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Musical Genres in the Age of Liminality
Muzikos žanrai liminalumo epochoje

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Abstract

This essay aims to investigate the role the category of genre has in music-related discourses in an age characterized by its interest in the liminal, or the non-generic. The objective is determining whether the concept of genre still has a useful role to play today (when many discard it for a range of different reasons). The hypothesis is that genre can no longer be used as a normative, taxonomic category, yet that it continues to fulfil a crucial function as a "generic contract," an agent of communication that provides information influencing and facilitating the reception of music. Taking a digital graphic representation of popular-music genres as a starting point, the problems and challenges of generic classifications in today's world are outlined, proposed alternative approaches (such as the "post-genre" phenomenon) are explored, and recent musicological thinking on the topic is assessed. A look at the structure and function of Spotify's map of "genre-shaped distinctions" leads to a discussion of the function of genres in the digital music industry: its ultimate aim is the classification of the listener, rather than the music, for the purpose of micro-targeting. This leads to an assessment of genre as an agent of power and the potential of emic and etic points of view to expand our perspective. The essay concludes that both the communicative and the economic functions of the genre category are united by their application in a liminal context in which uniqueness and hybridity appear to deny the usefulness of genres while paradoxically still relying on them.

Keywords: Music and genre, musical classification, music and taxonomy, music and the digital economy, micro-targeting, music and power, emic and etic approaches to music, post-genre.

Anotacija

Straipsnyje siekiama ištirti žanro kategorijos vaidmenį su muzika susijusiuose diskursuose dabarties laikotarpiu, kuriam būdingas domėjimasis liminaliais arba negeneriniais dalykais. Bandoma nustatyti, ar žanro samprata ir šiandien vis dar prasminga (daug kam atmetant ją dėl įvairių priežasčių). Keliama hipotezė, kad žanro nebegalima naudoti kaip normatyvinės, taksonominės kategorijos, tačiau jis vis dar atlieka reikšmingą „generinės sutarties" funkciją kaip komunikacijos agentas, teikiantis informaciją, veikiančią ir palengvinančią muzikos recepciją. Pasitelkiant skaitmeninį grafinį populiariosios muzikos žanrų vaizdavimą kaip atspirties tašką, apibrėžiamos generinių klasifikacijų problemos ir iššūkiai šiandieniame pasaulyje, nagrinėjamos siūlomos alternatyvios prieigos (pavyzdžiui, postžanro reiškinys) ir vertinamos naujausios muzikologinės mintys šia tema. Žvilgsnis į „Spotify" žanro suformuotų skirtumų žemėlapio struktūrą ir funkcijas leidžia pradėti diskusiją apie žanrų funkciją skaitmeninės muzikos pramonėje: jos galutinis tikslas yra veikiau klausytojų nei muzikos klasifikavimas tikslinei mikrorinkai nustatyti. Tokiu būdu žanras vertinamas kaip galios veiksnys bei eminių ir etinių požiūrių potencialas mūsų perspektyvai praplėsti. Straipsnyje daroma išvada, kad ir komunikacines, ir ekonomines žanro kategorijos funkcijas vienija jų taikymas liminalumo kontekste, kuriame unikalumas ir hibridiškumas tarsi neigia žanrų naudingumą, kartu paradoksaliai vis dar remdamasis jais.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: muzika ir žanras, muzikos klasifikacija, muzika ir taksonomija, muzika ir skaitmeninė ekonomika, tikslinės mikrorinkos nustatymas, muzika ir galia, eminis ir etinis požiūris į muziką, postžanras.

[...] genre is what nobody really believes in but everyone relies upon. (Daniel 2019: 130)

This line by Drew Daniel summarizes well the problems we have with the concept of genre. We always struggle with it – if it's defined too tightly, it seems to be too rigid to correspond to the real world; if it's defined loosely, we wonder whether it remains useful. The signification of genre in music has never been static; each period has had its own take on it. Hence, I want to investigate in this essay what the category of genre might mean in the early twenty-first century, how it has evolved in recent decades, and how it reflects general trends in both musicology and the humanities in general.

We live in an age of liminality. Research in the humanities and social sciences regularly names among its main goals transcending boundaries, engaging with the intersectional, and exploring the liminal. In both popular and art music, new pieces are praised highly if they push boundaries or merge separate traditions; it adds to their originality and uniqueness if they represent not "just" another example of a type we are already familiar with from countless previous pieces.

A normative classification of music according to genres does not seem to fit into this world. We are less interested in what something stands for at its core and more in how it interacts with its neighbors – or has that core perhaps been some kind of illusion all along? In any case, genres

still form a perhaps unloved yet indispensable basis of our "in-betweenness" – without them, we would lose all musical bearings in this constantly shifting world. We may see traces of many different genres in a piece of music or deny it membership of any genre at all, yet even as a purely historical or theoretical category, genres still help us make sense of today's ontological hybrids. They are indispensable for performers, listeners, and the music industry, who all rely on what Jeffrey Kallberg has described as a "generic contract"[1] (a virtual construct akin to Rousseau's social contract that guides our behavior in the musical world even though we have never been formally acquainted with it):

> The choice of genre by a composer and its identification by a listener establish the framework for the communication of meaning. The genre thus guides the decisions made by the composers in writing the work, and the listener in hearing the work. Between these two a "generic contract" develops: the composer agrees to use some of the conventions, patterns and gestures of the genre, and the listener consents to interpret some aspects of the piece in a way conditioned by this genre. (Kallberg 1987/88: 775; see also Kallberg 1988)

Even in our time, in which pieces often appear as hybrids, mixing elements of different styles and genres, knowledge of that generic contract is still crucial – or we couldn't recognize the hybridity of those pieces. Mixing elements of different genres is not a new phenomenon; Kallberg and Jim Samson have observed elements of different genres in a number of piano pieces by Frédéric Chopin, with Samson stating about one of the Polish composer's Nocturnes (op. 15 no. 3):

> The work is not a march, a waltz or a mazurka but rather refers to a march, a waltz or a mazurka. (Samson 1989: 225)

We will return to the question of whether a hybrid can refer to something without actually being it or instead turns into a new kind of entity in its own right.

