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Citation: Harper, A. (2016). 'Dux Content: Life Style' and 'The New Hi-Tech Underground'. In: Beyer, T. & Burkhalter, T. (Eds.), Seismographic Sounds - Visions of a New World. (pp. 478-483). Bern: Norient. ISBN 978-3-9524496-0-8

This is the published version of the paper.

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Life Style

Artist **Dux Content**
Country **Great Britain 2013**
Director **Daniel Swan**

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A Satire of Digital Culture?

By Adam Harper

Dux Content is one of the less well known but arguably most interesting acts under the umbrella of the controversial new London-based label PC Music. Their technical expertise, both with machines and traditional musical techniques, is a great example of the kitsch technocracy that accompanies the new aesthetics of digital cuteness pioneered by the label. Indeed, Dux Content is made up of PC Music's manager, A. G. Cook and Danny L Harle, who is trained in classical composition. Alongside artists like Maxo and DV-i, they offer a powerful and provocative inversion to the lo-fi primitivism and minimalism of so much countercultural aesthetics since punk. It's one of the reasons why PC Music are so controversial and, perhaps, so punk.

The video for «Life Style» couldn't be more emblematic of underground music's new consciousness of culture's mediation by technology in the contemporary era. What we see is one of today's «devices» that looms in the silky void as God on the first day of creation. A blue light winks in readiness on its periphery—unread messages maybe? Then there is a storm of color. Two things flux with thrilling and intimidating speed: the content displayed on its screen and the customized decoration of the device. The former displays the Internet's trash: adverts, memes, news, forums and image boards like 4chan. The decoration expresses all the difference in geography and individuality possible to the device's (potential) owner. Each setting is an adventure, an identity, and many of them, like holiday snaps, hint at the exotically primitive or futuristic (or both). The music draws out the manic investment in the device still further with its triple-time hardstyle (one of the gaudiest, most intensely euphoric styles of music there is today) led by a screeching synth and powered by an enormous, relentless kickdrum. In a brief interlude, we lurch away from the device, dizzy, weightless, to catch our breath. But there is vertigo and no gravity here, no up and no down, and actually, no body to look down at. It is the cloud, and we spin as if in withdrawal or dizziness at the unframed breadth of the space. Better return to the scrolling images.

The video displays some key aesthetic arguments about the digital age: that its cultural content is rapid, intense and apparently diverse. But for all that, it is an endless permutation of the same—for it's the device and our gaze on it that doesn't differ—with everything outside it as a blue sky of directionless thought. Also characteristic is that while it might appear to technology-skeptics as a satire of digital culture (though a rather heavy-handed one), a more interesting way to understand it is to find a deep ambivalence for this new world and the disquieting thrill of dissolution within it.

Adam Harper discusses aesthetics and criticism in music, art and life on his blog *Rouge's Foam*. He studies musicology, composes music and has written for The Wire.

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Is This the New Punk?

By Michael Kinzer

Dux Content subscribes to the philosophy and to the trendsetting contemporary art backdrop of its label, PC Music. Their relationship is summed up best by the rather fascinating *Dead or Alive* live-stream on YouTube, which showcased several PC Music acts. In short, this video defines work that is willfully cheap and bizarre art, vrai-faux DIY-techno, and an «I do whatever I want—I do it the way I want» punk attitude that art intellectuals want to believe in, but really don't.

In the early days, punks weren't able to broach the concept of adversity; they could only shout out their disgust with the world and the bourgeoisie got offended. Punks were nihilists in a way you wouldn't get away with nowadays. Today, punks can only be romantic in the glamorously decadent sense of the word. Considering our overly conscious and über-marketed environment, they know too well what goals radicalism can aim for and how fast leaders will happily follow.

The references in Dux Content's «Lifestyle» video stand out. From the brainwashing melody of «Popcorn» to discount electronicized Arabic trance, from sped up images of our society's

organic breakdown à la the 1982 documentary *Koyaanisqatsi* to Warhol's Pop post-realism, «Life Style» is a short and clever instrumental track with a fine synthetic twist. It shapes its addictive melodic hook by playing with octaves and minor keys, an old trick reminiscent of Modern Talking's efficiency. It is designed to divide the dance floor community into two: those willing to honor its basic euphoric pounding beat at the peak of leftfield club culture, versus those happy to finally shake it off at the loo.

