

Basslines: Poltergeists

Column in the zweikommasieben Magazin #10, 2014 (www.zweikommasieben.ch)
Annotated version with sound and text references



Text: Marius ‚Comfortnoise‘ Neukom (www.comfortnoise.com)
Illustration: Nando ‚STVAN‘ von Arb (www.stvan.tumblr.com)

No one diagnoses the lamentable state of contemporary pop culture more knowledgeably, eloquently, and originally than Simon Reynolds in Retromania (2011)¹ and Mark Fisher in Ghosts Of My Life (2014)²: the former does so in an encyclopedically informative way, the latter associatively and provocatively. Since the 1950s, there has been no worse era than our present one. The great potential of the 1990s has been fatally lost in the noughties. And what's next? No Future.

¹ For an overview of Reynolds's quintessential points, see www.comfortnoise.com/blog/2014/09/simon-reynolds-retromania.html.

² For Fisher, see www.comfortnoise.com/blog/2014/07/mark-fishers-ghosts-of-my-life.html.

What remains is the London producer Burial.³ Whereas his sound – with its heavy bass, dub effects, reproduced crackle of vinyl, and distorted rave vocals – evokes the euphoria and atmosphere of departure of 1990s dance floors, it paradoxically produces melancholy⁴: a private, restrained, and sadly wistful mood. Burial's music stages the visitation of our lives' ghosts, a prime example of musical "hauntology".⁵ He documents the backward-looking, disillusioned, and cheerless stagnation of our futureless era. In short: Today's listeners, clubbers, producers, DJs, and event organizers are unable to create, let alone live, something that produces the shock of the new and leads us courageously into a (better) future. Instead, we seek refuge in the familiar, in nostalgia, and in a dreary, infinite repetition that leads us as far as depression. We are the uncritical kids of today's all-prevailing neoliberal regime, without an alternative to its maximising of consumerism and profit-making, a mindset that unquestionably blocks cultural development.⁶

Reynolds and Fisher criticise current music culture with an almost overwhelming abundance of evidence from music, film, literature, technology, critical cultural studies, and psychoanalysis. But do we want to accept condemnation by their sombre diagnosis? When Burial's album appeared in 2006, we welcomed it without too much excitement as a musical design of British provenance that refers to certain continental aesthetic elements (which later proved crucial for the mutations of genuine dubstep).⁷ The album

³ See Reynolds, 2011, pp. 393f. and Fisher, 2014, pp. 98ff. – Burial's album *Burial* was released in 2006 on *Hyperdub*: www.discogs.com/Burial-Burial/master/11767.

⁴ Both Reynolds (2011, p. 337) and Fisher (2014, p. 22) refer to Freud and his article *Mourning and Melancholia* (Freud, 1917). In this text, Freud conceptualises the psychic processes that take place within an individual and that he or she needs to come to terms with when losing a close friend or relative. Melancholia in Freud's sense is virtual (clinical) depression. Melancholy in the sense used here is more related to mourning. Reynolds (2011, p. 337) wrongly mentions the term "memory work" instead of "mourning work". The latter was introduced by Freud in *Mourning & Melancholia*.

⁵ "Hauntology" is a term coined by cultural studies and journalism at the beginning of the new millennium. It is – in a somewhat blurred and inflationary manner – related to particular music, producers, and labels (see Reynolds, 2011, pp. 328ff. and Fisher, 2014, pp. 16ff.). The original concept derives from French philosopher Jacques Derrida (1994), who deduced it from the verb "hanter" (to haunt) with an allusion to the unisonous German term "Ontologie" (ontology) – the nature of being, becoming, or existence. "Hantologie" is the "doctrine of visitation" or spook. The appearance of a spectre as something present and absent in the same moment evokes the feeling of the uncanny, of mourning about a loss, and thereby confuses the experience of the past, the present, and the future. Not only Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* (Freud, 1917) is important here but so too his *The Uncanny* (Freud, 1919). In his discussion of the legacy of Marxism, Derrida refers to Marx's *The Communist Manifesto* ("A spectre is haunting Europe — the spectre of communism") as well as to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ("Enter the ghost"/"exit the ghost"/"re-enter the ghost" – "time is out of joint"; Act 1, Scenes 1 & 5).

⁶ Worth reading in this context is Fisher's critique of capitalism entitled *Capitalist Realism: Is there no Alternative?* (Fisher, 2009), which focuses on culture, education, and health care.