Like Kallberg and Samson, I don't regard genre as a fixed ontological or taxonomic category but rather as a communicative strategy based on the generic contract. However, that doesn't mean that I don't accept that for a long time it was regarded as the former in Western thinking – and still is by some today. This often has to do with perceived notions of authenticity with regard to music, which means a lot to the people defending generic orthodoxy, as recently outlined by Peter Manuel with regard to flamenco. In response to the success of the Catalan singer Rosalía, whose style – especially in her album *El mal querer* (2018) – mixes flamenco and pop elements, often heated discussions between flamenco purists and rosalístas (fans of the singer) have erupted in Spain:

> The basic problem ... is that some flamenco fans ardently wish to claim her music for the art form, which, they argue, is in danger of becoming petrified and stale, while others wish to exclude it, fearing that fusion projects like hers could marginalize traditional flamenco, which they see as perpetually threatened by commercial fads and ephemeral hybrids. (Manuel 2021: 36)

Yet this is not just about musical features but also social contexts. Rosalía comes neither from Andalucía, the core region associated with flamenco, nor does she represent the gitano (Spanish Romani) culture typically connected with it: "innovations within the genre are only truly legitimate and trustworthy if they are undertaken by artists such as Camarón and Morente who have earned prior respect as performers of traditional flamenco" (Manuel 2021: 46). So the definition and role of genres is based on social context as much as structural features.

For the purposes of this text, I understand the term "genre" to be applicable to any possible categorization of music as it has occurred in different periods and cultures. It can also be applied to different taxonomic levels (with certain qualifiers). Music has been categorized and classified in so many different ways that any restriction of the term's applicability would exclude too many musics from consideration. Today it is far more rewarding to reflect on the ways in which categorization has happened and is still happening, and on how the criteria applied to the classification and signification of music have evolved, than attempting to determine new generic definitions for our time – a task that would be bound to fail anyway, and that is also not necessary if one primarily understands genres as agents of communication.[2]

Over the following pages, I want to look at a few aspects of how genres manifest themselves in music today. This will include discussion of online representations of genre worlds, recent developments in musicological thinking about genres, ways in which genres play a part in discourses of power, and also the role of genres in a multicultural world. At the end stands the confirmation that today, musical genres should be regarded as socially constructed entities with multiple facets and open to change, manifesting themselves in a range of stronger and weaker – often hybrid – forms. For better or worse, the role of the genre category nowadays reflects our globalized, multicultural world.

musicmap

Let us begin with a graphic representation of musical genres entitled *musicmap*, which is freely accessible online (Crauwels 2016). It strives to explain "The Genealogy and

History of Popular Music Genres from Origin till Present (1870–2016)" (see musicmap.info). Its creator is Kwinten Crauwels, a Belgian architect (as well as a music data visualizer and aspiring filmmaker) who has spent eight years working on this map, which was published in 2016 (he continues to update it). He explains his concept in a TEDx talk from 2017 (Crauwels 2017). I strongly recommend having a look at this map and playing a little with its options (zooming in and out at different positions and becoming acquainted with the info options provided by the menu bar on the left) before continuing to read this text.

Musicmap displays many dimensions of musical classification and different types of relationships. It is about what we may call popular music in its broadest sense, broken down into a range of medium-level categories such as industrial, jazz, or techno. The color scheme indicates closer relationships between certain mid-level genres, which are explained in a bar at the bottom of the screen[3] – there are altogether nine groupings, which often overlap. For example, "electronic music" includes "electronic dance music," which in turn encompasses both "break beat dance" and "four-to-the-floor dance." If we zoom deeper into the main columns – we can take jazz as an example – we discover more genres within each column. These are what I have elsewhere (Marx 2004) called "specific genres" (or "konkrete Gattungen" in German), namely classificatory units which consist of actual pieces of music. In turn, I call higher-level terms of classification such as "jazz" "abstract genres" ("abstrakte Gattungen") as they are usually broken down into other genres rather than actual pieces of music (Crauwels speaks of "subgenres" and "supergenres"; Crauwels 2017).

Crauwels's representation offers us up to six levels of generic classification on top of each other, up to "Music" in general. This includes the four additional musical worlds at the top of the main picture, entitled "Utility Music," "Folk Music," "Classical Music," and "World Music." Each of these four circles offers some additional high- and mid-level abstract genres, yet we can't click on them – they are only present here as target or origin points for links to some popular-music genres. If we zoom in even further to the jazz column, we discover a dense web of lines that connects each specific genre to many others which have influenced it, or which it in turn has influenced. A legend in the side bar explains the nature of the differently structured lines; generally, Crauwels gives quite a bit of information on how, and well as why, he structured his map in this way. He even offers a bibliography, which included 222 entries (many of them scholarly titles) when I checked; since this is a work in progress, it may be a few more by now.

Going deeper into the jazz column, we discover cloud-like structures linking groups of specific genres. The legend

explains them as "Combination[s] of different genres that are related, forming a larger music group." If we touch a specific genre with our cursor, all the connecting lines not related to this genre recede into the background; only the ones relevant to it remain. It is as if the forest vanishes and an individual tree with all its branches suddenly comes into focus. If I click on the name of the genre, a pop-up window opens, which contains a definition of this genre with a year or period of origin (the Y axis represents the timeline in this map, moving chronologically from top to bottom). There is also a link to a Spotify playlist prepared by Crauwels where we can acquaint ourselves with songs which he regards as important representatives of this genre.

Overall, it is obvious how much work has gone into this project. It demonstrates a very clever, interactive use of the internet to engage with the complexity of generic definitions and the structure of generic relationships. Crauwels has managed to create something that is both aesthetically beautiful and offers educational value; particularly useful are the links to actual music that we can listen to. We will probably not agree with all of Crauwels's definitions and relationships as indicated here (in fact, so far, I haven't met anyone who agrees with all of its details), but that is not my point. *Musicmap* represents a very good and easily accessible introduction into the complexity related to the concept of genre, or more broadly of musical classification.

Among these complexities are the existence of low-, mid- and high-level genres, the fact that – unlike in biological taxonomies – the number of levels is not identical in each area, the emergence of genres at different times and their often complex, hybrid origins. In addition, the complexity of links between genres (regarding both their number and their type) is irregular and messy. There are, however, aspects of generic definition and development that even this complex map cannot capture. These include power relationships – some genres are or were regarded (by some, sometimes by many) as more or less reputable than others, often related to the social standing of the people associated with it. We can think of something like punk or metal, but also of the concept, often still purported, of the higher standing of classical music. An example of this would be Carl Dahlhaus's classification of the string quartet as being defined by three criteria: its instrumentation (two violins, viola, and violoncello), the presence of sonata form, and what he calls "aesthetic distance from the popular" ("ästhetische Distanz zum Populären"), or "elevated" style – essentially, highbrow music (Dahlhaus 1974: 621). Dahlhaus – who wrote three foundational essays on the topic of musical genres (Dahlhaus 1973, 1974, 1987) – regards "Ranghöhe" (level of style) as a core element of any musico-generic debate; for example, he rates piano music

lower than string quartets, and music for male choirs lower than music for mixed choirs (Dahlhaus 1973: 866ff.).[4] Finally, Crauwels would also have problems representing pieces which display elements of two or more genres without actually fully belonging to either of them (such as Chopin's Nocturne referred to above) in his map.

