No Doubt – Death of the Superunknown in Music

Charlie Brooker posed an unoriginal but nevertheless timely and, as such, fairly creepy question in the last instalment of his recent *Black Mirror* series: What would life be like if everything we did was perfectly preserved, recorded and freely available? In the programme the answer was pondered via a science fiction narrative set in a not-too-distant future where brain implants that record memories (as if to a computer hard drive) are in near-universal use. The memories they record can be played back both privately and publicly via screens in almost any situation, thereby erasing any chance of misremembering, doubt, hearsay or deception. This technological advance has predictably disastrous consequences for human relations, driving the main character insane as his paranoid inklings about his wife's fidelity are fully confirmed and, eventually, replayed to him in high definition.

As a Situationist-inspired techno-cynic the programme had a lot of resonances for me. In the past, my crude interpretation of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* was that the (qualitative) poverty of contemporary life was attributable to the bullshit associated with technocratic capitalist society. A more authentic and visceral life can be arrived at through stripping away the layers of gloss and 'images of things' with which we are incessantly bombarded, to get down to the real (precapitalist) core of being. 'Live in the moment, the here and now, the immediate and tangible!' Accordingly I shunned spectacular devices like TV, the internet and, more recently, social-networking tools like Facebook and Twitter. Such a reductive view finds support in the writings and actions of anarchoprimitivists like John Zerzan, but is also demonstrated (less militantly) in the disdain for bourgeois pursuits and toys - smart phones etc - shown by factions of the punk community.

I now recognise that things are more complex. I also see that the tide is turning. At a recent squat gig I played in Halle, East Germany I enjoyed a game of table football with some radicalised teens. Such experiences are, for me, a rare and brief insight into the way in which 'the youth' live and think today. My team (made up of the visiting British players) tried to combat the ever-increasing seriousness of the game by making silly comments about the invention of table football; speculating that it was more likely to be a product of the Germans than the Brits and that therefore they had a home advantage. No sooner had such a spurious claim been aired though, it was shot down by a smug fourteen-year old waving his Blackberry at us and quoting from the table football Wikipedia entry to prove that it is, in fact, a Spanish invention. This was clearly no joking matter.

That is not my only experience where the omnipresent accessibility of 'facts' – accelerated by mobile internet access - has curtailed a shared laugh. Elsewhere, on an artist residency in the Lake District, the group of friends I was with spent an entire evening drunkenly debating the width of the M1. If the place in which we were staying had had mobile phone signal or broadband it is likely that such a life-enriching experience would never have happened; at worse we may have quickly put the issue to bed and got on to doing some 'proper work'.

The decreasing margin for error, for misinterpretation, for speculation, second-guessing and wondering is constantly sold to us as a blessing. Apple assure us that we have knowledge at our fingertips, every moment can be an immersion in learning. We are more productive, confident and able. But, as Brooker unsubtly infers in *Black Mirror*, an uncritical embrace of the emancipative promise of technology can lead to a very dark and dismal opposite. Perhaps this flipside to technologically-aided certainty is best illustrated in the arts, and even more specifically in music.

I've written elsewhere about the disappearance of the 'dodgy metal past' that easy access to the entire history of music via the internet has caused (see 'A Young Person's Guide to Music Criticism'). In that essay I proposed that because nowadays finding out about and downloading the entire back catalogue of the most trendy/obscure/'underground' music artists is as simple as a quick Google search and a few clicks of a mouse, the *commitment* and *work* required of pre-web 2.0 music fans – not to mention the years of listening to mainstream pap – is a thing of the past. Becoming a 'fan' of weirder and outer-limits or leftfield music is no longer a hobby that requires laborious hours of

searching through unusual fanzines or talking to odd record shop owners or elder siblings. Whilst this has had the positive effect of broadening the audience for such music, the downside is that modern fans of 'weird' music are unlikely to feel the intense sense of ownership or identification with music that previous 'harder working' generations were rewarded with. This has led to a more trend-based, fleeting and disinterested audience for such music and, accordingly, has further blurred the boundaries between the underground and mainstream.

That essay was concerned primarily with the audience and their approach and reception of music, but what about the effects this aspect of technology has had on its creation? We know well that every generation has its own nostalgic fascination with the style and culture of a previous era; that the eighties was a regurgitation of the fifties, the nineties showed an obsession with the seventies, and so on. Of late there's been an acceleration in the return to previous eras – the spiral is growing tighter – and so now the very recent past is prime pickings for a 'revival' or revisiting. This affectation is best demonstrated in the underground/alternative music scene by All Tomorrows Parties' increasingly absurd cash-in attempts that consist of getting bands that split up yesterday to reform and play 'classic material' from an album still warm from the pressing plant.

This revisionism is undoubtedly made easier and more attractive by the ever-expanding archives of the internet. A quick Wikipedia search on a band or movement reveals all the history, context, associated acts and - in many cases - the equipment that helped define 'that sound'. Youtube is littered with entire concerts-worth of footage that allow people to see what they missed out on, and offer ammunition for an even more accurate resurrection. I believe that this is a major contributing factor to the unwavering aesthetic 'authenticity' that bands of the present era demonstrate. It would seem that a strict adherence to the rules of genre and style is becoming the defining trait of underground music in our decade. The odd dodgy nu-metal/dubstep crossover aside, we have moved beyond the postmodern mash-up and ironic play of styles that was common in the nineties and early 2000's towards a desire to 'get it right'. Hence a proliferation of reverb-soaked garage rock bands recording on to the 'original equipment', intimidatingly well-informed hardcore, 'spot-on' psych-folk, well-read drone and 'experimental' improvisation, and so on.

This love affair with accuracy and correctness also permeates the before and after of musical creation. Not so long ago my girlfriend was party to a promoter dishing out advice to an aspiring musician wanting to get into the indie-rock scene in Leeds. He was told that the first thing he needed to do was 'decide what sound you want and who your audience are. There's so many scenes in Leeds you need to first work out which one you want to be part of and then tailor your music to that.' Such a cynical – not to mention wholly capitalistic – approach to music is becoming commonplace even in the free and easy underground/indie music world. Bands are now able to 'target audiences' in unprecedented ways. The communities of interest (rather than geographical proximity) that have proliferated with the growth of internet forums and social networks allow bands to identify an audience that are almost guaranteed to love certain music if it is as true to a resurrected or already-existing style as possible. As such, the way in which music is marketed, framed and distributed becomes increasingly targeted and focused rather than open and outward looking.

If I were to take a Brooker-esque cynical stance it would seem, then, that the availability of the 'facts' of music – of archive footage; unlimited and easy access to back catalogues; of biographical, contextual and technological info - is limiting creativity to a safe zone of certainty rather than aiding real experimentation, risk and open accessibility. Because what else is creativity and experimentation than a willingness to get it wrong; to put two or more things together that shouldn't work but might create something new; an embrace of the unknown and of doubt rather than the certain and well-rehearsed?

As a backlash to this lack of speculation in music will we see a movement that embraces ignorance; that is willingly blind and deaf to the history of music and the genres and stylistic categories that have arisen from it? Will we see the emergence of a musical Luddite - dismissive of their pigeonholing as 'outsider art' – capable of shaking our growing and potentially debilitating obsession with the known

and the guaranteed. Can we anticipate a revival of doubt as the next big thing in music? I hope I'm not wrong.

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