⁷ From my point of view, Burial has *translated* an already existing sound into the aesthetics of Breakbeat, Jungle, Drum'n'Bass, 2-Step, Grime, and Dubstep. British music culture and criticism unfortunately tends to navel-gaze. This explains why particular currents in electronic music, namely, Detroit Techno and Dubtechno, have been absorbed with a delay of approximately 10 years. We consider the following artists as immediate forerunners of Burial: The German producer Pole (www.discogs.com/artist/611-Pole – especially the EP *Raum Eins/Raum Zwei* (1998): www.discogs.com/Pole-Raum-Eins-Raum-Zwei/release/368); the British artist Donnacha Costello's album *Growing up in Public* (released in 2000 by the German label *Force Inc.*; see www.discogs.com/Donnacha-Costello-Growing-Up-In-Public/release/31048); see especially the track *Melan*: http://youtu.be/djgl_Mdcj-U); Canadian Scott Monteith a.k.a Deadbeat (www.discogs.com/artist/15056-Deadbeat) and his albums *Wild Life Documentaries* (2002), *Something Borrowed, Something Blue* (2004) and *New World Observer* (2005) (released by Pole's label *~scape* and recently re-issued on *BLKRTZ*).

offered us the opportunity to once more delve into the *Tresor 3* compilation⁸ and the subsequent *Maurizio* series (from *M-4*).⁹ This music was developed in the mid-90s across the Detroit-Berlin axis (sorry London!). From the beginning, it reproduced the oppressive and yet elevated atmosphere of 1990s industrial wastelands. Therefore the mood of Burial's tracks doesn't come as an heir to the rave scene, but rather as its companion.

The steady increase in the importance of digitised information in the Western world has initiated manifold changes in all areas of life, changes that can be seen although their implications remain unpredictable. It is neither an impasse nor a standstill if our contemporary music culture remembers, repeats, and works through itself (Freud¹⁰). Digitisation enables and compels us to examine and test the existing cultural assets under changed conditions – wrong turns and detours included. Everything is open; there is no lack of good music, and the conditions are excellent.¹¹ Why is this situation “lame and shameful” for Reynolds, and why does Fisher sink somewhat theatrically into a deep depression?¹² Their diagnosis of the (ongoing) cultural decline is based on incisive experiences with rock, punk, wave, and rave. These yardsticks are ironically conservative.¹³ The more appropriate their criticism, the more the future takes place without them.¹⁴ Pop has always been fun for those who find themselves in its midst, but a nuisance to those ancients who forever lament what has been lost.

⁸ The compilation *Tresor III* was released on *NovaMute* in 1995 with the sub-title *New Directions in Global Techno*: www.discogs.com/Various-Tresor-3/master/38971. Although these tracks are dancefloor-oriented, their restrained, timeless, and latent melancholic mood stands out.

⁹ The *M-Series* was released by *Maurizio*. With *M-4* from 1995 emerged a characteristic sound, whose atmosphere and production (bass, dub effects, dominant vinyl crackle) are regarded as the blueprint of Dubtechno: www.discogs.com/Maurizio-M-4/master/1656 and www.discogs.com/Maurizio-M-Series/release/203360.

¹⁰ These three verbs hint at Freud's essay *Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through* (Freud, 1914), where he shows that sustainable changes in psychoanalytic treatments are as a rule the result of a protracted remembering, repeating, and particularly (psychic) working through. It is mistaken to believe that the new can arise only from scandalising eruptions.

¹¹ Electronic music culture is by no means dominated by a sense of standstill. Although currently no genre is dominating nor any sensational innovations are happening, a lot is on the move. Digitisation allows (or enforces) the re-classification, re-discovery, and re-combination of existing cultural goods. This form of working-up requires time, which is appropriate after a period driven by such revolutionising technological achievements.

¹² Reynolds, 2011, p. 403: “Given that I enjoy many aspects of retro, why do I still feel deep down it is lame and shameful?” Fisher, 2014, p. 28: “[My] insights have been hard won. Depression is the most maglin spectre that has dogged my life... .”

¹³ In *Infinite Music: Imagining the next Millenium of Human Music-making*, Ben Harper (2011) takes a more open and impartial position than Reynolds and Fisher. However, he is not writing as a critic but as a visionary systematically attempting to plumb the conditions of music production in order to think it into the future without passing judgment.