Overall *musicmap* is a very good introduction to the role genres play in music, yet also the problems related to their use.

Alternative, non-generic classifications?

In *Every Song Ever: Twenty Ways to Listen in an Age of Musical Plenty*, published in 2016, Ben Ratliff discusses alternative ways to listen to music and group musical experiences. He contends that the age of digital ubiquity ("a situation of total, overwhelming, glorious plenty"; Ratliff 2016: 10), in which enormous amounts of music of a broad range of types can be accessed, has changed our listening habits. At the same time, we now encounter music in all sorts of circumstances, most of them featuring it as part of a more holistic experience in which it serves as background or as part of a wider range of sensory stimuli.

> We might get our cues about what to listen to from our Facebook feed, or from sources that use music almost as neutral content in a mediated environment – talent shows, talk radio, football game ad spots. Background music services have vastly improved, thanks to the information yielded by our online listening activity. (Ratliff 2016: 6)

Ratliff accepts that this can have negative consequences, namely a possible "atrophy of desire to seek out new songs ourselves, and a hardening of taste, so that all you want to do is confirm what you already know" (Ratliff 2016: 6). Yet his focus lies on the potential for good that can emerge from this situation:

> There is a possibility that hearing so much music without specifically asking for it develops in the listener a fresh kind of aural perception, an ability to size up a song and contextualize it in a new or personal way, rather than immediately rejecting it based on an external idea of genre or style. (Ratliff 2016: 6)

Here the word "genre" appears for the first time and in a rather negative way: a genre is something that makes us reject a piece of music. Why is that? Elsewhere in his book, Ratliff explains: "When the first order of business is to sort music out by genre or structure or language – to determine whether a song is indie-folk or classical or R&B or whatever – that's a direct route to the bottomless comfort zone" (Ratliff 2016: 10).

Yet the comfort zone is what, according to Ratliff, epitomizes the negative consequences of the age of plenty in which we refuse to engage with new musical experiences, music of a type we are not already familiar with. He wants to overcome a mindset that lets us settle in the purely familiar and regards genre as a core tool that we use to achieve that aim.

What Ratliff really wants is an approach that is as much as possible determined by ourselves, rather than by formal or generic structures predetermined by others. This applies not just to music but to everything we do and encounter in life:

> when you are entering new problems or encountering elements with a great possibility of variety: [...] you [...] move through these situations, these different rooms of life, each one revealing an endlessly permutating number of changes in color and temperature and sound and feeling. But there is one internal structure that defines them all and makes them cohere into something resembling sense. That is you. (Ratliff 2016: 208)

This is ultimately a modern radicalization of Roland Barthes's hypothesis of the death of the author (Barthes 1986): meaning should be provided entirely by us, the recipients, rather than by any force external to us – be it the author, a performer, or socially developed and accepted "habits" such as generic determinations.

Yet how does Ratliff develop and categorize his twenty "better" ways of listening to music? According to him one can't entirely abstain from referencing certain attributes of the music, yet should generalize them as much as possible:

> reasons for engagement could be articulated in a language that isn't specifically musical, or identified with composers and players [...], but rather a language that refers to generalized human activity. Therefore, perhaps, not "melody," "harmony," "rhythm," "sonata form," "oratorio." Perhaps, instead, repetition, or speed, or slowness, or density, or discrepancy, or stubbornness, or sadness. (Ratliff 2016: 9)

So he has a beef with genres (such as sonata form or oratorio), yet also with formal and structural issues – generally it feels as if he doesn't like terms used by "specialists" or "experts" which indicate a predetermined area of understanding. Our approach to music unknown to us should be as open, as unbiased as possible:

> The suggestions I'm offering for how to hear are based on certain kinds of affinities between pieces of music. The affinities are not based in genre, because genre is a construct for the purpose of commerce, not pleasure, and ultimately for the purpose of listening to less [...]. This book is about listening for pleasure, and about listening to more. (Ratliff 2016: 11)

That for Ratliff the acceptance of traditional genres ultimately leads to listening to less confirms what he stated earlier, yet the idea that it is a business tool is new here. What matters most is his assertion that genre doesn't – almost

Twenty Ways to Listen in an Age of Musical Plenty				
repetition	slowness	speed	transmission	quiet/silence/intimacy
stubbornness	virtuosity	sadness	audio space	endless inventory
wasteful authority	density	improvisation	closeness	loudness
discrepancy	memory and historical truth	linking	community and exclusivity	the perfect moment

Fig. 1. Ratliff, Twenty ways to listen to music.

can't – serve the purpose of supporting the pleasurable experience of music. He doesn't explicitly say this, yet my reading is that what he means by this is a genre's communicative agency, the way in which well-established generic or formal categories pre-shape our expectations when encountering a piece of music (if we encounter a requiem we expect a piece for soloists, choir and orchestra starting with the line "Requiem aeternam dona eis Domine"). Ratliff wants us to be as open as possible and therefore rejects this core function of generic and formal terminology. What is interesting, however, is that he himself uses such terminology regularly when discussing in detail his twenty ways of modern listening[5] – in the end, it is impossible to abstain from it completely, certainly as an expert trying to convey information about music through words to a reader or listener.

Yet what are his twenty ways of listening? Fig. 1 represents a list of them (reduced to keywords).

This list is not based on a coherent system; its components cannot be converted into a logically coherent genre tree akin to those used by taxonomists classifying plants or animals.[6] They mix emotional states (sadness) and social and individual experiences (memory and historical truth), as well as structural and performative components of the music (density, loudness). I'm sure that they're not meant to represent a complete list; other categories are possible and may be suggested by others, or by Ratliff himself at a later stage. We can also easily imagine pieces that could fall into several of these categories, although one of them may usually be more prominent than the others for any individual listener. In any case, these twenty categories are just the ones that Ratliff experiences as being relevant to himself, as being useful indicators of his own listening experiences – no more, no less.

Ratliff's twenty categories or "ways" hang somewhere between specific and abstract genres – and yes, I call them genres because I don't restrict the use of this term in the way he does. His rejection of traditional genres comes hand in glove with an attempt to introduce new ones – even though they are fuzzier and less normative than they would have been in the past. Like many other authors, he may also want

to avoid the application of an existing term to something new he proposes, yet should he be successful, his categories would soon appear in music databases and shops alongside traditional genres, regardless of whether he approves (in fact, something like "the perfect moment," "intimacy," or "slowness" may already exist as a category for classification and searches in some databases).