Daniel Swan's video is entertaining. It leaves imprints of zapping images that will fit each viewer's obsessions (damn: are censorship warnings, X content, ITV, weight loss, and Shrek my very obsessions?). This manic graphic overload is juxtaposed with the static presence of an outmoded smartphone case, which symbolizes comfort and belonging (two values punks intended to destroy, while unconsciously building up their own ideal of comfort and sense of belonging).

You can get a multi-layered interpretation out of «Life Style.» Generally related to PC Music's works and artists, you can also sense a strong musical education, fresh off-tunes, controlled freedom, a creative stage presence, and an ambiguously offensive marketing strategy. But let's not get fooled. This video is highly thought out and well positioned. Just like other ephemeral «movements» in the recent past and unlike punk's fundamental threat on society, PC Music will rapidly accept its obsolescence.

Let's make it short:
Punks didn't give a fuck. Dux Content cares.
PC Music? As in Pretentiously Cool Music.
No future? Exactly.

Michael Kinzer is the director of the Festival de la Cité Lausanne. He also manages artists and produces shows. In the past, he has worked for the national Expo.02 and has directed two theaters and a rock club.

«Communication in social media today isn't only mirroring and copying the world—this communication speaks to social, cultural or political needs. It's not just a phenomenon of our time! It's an infinite spiral causing deep structural changes in societies, which forces us to take a position more than ever before. The aim of contemporary music is not to shirk responsibility by hanging on to traditions and institutions. The aim is to face, reflect and form this uncontrollable spiral through a sensory experience that contains the possibility for all artistic expression.»

Brigitta Muntendorf, composer and founder of Ensemble Garage (Germany)

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The New Hi-Tech Under-ground

By Adam Harper

In the past decade, culture was longing for the nostalgic and authentic. The new Internet underground celebrates the contrary: hi-tech, artificiality and kitsch. Is it a critique of capitalism or a capitulation to it? Both and neither, says Adam Harper, the philosophical flight attendant of Internet music trends such as bubblegum-bass and vaporwave.

Music that resists the mainstream, or what is sometimes called «countercultural» music, has often been associated with humanity, warmth and the past, in contrast to industrial technologies: its opponent. This music includes popular genres like folk, punk and indie, and typically aims to escape commercial and inauthentic musical intentions through use of older, «retro» styles, techniques and technologies. But that's changing: a new movement within underground music is reversing that strategy, and in 2015 that means exploring hi-tech digital technology and its consequences.

A key difference between old and new technologies is that of surface. Traditionally, the preferred surface sound of countercultural music is «rough,» as in the amateur, cracking voice of the folk singer, the sloppiness of indie rock technique, or the hissing, grainy qualities of analogue media. This aesthetic preference, still prevalent today, is known as «lo-fi,» (referring to sound quality, being the opposite of «hi-fi»). Associated with amateur or «DIY» music-making, it stood in opposition to a mainstream deemed slick, artificial, inauthentic, and tainted by modernity. The new digital movement, however, represents the «other» of lo-fi—not merely hi-fi, but hi-tech, as it encompasses a range of multimedia strategies beyond sound quality. Hi-tech is lo-fi going on the offensive, engaging ambivalently with those same qualities it had previously rejected. For many, the Internet embodies these hi-fi qualities.

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Stylistic Pluralism, Kitsch and Non-Humanity

So what does the Internet sound like? Well, ultimately, no one thing in particular. But the characteristics that the Internet and the wider digital world are perceived to have found their way into music in three main senses: stylistic pluralism, kitsch and non-humanity. These three areas are never entirely separable from each other, but some releases lean more one way than others. A good example of a release that combines all three is Blank Banshee's album *Blank Banshee 1*, which presents a kaleidoscope of candy-colored textures and artificial voices while spreading itself through various forms of hip hop and dance musics (see interview with Blank Banshee on page 264).

