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Music that laughs

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MUSIC THAT LAUGHS

Adam Harper



60 **G**ood morning. Funny, isn't it? Funny, isn't it? Thank you very much for that very warm welcome. How things have changed... Isn't it funny. You know when I came here seventeen years ago and I said that I wanted to lead a campaign to get Britain to leave the European Union, you all laughed at me. Well I have to say, you're not laughing now, are you?« (Nigel Farage addresses the European Parliament, June 28, 2016)

Interviewer: You said that women offended online should log off. You said, »yes, we'll certainly let women onto the men's internet a few times a year as long as you follow a few basic rules.«

Interviewee: You can't hear the humour in that?

Interviewer: You said »mass Muslim immigration must stop, or people will know real rape culture.«

Interviewee: Am I wrong? Am I wrong about that? Am I wrong about that? Am I wrong about that? Am I wrong about that?

Interviewer: Answer me. Are we supposed to just soak it up, and take it as one big joke?

Interviewee: You're supposed to treat it as it's intended and not wrench it from context. You know perfectly well that it is a provocation designed to make people think and perhaps to make them laugh.

(Cathy Newman interviews Milo Yiannopoulos for Channel 4 News (UK))

English people who are a bit older sometimes respond to stories of absurdity, adversity or abject failure with the expression >you have to laugh, don't you?< 2016 has gripped the chattering classes as a notably abject year, from the deaths of musical heroes to the shocking political vertigo of Brexit and Trump to outright massacre in, among other places, Birstall, Charleston, Oakland, Orlando, and, of course, Aleppo. How to respond? Maybe you have to laugh.

Not that any of it is remotely funny, of course. But laughter is a lot more than joy and appreciation, than simply a light-hearted expression of amusement, or even of positivity. Laughter can be a response to embarrassment, anxiety, insanity. As a physiological behaviour it has an unnerving intersection with weeping. It is not only personal or individual but social, and as such can be both collectivising and antagonistic, even bitterly so, in the context of conflict (consider English expressions such as >now who's laughing?<, >laughing all the way to the bank<, >s/he who laughs last laughs longest< and >first they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win< – a quote associated with Trump on social media).

It is largely involuntary, a deep-seated function of the mammalian nervous system – even rats laugh if tickled – and often falls foul of social protocol. As such, laughter is often pulled into the dichotomy of >laughing at< and >laughing with<, of subject and object, and of being appropriate and inappropriate. Laughter is a viscerally physical and physiological phenomenon that is nevertheless loaded with layer upon layer of values, connotations and uncertainties. It is a sensitive, unstable, ambiguous, multivalent and sometimes contradictory event that demands to be >read<, and that is ultimately beyond control and rationality. Laughter, to adopt a word that's become a cliché in academia, that has now proliferated among educated progressives online, and that has hung over 2016 with particular menace – laughter is >problematic<.

The transcriptions above, notable snapshots of 2016's triumphant right set against the establishment, begin to reveal the complex, contested and antagonistic place of laughter in cultural and political struggle. There is ultimately little mirth in the Farage's sentiment of >who's laughing now?< Milo Yiannopoulos, the polemicist star of the alt right, dances between humour as alibi and deadly seriousness in his interview for Channel 4 News. Liberal Western Culture has long been comfortable with the intersection of serious provocation and laughter when it comes from the Left, but when it comes from the far Right the instability, even falseness, of the position appears to be thrown into disquieting relief. Whether or not the left-countercultural shockers of the twentieth century ever took the position, the twenty-first century alt right, often seem to handle provocation and laughter as ends in themselves, beyond a point of amorality, of truth, or even coherent ideological position – just say whatever the crowds want, whatever the crowds believe, whatever gets you elected. As

Die Zeitschrift »Pop. Kultur und Kritik« analysiert und kommentiert die wichtigsten Tendenzen der aktuellen Popkultur in den Bereichen von Musik und Mode, Politik und Ökonomie, Internet und Fernsehen, Literatur und Kunst. Die Zeitschrift richtet sich sowohl an Wissenschaftler und Studenten als auch an Journalisten und alle Leser mit Interesse an der Pop- und Gegenwartskultur.

»Pop. Kultur und Kritik« erscheint in zwei Ausgaben pro Jahr (Frühling und Herbst) im transcript Verlag. Die Zeitschrift umfasst jeweils 180 Seiten, ca. 20 Artikel und ist reich illustriert.