Another phenomenon that has emerged during the last decade may be distantly (yet not consciously) related to Ratliff's approach: "post-genre." Appearing in both pop music as well as art music (and there particularly in the "indie classical" scene), it regards genre as a category limiting a creator's options – just like Ratliff's predetermined, "traditional" generic categorizations limit listeners' openness to new sonic experiences. Robin James interprets post-genre as a cultural omnivorousness, a post-modernist response to the realization that we can no longer judge everything on the basis of Western, Eurocentric points of view. It is thus a part of "post-identity politics":

> Omnivores demonstrate the openness to diversity that post-identity society demands, and this openness to diversity is a marker of the overcoming of old-fashioned attitudes, and thus also of elite status. Both explicitly and implicitly, omnivorous taste uses the same post- as post-identity politics: in both cases, "post" refers to the overcoming of obsolete investments in purity and the preference for an aesthetically pleasing, respectable mix. (James 2017: 25)

James discusses songs by Taylor Swift, Jack Ü, and Diplo, who all freely incorporate elements of different genres into their music (as well as their video aesthetics). Omnivorousness is their principle; adhering to the norms of just one genre wouldn't be "cool." However, a crucial aspect of this process is that a new piece doesn't result in the foundation of a new genre, or in a recognizable evolution of one or several old ones – instead, each song mixes elements of several genres (particularly of "Black" and "White" music) in new and unrepeated ways.[7]

While the core application of the term "post-genre" refers to music from the last decade, it has also been

retrospectively applied to earlier music. For example, Andrew Jurik uses it in relation to the fusion of classical and jazz styles which Gunther Schuller labelled as "third stream" in 1957 (Jurik 2016). Examples of mixing elements of different genres without attempting to evolve an existing genre or create a new one go back a long time – yet again we can recall the references to three different genres in Chopin's Nocturne – but it is now much more common than it was two centuries ago, in all types of music.

Musicological thinking about genre theory in the twenty-first century

Musicological thinking about genre has evolved significantly in the twenty-first century. The thinking of the late twentieth century was heavily influenced by the three essays by Dahlhaus already mentioned and similar publications. Dahlhaus postulated a gradual disintegration of genres over the course of two centuries:

> The abrogation of musical genres, whose importance has already declined in the course of the nineteenth century, is the result of the reverse of the emancipation of the individual work which is directed not only against functional constraints but also against dependence on types and models. (Dahlhaus 1987: 42)

According to Dahlhaus, what makes a composition special – and thus worthy of our attention – is not what it shares with others (due to generic norms), but what makes it unique, which is by definition not related to genre. The emergence of a canon of masterworks was another blow for the relevance of genres: "genre ensured historical continuity as long as the music that was performed was contemporary music, with the result that it was not the individual work but only the genre, whose evolution transcended the individual entity, that survived" (Dahlhaus 1987: 42). If pieces are only performed for a brief time and then replaced by others, those new ones must conform to certain standards to be able to replace the previous ones adequately, so generic norms are much more important in this context. Once the canon emerged, we started performing fewer pieces more often, and new ones no longer react to their immediate predecessors but instead to the totality of past music history. Music history becomes a history not of genres but of exceptions – of "masterworks".

Two recent articles offer useful approaches to revising and expanding Dahlhaus's view. The first is Eric Drott's "The End(s) of Genre" from 2013 (Drott 2013). He flatly denies the validity of several of Dahlhaus's observations regarding the absence of generic titles in the 1960s.[8] For starters, there

have in fact always been lots of pieces of art music that still use generic titles such as string quartet or symphony. More generally, "the groupings enacted by genre classification, far from disappearing or lapsing into irrelevance, continue to shape our understanding of modernist music, up to and including to its most recent expressions" (Drott 2013: 3). Drott points out that "[t]he denial of genre was less the symptom of a broad, historical process than a distinguishing characteristic of a particular body of musical texts" (Drott 2013: 6). Yet somewhat paradoxically even the denial of genre in itself can become a category of a new grouping, in effect a new generic trait. Furthermore, Dahlhaus talks only about art music, while genres have been alive, well, and proliferating in popular music in particular, yet also in world music in recent decades. Popular-music scholars have also provided the bulk of genre-related musicological research during this period.[9]

However, according to Drott, we have to redefine genre if we still want to use the term fruitfully. We have to accept it as a much more flexible unit than before. Genre is not a group but a grouping, not a given thing but the result of agency. It is a temporary act that can evolve and allows for fluidity. This will also make operating at different levels (specific genres, abstract genres) easier because we no longer have to create or maintain a rigid taxonomic tree structure.[10] Drott describes this type of genre "as a dynamic ensemble of correlations, linking together a variety of material, institutional, social, and symbolic resources: repertories, performance practices, distinctive formal and stylistic traits, aesthetic discourses, forms of self-presentation, institutions, specific modes of technological mediation, social identities, and so forth" (Drott 2013: 9).

Another crucial revision of our understanding of genre is that a piece can be related to several genres (such as Henze's Requiem, which the composer classified simultaneously as a trumpet concerto, a series of nine sacred concertos and a requiem): "What is needed is a hermeneutics that does not presume a single, undivided horizon of expectation but one that is fissured, internally heterogenous, divided between a range of competing allegiances and investments" (Drott 2013: 41). Drott speaks of a "plural condition ... : it is not just the unity and self-identity of the work that is in question but the various genres to which it can be brought into relation, and the various actors who participate in its production, circulation, and interpretation" (Drott 2013: 40).[11]

A second article providing interesting new ideas is "Genre Complexes in Popular Music" by Daniel Silver, Monica Lee, and C. Clayton Childress, published in 2016. This is an empirical study based on more than three million datasets gathered in 2007 from the MySpace database. On MySpace musicians and bands could indicate their

musical allegiances from a set of 122 given musical genres. The authors managed to group the musicians into three "genre worlds" (rock, hip-hop, and "niche") and sixteen lower-level "genre communities," but the key finding for us here is that they postulate different types of generic identities. Genres can have a high or low "differentiation rate" (meaning there can be many or few "subgenres"), and they can have a high or low "boundary strength" (meaning they are prone to incorporating elements from other genres to a greater or lesser degree). For example, while rock and niche have a high differentiation rate, hip-hop does not (it has no subgenres). On the other hand, 53% of niche musicians associate themselves with genre communities from other genre worlds, while only 28% of rock musicians do the same. This means that niche music has a high differentiation strength and a low boundary strength while rock has a high differentiation strength yet also a high boundary strength. Hip-hop in turn has a low differentiation strength and a medium boundary strength. These data are from 2007 and may be a bit outdated, but what matters for us here is the concept of differentiation and boundary strengths as such, which allows for a more flexible approach to genre, akin to the points made by Drott.

