressure)
<https://soundcloud.com/5vexe/b4ugo>

Cher - Believe
<https://soundcloud.com/cher-scmusic/believe>

T-Pain - Buy U a Drank (Shawty Snappin') feat. Yung Joc
<https://soundcloud.com/t-pain/buy-u-a-drank-shawty-snappin>

T-Pain - Bartender feat. Akon
<https://soundcloud.com/t-pain/bartender-main-version>

Katy Perry - E.T. feat. Kanye West
<https://soundcloud.com/katyperry/e-t-feat-kanye-west>

capoxxo - i sit here and i cry (prod. 51five)
<https://soundcloud.com/capoxxo/i-sit-here-and-i-cry>

capoxxo - don't have much time (prod. DEADAT18 and 6 percent)
<https://soundcloud.com/user-927192013/capoxxo-dont-have-much-time>

S3RL - Hypnotoad
<https://soundcloud.com/s3rl/hypnotoad-s3rl>

nosgov and ket4seki - party addict (prod. kojo)
<https://soundcloud.com/kets4eki/party-addict>

horormovies and maxo xoxo - cutting
<https://soundcloud.com/horormovies666/cutting-w-maxo-xoxo-1>

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Paper Rad - Welcome To My Homepage
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=er-OWkFeeV8>

capoxxo - doing better
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJaVbwK2C6s>

The Kid LAROI and Justin Bieber - Stay
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTJczUoc26U>

The Weeknd - Save Your Tears
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XXYlFuWEuKI>

6arelyhuman and horormovies - XOXO (Kisses Hugs)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cAHWiRsyg7Q>

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<https://soundcloud.com/buffalobang>

mayh3mp
<https://soundcloud.com/mayh3mp>

capoxxo
<https://soundcloud.com/capoxxo>

xaviersobased
<https://soundcloud.com/xaviersobased>

dreamcache

<https://soundcloud.com/dreamcache>

keyblayde808

<https://soundcloud.com/keyblayde808>

A. G. Cook

<https://soundcloud.com/agcook>

SOPHIE

<https://soundcloud.com/msmsmsm>

Charli XCX

<https://soundcloud.com/charlixcx>

100 gees

<https://soundcloud.com/100gees>

ericdoa

<https://soundcloud.com/ericdoa>

d0llywood1

<https://soundcloud.com/sanriorose>

glaive

<https://soundcloud.com/1glaive>

angelus

<https://soundcloud.com/angelus7k>

maria kate

<https://soundcloud.com/marscantdrive>

Paper Rad

<http://www.paperrad.org/>

blackwinterwells

<https://soundcloud.com/blackwinterwells>

vagex

<https://soundcloud.com/vagexsm>

5v

<https://soundcloud.com/5vexe>

Lil Uzi Vert

<https://soundcloud.com/liluzivert>

Lil Yachty

<https://soundcloud.com/770rd>

Milli Vanilli

<https://soundcloud.com/milli-vanilli-official>

Buddy Holly

<https://soundcloud.com/buddy-holly-official>

The Who

<https://soundcloud.com/thewho>

Christian Marclay

Yasunao Tone

Oval

<https://soundcloud.com/ovalandbeyond>

Aphex Twin

<https://soundcloud.com/richarddjames>

BT

<https://soundcloud.com/bt>

edIT

<https://soundcloud.com/edit>

Coldplay

<https://soundcloud.com/coldplay>

Drake

<https://soundcloud.com/octobersveryown>

Katy Perry

<https://soundcloud.com/katyperry>

Cher

<https://soundcloud.com/cher-scmusic>

T-Pain

<https://soundcloud.com/tpain>

Kesha

<https://soundcloud.com/kesha>

Pressure

<https://soundcloud.com/pressure666>

Kanye West

<https://soundcloud.com/kanyewest>

51five

<https://soundcloud.com/51five>

Laura Les

<https://soundcloud.com/osno1>

quinn

<https://soundcloud.com/catmom4>

michaelwarren

<https://soundcloud.com/prodmichael>

S3RL

<https://soundcloud.com/s3rl>

kets4eki

<https://soundcloud.com/kets4eki>

nosgov

<https://soundcloud.com/820>

kojo

<https://soundcloud.com/kojowav>

Bring Me the Horizon

<https://soundcloud.com/bring-me-the-horizon>

Asking Alexandria

<https://soundcloud.com/asking-alexandria-official>

Pierce the Veil

<https://soundcloud.com/pierce-the-veil-music>

horormovies

<https://soundcloud.com/horormovies666>

Pixel Hood

<https://soundcloud.com/pixelhood>

6arelyhuman

<https://soundcloud.com/6arelyhuman>

syris

<https://soundcloud.com/xxsyris>

skypebf

<https://soundcloud.com/skypebf>

shinju

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