»Pop. Kultur und Kritik« kann man über den Buchhandel oder auch direkt über den Verlag beziehen. Das Einzelheft kostet 16,80 Euro. Das Jahresabonnement (2 Hefte: März- und Septemerausgabe) kostet in Deutschland 30 Euro, international 40 Euro.

Sam Kriss put it for »Vice«, »what [Yiannopoulos] wants more than anything is for you to know who he is, and he shouldn't be allowed to get it.«

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Given all of this, consider an analogy between music and laughter. Music, too, is lost in a fog of subjects and objects, truths and untruths, collectivities and antagonisms; it is also visceral, sub- and post-rational, often non-semantic, bound up in social protocols and dances of ideology. Such a view of music lies beyond the naive model of political or »protest« music: that it occupies and articulates a clear political position and subjectivity, and best does so with sincerity, authenticity and intentional purpose. The corollary of this is that it might achieve political results: changing hearts and minds, providing a voice, or even simply raising awareness. From a countercultural position – musical cultures that are founded on some degree of negative relation to other cultures: ignorance, withdrawal, outright opposition – the dichotomies surrounding music and laughter become more pronounced. There have been plenty of songs that laugh at the »squares« of the mainstream (Dylan's »Ballad of a Thin Man« and the Beatles' »Nowhere Man« are a couple of particularly famous examples), and even songs and musicians that appear, to some degree, to adopt and explore the subjectivity of the squares (consider the ironic suits and costumes of the New Wave artists of the late 1970s and early 1980s). So faced with the music of 2016, we might ask who's laughing at whom? What does the laughter mean? What does it achieve?

The borders between what might be term »progressiveness« in underground music and a violent regressiveness have always been thin and blurry, especially given that the latter has often taken a quasi-satirical stance in resembling the

former (in much punk music, industrial music, music that flirts with fascist imagery, and all the dystopian musics). Put another way, there's a reason that the prefix ›alt‹ in alt right is often applied to indie music. A sizeable section of today's online underground music networks overlap with the alt right in terms of its demographics (young, lonely white men), aesthetics (kitsch, memes, cartoons, an ambiguous disposition of irony), favoured websites (4chan, Reddit) and views (that people are too easily offended today, that Hillary is the Devil, that mainstream values and elites are strangling culture).

American multimedia artist Mike Diva's video »Japanese Donald Trump Commercial トランプ 2016« went viral in June. To a soundtrack akin to the releases on cyber-kitsch label PC Music and with a visual style owing a considerable debt to the kawaii surrealism of J-pop singer Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, it ridiculously depicted a young woman enamoured with Trump and gliding through a pink and pastel-tinted world of Trump Towers, anti-immigration walls, military might, and even swastikas. Presenting itself as a Japanese commercial, it was taken at face value by a great many commenters on social media, many of whom, even with the video's noticeable exaggerations, saw the lurid colours and political naivety as understandably Japanese.

This satirical gesture was thus only a hair's breadth from a genuine endorsement, and as near as makes no difference in the eyes of some witnesses, whether anti- or pro-Trump. Indeed, as a personality and an aesthetic, Trump is within spitting distance of the particular forms of kitsch that have proliferated in online subcultures such as vaporwave, whose tracks and imagery conjure a yuppie 1980s of high-rise, urban luxury and financial success, critical distance from which is ambiguous and variable at best. For every account of vaporwave as a critique of the late-capitalist subject position, there is a response that its appeal lies merely in its weirdness, its nostalgia, or even that it's simply fun. Either way, vaporwave depends on the ambiguity.

Right on cue, by the end of 2016 attention had been paid by both Buzzfeed and »The Guardian« to ›fashwave‹, an apparently alt-right remodelling of the retro genre of synthwave that has been sustaining itself ever since the French house and disco revivals of the turn of the millennium, and lately proliferating among a probably younger generation online under its newfound genre name. ›Fashwave‹ is synthwave with paratexts (titles, covers, artist names etc.) and the occasional sonic sample alluding to fascism and mixing both Trump and Nazism in that regard.