Every Noise at Once – The "Spotification" of genres

Let us now look at another graphic breakdown of musical genres. Unlike Crauwels's *musicmap*, this one is not "restricted" to popular music but covers the entire "genre space," as its creators claim. Called "Every Noise at Once," it was developed by a team headed by Glenn McDonald ("How Spotify Discovers the Genres of Tomorrow" 2018). McDonald initially worked at a company called "Echo Nest," which was an early pioneer of statistical work on digitized music preferences and music consumption (and was later bought by Spotify). He explains his project as follows:

> Every Noise at Once is an ongoing attempt at an algorithmically-generated, readability-adjusted scatter-plot of the musical genre-space, based on data tracked and analyzed for 5,724 genre-shaped distinctions by Spotify as of 2022–01–19. The calibration is fuzzy, but in general down is more organic, up is more mechanical and electric; left is denser and more atmospheric, right is spikier and bouncier. (Every Noise at Once n.d.)

Let's look at this description in more detail. An algorithmically generated map means the creation of new genres is automatized, done by a computer. Machine-based grouping of music has probably been one of the most researched areas related to musical genres in recent years purely in terms of numbers of publications – yet the majority of those appear

Fig. 2. Extract of the *Every Noise at Once* map.

in IT, economics, or media studies journals. These articles engage with traditional machine-learning techniques and increasingly in recent times the more sophisticated deep learning that makes the algorithm learn by example.[12] Core aspects analyzed by the program are usually the timbral structure, pitch content and rhythmic content of a section of the music (usually only a snippet – 10 to 30 seconds long – is analyzed as the amount of data could not otherwise be managed, while the success rate is still good enough).

Let's have a look at an extract (Fig. 2). Here we see about 200 of the more than 5,700 "genre-shaped distinctions," as McDonald calls them. Why does he not use the term "genre" proper? I assume it is because many of these terms are created by him and his team and are only meant to be used in-house by Spotify. They are not – and will never be – generally known and recognized genres used by people outside the company. The algorithm keeps generating new genre-shaped distinctions – there were 5,643 genres when I first checked the page on 14 October 2021, yet by 19 January 2022, that number stood at 5,724, an increase of eighty-one over a period of three months. Just like in Crauwels's map, we can click on each name to access a sample piece that represents the genre-shaped unit in question; we can also access a list of representative artists in each genre. I assume that the difference in the size of the names indicates a difference in the number of pieces that belong to a category. Unlike Crauwels, McDonald is not interested in denoting relationships between his generic classes; each one exists in splendid isolation (although its general position on the vast map has a broad meaning, as indicated in the quotation above). There are no abstract genres here, and no timeline is indicated. The names of the "genre-shaped distinctions" appear to be created following a few simple principles. Many of them specify an existing genre by adding a geographical term to it (Arab pop, Australian alternative rock, Brazilian punk) while others add words such as "new/neo," "post," or "alternative" to existing genre names – so the creation of names is not very original. Existing genres are mainly specified in more geographic, historical, or relational detail. It is not clear who allocates the titles to the classes; I suspect that this is the result of human activity – if the system creates about eighty new categories over the course of three months, it is not too much to ask from its operators.

What can we do with this list? It is possible to find out what the most listened-to genre is in my city or university or country and compare it with others. For example, I can ask for the most listened-to artist in any genre; I can list the songs belonging to the genre that are "deep," "deeper," "deep only," and "mainstream only"; I can also sort the pieces belonging to a genre according to thirteen criteria, including "popularity," "youth," "femininity," "tempo," "duration,"

or "xmasness." I can search for music not belonging to a particular genre that is still similar to what I just listened to. Finally, the genres feed Spotify's genre and mood filters, which were introduced in 2021 ("How to Sort Your Favorite Songs" 2021). If you are a registered Spotify user, I again strongly recommend playing a little with all these functions.

Yet why is Spotify making the effort to produce this map in the first place? The website doesn't tell us anything about this. On his Twitter account, McDonald describes himself as "Spotify genre taxonomist and mechanic of the spiritual compasses [sic] of erratic discovery robots that run on love" (McDonald 2013). This is very endearing, yet certainly not true – as we all know, nothing runs on love alone, and certainly not a major international database that depends for its continuing survival on revenues mainly created through advertising. In the second quarter of 2021 alone Spotify generated revenues of over €2.31 billion. It has 165 million paying subscribers and 365 million active users per month, who can access content provided by seven million artists ("Revenue of Spotify worldwide" 2021). Spotify is currently the largest music streaming service in the world.

While I have no direct source indicating what the main function of this genre map is, it is not too difficult to guess, and I want to outline this on the basis of an EU "Science for Policy" report entitled *Technology and Democracy: Understanding the influence of online technologies on political behaviour and decision-making*. This report identifies four aspects which play a crucial part in determining our behavior online; of these, two in particular are relevant here. The first is the "attention economy"; as we all know, if we are not paying for something online, we are the product being sold (and even if we do pay something, we may still be a product anyway). The most important commodity in the digital world is the time that users spend on a certain webpage, the attention they give to what is displayed on it, and the data they leave behind in the process – usually without being aware of it. Like every other web service, Spotify wants us to spend as much time as possible on its pages. The second crucial aspect is "algorithmic content production": "[A]lgorithms are an indispensable aspect of digital technologies which can be used or abused to impact user satisfaction, engagement, political views and awareness. Curated newsfeeds and automated recommender systems are designed to maximize user attention by satisfying their presumed preferences" (Lewandowsky et al. 2020). So a provider assumes that we will spend more time on its pages if it serves our preferences; hence, exploring them is a crucial step in the process of increasing revenue. Each time I listen to a piece of music, I increase the system's knowledge about my musical taste and allow it to predict my future choices with increasing accuracy. Yet how can that

be realized through the algorithm? It makes sense to assume that a larger number of genres allows the system to specify a user's taste with increased precision. If there were only a few hundred genres, lots of people would share the same generic preferences, yet if there are close to 6,000 of them, it is more likely that the system will be able to create a unique profile of me as a user since it is more likely that no one else in the world has listened to the exact combination of – say – sixty-one genres that I may have engaged with since joining the platform. This allows for "micro-targeting," a placement of ads based on my specific tastes and preferences that is far cheaper and far more successful for the advertiser than firing ads indiscriminately at everyone. It even allows for the placement of "dark ads," which can only be seen by the user in question and the advertiser. These ads allow for targeting different groups of people with contradictory types of messages at the same time (Shaffer 2021).

So the main purpose of the "Every Noise at Once" exercise is most likely not classifying the music but instead classifying the listener. An ever-increasing number of "genre-shaped distinctions" allows for ever more precise micro-targeting, while there is no real interest in the music itself or in the user's own interests per se. This is one of the most radical (and certainly unintended) consequences of the gradual inclusion of social aspects, of "genre cultures" beyond the sounding artefact itself, in the thinking about musical classification and signification. But in another way, it is a major departure because in this context, the music signifies nothing in relation to itself; it is reduced to a vehicle of the attendance economy used to lure ever more people to Spotify's pages. To quote the EU report one last time, "YouTube itself has claimed that 70% of viewing time on YouTube results from recommendations of its AI system, rather than purposeful consumer choice" (Lewandowsky et al. 2020). We can assume that this is similar in the case of Spotify – and, for that matter, other streaming services as well, as they all operate in parallel ways. If that is correct, McDonald is contributing significantly to the platform's success. This operation is very different from Crauwels's *musicmap*, as the Belgian is an enthusiast who cares about his content while McDonald's raison d'être is an economic one. If anyone runs on love, it is Crauwels, who does not pursue a perceivable economic interest, rather than McDonald.