¹⁴ The situation has changed profoundly since the introduction of digitisation. We have to look out for the invalidity of existing values and patterns of perception. Next to the mainstream flourish countless backward- and forward-looking sub cultures that bind and also dissipate creative energy. However, interesting developments occur in these niches. Their recognition through a larger public is not mandatory, maybe even decidedly unwanted, and certainly not necessarily a sign of quality. The dynamics of the distribution of content through the Internet and the technological possibilities of digital reproduction may massively obstruct creative processes. Instead of striving for unlimited distribution, in the near future technologies that protect and hold back cultural developments may become relevant. Technologies that moderate and allow protagonists to carefully manage their ideas and approaches instead of selling them out through cheap copies. Digitisation obviously does not stimulate the quality of mass culture. That is why the rave is definitively past. Now, the party can go on – under different circumstances and by means that occasionally still have to be found. Those doing it today, are in!

Literature

- Derrida, J. (1994). *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. New York/London: Routledge (French original: 1993). Available: <http://m.friendfeed-media.com/411d68a9b887290f0f6a1621dad4ad2249ea7421>
- Freud, S. (1919). *Das Unheimliche*. In: *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 12, pp. 227-278. Frankfurt a/M: Fischer. [*The Uncanny*, Standard Edition, vol. 17, pp. 219-256]. Available: <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>
- Freud, S. (1917). *Trauer und Melancholie*. In: *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 10, pp. 428-446. Frankfurt a/M: Fischer [*Mourning and Melancholia*, Standard Edition, vol. 14, pp. 237-258]. Available: http://www.english.upenn.edu/~cavitch/pdf-library/Freud_MourningAndMelancholia.pdf
- Freud, S. (1914). *Erinnern, Wiederholen, Durcharbeiten*. In: *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 10, pp. 126-136. Frankfurt a/M: Fischer [*Remembering, Repeating, Working Through*, Standard Edition, vol. 12, pp. 147-156]. Available: <http://www.history.ucsb.edu/faculty/marcuse/classes/201/articles/1914FreudRemembering.pdf>
- Fisher, M. (2014). *Ghosts of My Life. Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Winchester/Washington: Zero Books.
- Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist Realism. Is there no Alternative?* Winchester/Washington: Zero Books.
- Harper, B. (2011). *Infinite Music. Imagining the next Millenium of Human Music-making*. Winchester/Washington: Zero Books.
- Reynolds, S. (2011). *Retromania. Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*. New York: Faber and Faber, Inc.



zweikommasieben
Magazin #10

M.E.S.H. [21]
Lena Willikens
Vessel [31]
Powell
DJ TLR
The KVB [41]
Juju & Jordash [22]
Torn Hawk
Ralf Köster,
Nika Son &
f#x vom
Golden Pudel
Yör
Ulf Eriksson

[4]

A magazine on contemporary
club culture containing
interviews, columns and essays

Ein Magazin zur zeit-
genössischen Klubkultur,
das Interviews, Kolum-
nen und Essays beinhaltet



INHALTSVERZEICHNIS

INTERVIEWS

- 6 **M.E.S.H.: Space for the Homeless**
21 **On physical Intensity – An Interview with Vessel**
29 **That Feeling of Surprise – A Conversation with Powell**
41 **Not from Africa, not from the Future: DJ TLR**
63 **Moral Fabric: Juju & Jordash**
75 **Ein Nachmittag am Pudel-Tresen – mit Ralf Köster, f#x und Nika Son**
93 **Yør – Die Möglichkeit des Anderen**
105 **Being Kontra – An Interview with Ulf Eriksson**

PORTRAIT

- 15 **Más que un DJ – Lena Willikens im Portrait**

KOLUMNE

- 38 **Outernational** KLUBGEFLÜSTER
53 **The KVB** EINWEGKAMERA
90 **Poltergeister** BASSLINIEN
102 **Mach mal was** MUSIC BOX #5
110 **Sonnenbrille** GEGEN: STAND

ESSAYS

- 46 **The Artist-Technician as Performer**
82 **Be a Body**
100 **Jack. Eine Ode.**

CONTRIBUTE

- 68 **Who Bombed The Near Nap Institute**

M.E.S.H.: Raum für Heimatloses

Von physischer Intensität – ein Interview mit Vessel

Dieses Gefühl von Überraschung – eine Unterhaltung mit Powell

Nicht aus Afrika, nicht aus der Zukunft: DJ TLR

Eine Frage der Moral: Juju & Jordash

An afternoon at the Pudelbar with Ralf Köster, f#x and Nika Son

Yør – The possibility of the other

Kontra sein – ein Interview mit Ulf Eriksson

Más que un DJ – A Portrait of Lena Willikens

Outernational CLUB TALK

The KVB DISPOSABLE CAMERA

Poltergeists BASSLINES

Do something! MUSIC BOX #5

Sunglasses ARTE: FACT

Der Künstler-Techniker als Performer

Be a Body

Ode to Jack