First, the Internet provides the contemporary listener and music-maker with opportunities to explore the pluralism and juxtaposition of musical styles. Not only do genres combine vigorously and complexly in both mixes and new music, but a «collage» style of production has been founded on disorienting and yet oddly serendipitous combinations of samples and hi-tech sound effects in the music of Elysia Crampton, Chino Amobi, Total Freedom and DJWWWW. Their work achieves moments of sublime beauty and samples from R&B or classical music. These sounds are starkly contrasted with violent rhythms that suggest factories of the future, and seem to portray the modern human made God-like by technology.

Second, the digital world's supposedly superficial qualities emerge with a new interest in kitsch and cuteness. The new genre of vaporwave samples late 20th century muzak and slows it down, thus highlighting its dream-like and anaesthetic qualities, which connects it to the technocratic and corporate spaces of late capitalism (see article on vaporwave on page 261). Artists like YEN TECH and Gatekeeper make highly skilled pastiches of almost aggressively developed electronica. New labels such as PC Music and Activia Benz explore high-pitched and childlike excitement surrounding romantic love with considerable intensity, straddling the border between pop and satirical excess. Throughout the online underground there is a keen interest in an imagined Japan, not only as a source of hi-tech mythologies (Japanese characters in artist names and titles are a hallmark of vaporwave) but as the home of Kawaii and the alluring sentimentality of anime.

Third, there is a curiously robotic, coldly inhuman or post-human quality to much hi-tech music. «Humanity,» of course, is ultimately a construction that, in popular music, is based around imperfection, acoustic instruments, emotion and analogue «warmth.» Instead, much hi-tech enters the «uncanny valley,» the zone where something is all the more disquieting for its almost-but-not-quite resemblance to human attributes. Disembodied and reprogrammed samples of the human voice are common, as are samples of it pitch-shifted with MIDI and played like so many keys on a keyboard. Often, as in the work of Giant Claw, Karmelloz, DYNOOO or RAP/RAP/RAP, we encounter approximations of human music, as if algorithms or artificial intelligence had sorted through the various elements of 21st century culture and arranged them according to their own mysterious logics—as indeed many parts of the Internet actually do.

Digital Sources and Shiny Surfaces

Many musical acts exploring the hi-tech aesthetic, such as James Ferraro, Oneohtrix Point Never or Gatekeeper, started out in more retro and/or lo-fi idioms. Today, the lo-fi / hi-tech opposition makes a comfortable (if not comprehensive) parallel with that of analogue and digital technologies. But «digital» has come to mean so much more than a certain way of electronically coding information—it has come to refer to the speed, information-richness and virtual spaces of modern technological mediation, embodied most famously (but not exclusively) by the Internet.

Much of this new hi-tech music is disseminated on the Internet, not just out of ease but often because the labels and musicians behind it have an active dislike of retro media. This has sometimes meant that underground music discourse has been slow to cover it, heightening the divide. It's important to note, however, that not all music released over the Internet necessarily explores or aestheticizes its digital origin. The main sites on which it's released—Bandcamp, SoundCloud, YouTube, MediaFire—show a full complement of musical styles and aesthetics, and ought to be taken seriously as an arena for any kind of music. But with hi-tech, these digital origins, as a channel of cultural communication, become somewhat self-aware, much as the lo-fi underground did in the 1970s-1990s when it came to associate relatively poorer technology (such as cassette and cheap instruments) with the music it carried.

It is not just the digital world that hi-tech scrutinizes in its zip files and YouTube videos, but the whole edifice of twenty-first century technocracy, animated as it is by the imperatives and colonization of neoliberal capitalism. The technological surface of the digital is its skin and its sensorium. Much hi-tech music can perhaps be considered the aesthetic equivalent of «accelerationism,» a political philosophy that holds that the best course of action is to push capitalism forward into its own dissolution rather than to abscond from it. In any case, far more than retro or lo-fi can today, hi-tech music engages with modernity, imagining where we are, where we're going and how deep it gets.

Adam Harper
See bio on page 481.

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Cover Art from the PC Music label: Easy Fun: **Deep Trouble**;
PC Music: **Volume 1;** A. G. Cook: **Beautiful;** QT: **DrinkQT**