The algorithm's focus on presenting us with things similar to what it assumes we like makes a mockery of Silver, Lee, and Childress's (as well as Ratliff's) hope that the wider range of available music will lead to us broadening our taste. This would only be possible if we make conscious decisions to go for music that the algorithm doesn't recommend to us – or even doesn't show us except if we specifically search

for it. That's quite an effort, and few people are likely to make it. The option is certainly there, yet in practice few are likely to benefit from it. One may even wonder whether psychologically preventing us from branching out and becoming aware of music (or books, or people, or political points of view) other than the ones we are used to already helps fuel the increasing polarization in our societies.

Classification and power

Critical theory and post-modern analytical methods both emphasize power relationships as a central issue of their deliberations. They approach texts – and any other manifestation of human interaction, such as music – with what Paul Ricœur has labelled the "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Scott-Baumann 2009), that is, they look not just at what appears on the surface, but rather search for the hidden, often subconscious way in which our words and actions want to either preserve or increase our power, our position in society. Is this also applicable to the discourse around genre?

The "Spotification" of generic classification as discussed above is already a good example of a power imbalance, with a big economic player influencing our choices of what we listen to. Another, pre-digital example of the influence of generic labelling – and of who holds that power – is provided by the evolution of the term "world music." It is generally credited to Robert E. Brown, who established a program about this music at Wesleyan University in the 1960s. However, it only became widely known from 1987, when a number of record companies decided to adopt the term as a high-level genre label. At a meeting on 29 June 1987, nineteen representatives of eleven companies determined that

> the main problem in selling our kind of material lay with the U.K. retail outlets and specifically the fact that they did not know how to rack it coherently. This discouraged them from stocking the material in any depth and made it more difficult for the record buyers to become acquainted with our catalogues. ("Minutes Of Meeting" 1987)

So the single reason for making "world music" a top-level abstract genre was an economic one, the facilitation of sales. Record shops needed to know how to present this music, and customers where to find it in the shop. This means, of course, that this music had recently become important enough (in Western countries, where the economic power was – and to a large extent still is – located) to warrant a separate label; ten or twenty years earlier this wouldn't have been on the agenda in the first place. Yet individual

artists would not have had the clout to make such a decision and influence the market sufficiently to "impose" such an umbrella term. Incidentally, the minutes of that fateful meeting continue: "We discussed various names for our type of music(s) and on a show of hands 'World Music' was agreed as the 'banner' under which we would work. Other suggestions were 'World Beat', 'Hot...', 'Tropical...' and various others." Unsurprisingly it doesn't seem to have been of much relevance that there was already an academic tradition using "world music" in a similar way.

Yet we should perhaps also not overestimate the power of "imposed" generic terms, particularly at the level of specific genres which usually emerge gradually out of a range of musical practices. In a PhD dissertation from 2015, Eric T. Smialek compared attempts by five different writers to create taxonomic genre trees for metal music (including the association of bands with them) (Smialek 2015: 29–64). He found significant differences between all five and points out that they were also all criticized by metal fans. A core problem was the fact that a neat allocation of a term to one particular branch of a tree (or a map, or a table) does not reflect the messy reality of life in which bands produce pieces that can have links to different subgenres, sometimes even at the same time – they have a low boundary strength. Bands also evolve over time and may change their style, oscillating between genres or fully moving from one to another. So proposing generic relationships and band allocations is not always convincing. Smialek also quotes Jacques Derrida's salutary reminder that "every text participates in one or several genres, there is no genreless text [...] yet such participation never amounts to belonging" (Smialek 2015: 48).

Popular-music studies have been the main driver of research about music and genre in recent decades, so it may be understandable that taxonomies are still occasionally attempted in this area (albeit more often by journalists and fans than by academics), yet this comes with a risk that Smialek describes as follows:

> Because [...] musical genres are intimately associated with social identity, the particular view of history that a genre taxonomy offers can have larger consequences in terms of how it represents metal within broader arguments surrounding gender, race, nationality, social class, and any other conceivable vector of identity. (Smialek 2015: 33)

A taxonomy always gives a static snapshot of a fluid situation, it always simplifies, it always leaves something out. It is very good at indicating differentiation, yet extremely bad at engaging with the aspect of boundary strength. Creating a taxonomy therefore comes with a certain responsibility, and if not power then at least some influence.

Finally, genre discourses can also serve the purpose of ranking genres in relation to each other. Dahlhaus's writings are a prime example of this tendency – while he acknowledges that the differentiation of "high" and "low" genres is a historical construct he still operates as if it is by now (that is, in the 1960s and 70s when he wrote his seminal texts) an unquestionable given; it forms the foundation of his thinking, and the way he constructs his arguments suit the perpetuation of this differentiation.

Intercultural views of classification

Another new approach to thinking about musical classification could enrich Western ways of thinking by juxtaposing them with non-Western ones, looking at how non-Western musics are classified within their own cultures but also how those modes of classification may reveal new ways of looking at music more familiar to Western ears.

From 2012 to 2017 Reinhard Strohm led the international research project *Towards a Global History of Music*. The purpose of this project is described as follows:

> Towards a Global History of Music aims to promote post-European historical thinking. The programme was not intended to create a global history by itself, but to explore, through assembled case studies, parameters and terminologies that are suitable to describe a history of many different voices. (International Balzan Prize Foundation 2020)

The project provided fascinating insights into many different aspects of music history across the globe, and the – so far – three book publications resulting from it are highly recommended.[13] Yet a look at their tables of contents already indicates one issue that I found particularly interesting: it is for the most part a history of either Western music in non-Western contexts, or non-Western music in its interaction with Western music. The topic can mainly be described as "How Western music spread all over the world, influencing and interacting with indigenous musics elsewhere." Philip Ewell, in his recent critique of Schenkerian's analysis and the White racial frame in US music theory, re-emphasizes the point that Western methods may not suit non-Western musics well, so analytical approaches suitable for the specifics of those musics should be either found in indigenous thinking or newly developed (Ewell 2020). Extending this to the area of genres and the classification of music, I wonder whether we should also have a closer look at how Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and other musics have been classified by their own practitioners and theoreticians. Ethnomusicologists working on those cultures take the indigenous views into account, of course, but I am ultimately interested in

a comparative study of views on classification in different cultures – and I don't think many studies of this kind have been undertaken. I certainly ignored this aspect completely when working on my own PhD thesis in this area many years ago (Marx 2004; see also Marx 2010). The consideration could start at the top, with the very concept of music itself: many cultures don't recognize much of what we would call "music" as such. Jean-Jacques Nattiez has compared the *katajjaq* throat games of the Inuit with the similar-sounding *rekutkar* of the Ainu people in Japan and the *pič eynen* of the Chukchi people in Siberia (Nattiez 1999). Despite their acoustic similarities they are categorized very differently by their performers. The *katajjaq* is a throat *game* (rather than a throat *song*), a competitive activity restricted to women and children. This is not the case elsewhere; Nattiez finds himself unable to determine "if the rekutkar [...] was seen in the Kraft Ainu culture as a game or as a song, or both" (Nattiez 1999: 407). The *pič eynen*, on the other hand, are certainly regarded as songs by the Chukchi. While the emic view (from within the respective culture) differs with regard to the musical status of these genres they are all songs in Nattiez's own etic view (the view from outside a culture). Similarly, the soundscape of Islamic religious rituals would be easily classified as music from the etic point of view of Western listeners, yet emically, "Muslims themselves not only do not use [the term music], but often reject it as offensive, as a matter of religious doctrine" (Frishkopf 2013). The Barundi people in Burundi have a genre called "Whispered Inanga" or "Inanga Chuchotée," which consists of whispered text accompanied by a zither; its main determinant is its timbre – a category virtually never applied in Western musical classification (Fales 2002). Native Americans in the Bolivian Andes relate songs to the plants they are cultivating at different times of the year and classify them accordingly; singing such a song at the wrong time brings misfortune upon the tribe (Stobart 1994). The Mapuche tribe in Argentina distinguishes between music of their own culture (and have several different words for it) and music by Europeans and non-Mapuchean people in general, which is called *kantun winka* (Nattiez 1990: 55). Given that Western listeners (and academics) usually talk about non-Western musics in an etic way, that is, as outsiders on the basis of Western ways of thinking, it may be interesting to look at non-Western views of Western music to gain insights that our emic position prevents us from reaching. Bruno Nettl's idea of a fictitious Martian coming to our planet and encountering the – for her – strange and unknown proceedings in a concert hall may give us an idea of what this could be about (even though he doesn't talk about genres but about the world of classical music in general; Nettl 1992). Nettl uncovers myths around great

composers/geniuses that in their structure remind him of music-related myths of the North American Blackfoot tribe. Ideally, emic and etic perspectives are meant to complement each other, yet each culture is naturally restricted to emic views of itself while looking etically at others.

Conclusion

So, was Drew Daniel correct when stating that genre is what nobody really believes in but everyone relies upon? The thinking about genres has shifted in several ways in recent years. On the one hand, there is the much broader approach to it advocated by authors like Daniel, Drott, and Silver, Lee and Childress, supported by a number of recent PhD dissertations on this topic such as those by Steve S. Lee (2007), Eric T. Smialek (2015), Andrew Jurik (2016), and Thomas Johnson (2018). They redefine genre as a much more fluid concept, as something that can mean different things to different people without jeopardizing its meaning and existence. Genres are groupings (rather than groups) that can have different degrees of openness towards mixing and fusion without losing their identities as providers of context, meaning and signification. They can show a more or less pronounced tendency towards differentiation into subgenres as well as different degrees of boundary strength. The situation is complicated further by the fact that they exist not just alongside other current genres but in the context of the entire generic history of music – within their own respective culture as well as interculturally. Understanding genre in this broader, more flexible way also provides a good counter-argument against those who claim that the category has become meaningless, as well as against the representatives of alternative, "anti-generic" classificatory approaches such as Ratliff or the "post-genre" movement. The latter oppose genres as rigid constructs (as defined by people like Dahlhaus), yet if pieces can have a share in genres without fully belonging to them, can relate to several genres at once, and can appear in more or less open incarnations, the issues their opposition is based on could be accommodated within the genre-theoretical discourse.

On the other hand, we see that the gatekeepers of music – particularly the music industry, now in its digital incarnation – rely on an ever more complex classificatory system in order to attract consumers in the context of the attention economy. Spotify is ultimately not working "for love" (as McDonald claimed) but aims to micro-target every one of us (as "micro" as possible) so that we spend more and more time on its pages. It is not interested in the music for its own sake, nor in a broadening of the listener's minds or their edification. Such hopes as expressed by

some of the authors discussed in this essay appear almost naïve when looking at the realities of our neoliberal economic structures.

What unites both groups – those investigating the positive aspects of classificatory differentiation and those instrumentalizing it in the service of economic goals such as micro-targeting – is the focus on liminality, on "in-betweenness."[14] Whether it is the continuous emergence of new generic categories or the simultaneous references of a single piece of music to a number of genres, in both cases the main point is not conforming to an existing set of norms or habits, but rather utilizing the generic contract between musicians (or businesspeople) and listeners as a communicative agent facilitating the transmission of information – be it musical or economic in nature. This communicative agent offers points of reference that steer our receptive process. On this basis, today's musicians continue to create new, unique pieces of music while still benefiting in their reception from listeners' genre-related knowledge.

Whether we like or dislike the way genre is developing in the twenty-first century, we just can't get rid of classificatory concepts – even if we wanted to. Drew Daniel was right, and so was Eric Drott when he stated that genre (defined as broadly as possible) is "a necessary ground against which musical conduct takes shape and acquires meaning" (Drott 2013: 7).

Endnotes

1   Kallberg imported the term "generic contract" from the literary scholar Heather Dubrow who proposed it in her book *Genre* from 1982 (Dubrow 1982).

2   I don't want to embark on a discussion of the complex relationship between the terms "genre" and "style" here; Allan Moore has outlined the many different views expressed on this relationship over the last decades (Moore 2001). For me, generic features encompass stylistic attributes.

3   This bar only becomes visible once one zooms in.

4   Dahlhaus focuses entirely on art music in his essays; he only mentions other musics occasionally as part of evaluative comparisons yet has no genuine interest in them. However, every now and then one finds an approach which is not dissimilar in studies of genres in popular music. Lena and Peterson, for example, state that:

> Not all commercial music can be considered a genre in our sense of the term. We consider music crafted for specific types of venues or referred to as commercial categories to be non-genred [sic] music. Examples include Tin Pan Alley, Broadway show tunes, and commercial music crafted for a specific demographic and designated by a commercial category (e.g., middle of the road [MOR], music for lovers, dance music, and easy listening music). (Lena & Peterson 2008: 699)

Psychological experiments indicate that listeners associate certain moral values with different musical genres; see Shevy 2008 and LaMarre et al. 2012.

5   An example of this is his description of "Be My Baby" in the category "memory and historical truth": [t]he action, then, is all base drum until the four. Sounds like Latin music; sounds like a variation on the habanera rhythm. Anyway, the rhythm doesn't articulate each beat in the bar; it leaves one empty, and strikes between two others. That's what Latin music does. (Ratliff 2016: 196)

6   Taxonomic systems are based on all branches being differentiated on the basis of the same criterion (in biology this initially used to be visual similarity, later it became genetic relationship). Attempts to classify musical genres by way of taxonomic trees were ultimately always bound to fail since cultural practices such as music always have a range of differentiating criteria in operation at the same time – not all of them being applicable to all branches.

7   Crauwels already noted in his *musicmap* that the emergence of new genres in popular music has slowed down considerably since the 1990s.

8   Dahlhaus's essay was published in English in 1987 yet was actually written in German in 1968.

9   To name just a few examples, these include Keith Negus's *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures* (Negus 1999), Fabian Holt's *Genre in Popular Music* (Holt 2007), and a range of PhD dissertations, including those by Eric T. Smialek (2015), Andrew Jurik (2016) and Thomas Johnson (2018).

10 Of course, not many have proposed rigid tree structures recently: while visualizations of genre relationships (such as *musicmap*) almost inevitably end up using something like it, these are not meant to be rigid, quasi-biological taxonomies that are set in stone once and for all.

11 Drott develops his argument utilizing actor-network theory (ANT), an approach taken further by Benjamin Piekut (Piekut 2014) who applies ANT to the issues of influence, genre, and context in music.

12 Publications of this type include Bigerelle and Iost 1999; Scaringella et al. 2006; Weihs et al. 2007; Rosner et al. 2015; Costa et al. 2017; and Medina et al. 2020.

13 See Strohm 2018; Strohm 2019; and Strohm 2020.

14 This is notwithstanding the presence of generic purists such as the flamenco fans discussed in the introduction (Manuel 2021). They are likely to exist in relation to most genres, yet they are not the drivers of developments and can't stop them.

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Santrauka

2019 m. Dru Danielsas rašė, kad „[...] žanras yra toks dalykas, kuriuo niekas iš tikrųjų netiki, bet kuriuo visi pasitiki". Straipsnyje siekiama ištirti žanro kategorijos vaidmenį su muzika susijusiuose diskursuose tokiu istoriniu laikotarpiu, kai telkiamasi į liminalius arba negenerinius dalykus. Pagal mano hipotezę, žanras nebegali būti naudojamas kaip normatyvinė, taksonominė kategorija, tačiau jis vis dar atlieka reikšmingą funkciją kaip „generinė sutartis", komunikacijos agentas, teikiantis informaciją, veikiančią ir palengvinančią muzikos recepciją.

Remiantis skaitmeniniu grafiniu populiariosios muzikos žanrų vaizdavimu kaip atspirties tašku, apibrėžiamos generinių klasifikacijų problemos ir iššūkiai šiandieniame pasaulyje, nagrinėjamos siūlomos alternatyvios prieigos (pavyzdžiui, postžanro reiškinys) ir vertinamos naujausios muzikologinės mintys šia tema. Žvilgsnis į „Spotify" žanro suformuotų skirtumų žemėlapio struktūrą ir funkcijas leidžia pradėti diskusiją apie žanrų funkciją skaitmeninės muzikos pramonėje: jos galutinis tikslas yra veikiau klausytojų nei muzikos klasifikavimas tikslinei mikrorinkai nustatyti. Tokiu būdu žanras vertinamas kaip galios veiksnys bei eminių ir etinių požiūrių potencialas mūsų perspektyvai praplėsti.

Pastaraisiais metais žanrų suvokimas pasikeitė keliais aspektais. Viena vertus, žanras buvo iš naujo apibrėžtas kaip daug takesnė sąvoka, galinti skirtingiems žmonėms reikšti skirtingus dalykus, nekeldama pavojaus savo prasmei ir egzistavimui. Žanrai yra grupuotės (veikiau nei grupės), kurios sunkiau ar lengviau pasiduoda mišimui ar susiliejimui, neprarasdamos savo, kaip konteksto, reikšmės ir prasmės teikėjų, tapatybės. Galime matyti daugiau ar mažiau ryškią tendenciją diferencijuotis į požanrius ir skirtingus ribų stiprumo laipsnius. Toks platesnis ir lankstesnis žanro supratimas yra geras kontrargumentas teigiant, kad ši kategorija tapo beprasmiška alternatyvų, „antigenerinių" klasifikacinių prieigų siūlymams.

Kita vertus, matome, kad muzikos vartų sargai – ypač muzikos industrija, įsikūnijusi dabartinėje skaitmeninėje eroje, – pasikliauja dar sudėtingesne klasifikavimo sistema, siekdami pritraukti vartotojus dėmesio ekonomijos kontekste. „Spotify" siekia tikslingai kreipti pastangas į kiekvieną iš mūsų kaip mikrorinką, kad vis daugiau laiko praleistume jos puslapiuose, todėl naudoja išsamią generinę klasifikaciją. Šiai komercinei muzikos platformai neįdomi nei pati muzika, nei klausytojo mąstysenos plėtimas ar jo

ugdymas. Viltys, kurias išreiškė tokie autoriai kaip Benas Ratliffas, atrodo beveik naivios, žiūrint į mūsų neoliberalios ekonomikos struktūrų realijas.

Abiejų grupių atstovus – tuos, kurie tiria teigiamus klasifikavimo diferenciacijos aspektus, ir tuos, kurie ją pasitelkia ekonominiam poveikiui, tokiam kaip muzikos vartotojų kategorizavimas rinkodaros tikslais, – vienija dėmesys liminalumui arba „pereinamumui". Ar tai būtų nuolatinis naujų generinių kategorijų atsiradimas, ar vieno ir to paties muzikinio kūrinio priskyrimas keliems žanrams tuo pat metu – abiem atvejais svarbiausia yra ne taikytis prie esamų normų ar papročių, o naudotis generine sutartimi kaip komunikaciniu agentu tarp muzikų (ar verslininkų) ir klausytojų, palengvinant muzikinės ar ekonominės informacijos perdavimą. Toks komunikacijos agentas siūlo atskaitos taškus, kurie valdo mūsų recepcijos procesus. Šiuo pagrindu šiandienos muzikai ir toliau kuria naujus, unikalius muzikos kūrinius, kurių recepcijai naudingos klausytojų žinios apie žanrą. Ar mums patiktų, ar nepatiktų žanro vystymosi tendencijos XXI a., net jei norėtume, tiesiog negalėtume atsikratyti klasifikacinių sąvokų.

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