Looking at the Bandcamp page of »Galactic Lebensraum« by C Y B E R N Δ Z I, and its tongue-in-cheek paratexts mixing cyberpunk and Nazi concepts, an understandable initial reaction is that this isn't a serious ideological identification but more probably a joke in poor taste, an approach along the lines of the world-conjuring of Japan and Eastern Europe, in vaporwave and its outgrowth hardvapour respectively, around instrumental music in

a pre-established style. But at every level, from the intentions of the artist such as they are to the impressions of the listeners, it could be and probably is ambiguous. In any case, it was taken seriously by BuzzFeed and »The Guardian«, and quite probably by listeners with fascist sympathies.

The synthwave/fashwave artist Xurious, whose logo is a swastika-like rune furnished in an airbrushed 1980s style and whose album is titled »The Rise of the Alt Right«, takes this to the point of apparently celebrating Trump, and in ways that appear identical to Mike Diva's »Japanese Trump Commercial«. In fact, the picture associated with the Xurious track »Hail Victory« on Soundcloud is a screenshot from Diva's video of Trump striking the kawaii pose of double victory signs. The track itself features Trump's absurd statement »we will have so much winning if I get elected that you may get bored with winning.« Surely a serious Trump supporter would eschew this obviously ridiculing imagery? »Are we supposed to take it as one big joke?« Perhaps not – perhaps this veil of ridiculousness is precisely what enables Trump supporters, bigotry and chauvinism on the far right today, just as the Pepe the Frog cartoon meme, and arguably the grown male »brony« fans of »My Little Pony« on 4chan, has done. »Laughing at« and »laughing with« become one and the same, and satire or protest music as conventionally framed becomes untenable.

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But it's not just music from the right that is laughing. As well as the continuing tradition of dystopian visions in popular music, especially away from the mainstream, violent sound effects and evil laughter in particular have been a recurring motif in experimental electronic music from a consciously and explicitly queer perspective. Aymara-American DJ, composer and trans woman Elysia Crampton's album »Demon City« features it especially, as a recurring sound logo akin to the radio idents found throughout her work (e.g. in »Demon City's« »After Woman (for Bartolina Sisa)«, but also edited to synchronize with the underlying groove in »Dummy Track«. The effect of the laugh is one of a B movie or of something heard in a kitschy Hallowe'en haunted house, becoming still more comical when it bounces along with Crampton's South American rhythms, thus losing the spontaneity typically expected of laughter. The music doesn't just feature laughter on top of it, the music itself is laughing, and the laughter is »musicking«.

One might ask, beyond the literal and with every level of context (e.g. Crampton as trans woman engaging with queerness in her work) and connotation (e.g. that s/he who laughs has the upper hand): who's laughing here? The laughter suggests a vocalic body behind it – who owns it, why are they laughing and what are they doing? There are several possible answers to the question of who's laughing. It could be Crampton herself borrowing a voice (it is not literally hers), or it could be an imagined, idealised Crampton, with her music as a technology allowing her to express herself and project herself in ways she otherwise wouldn't be able to – here, as powerful, triumphant,

celebratory. Similarly, it could be the listener, or an imagined/idealised projection of the listener. These readings would more or less imply positive sympathy or empathy between the music and its creator and between the music and its listeners (and by extension, between the creator and her listeners), but as with the naive model of protest music, this isn't necessarily the whole story.

Not everything within a musical utterance is ›on the same side‹, of course. Like any other artform, music can contain and contextualise its own adversaries. The laughter in Crampton's music could be ascribed to a virtual adversary in a virtual dystopian context, something that can be heard more widely and generally beyond laughter specifically and into other kinds of sounds with various negative connotations that invite antagonism from the listener. In fact, given the title ›Demon City‹, we could interpret it as the laughter of a demon or even Satan himself, analogical also to the historical and contemporary perpetrators of colonialism and the hellfire they bring with them (and mete out to colonised subjects like Aymara warrior Bartolina Sisa) that Crampton is explicitly engaging with. In fact, demonic laughter is one of many competing forces in the album's textures, appearing as it does alongside sounds and musics associated with indigenous Americans in varying degrees of rhythmic and harmonic synchrony.

More complex still, the demonic laughter could resonate, for better or for worse, with the self as evil, the self exploring its dark thrills, or perhaps the self positively or sarcastically identifying with projections upon it as malign. This is the mechanism through which slurs on minorities are reclaimed as positive identities – ›queer‹ is one of them, ›punk‹ another (Dick Hebdige wrote that punks were dramatising Britain's decline, so it was fitting that they presented themselves as ›degenerates‹). Even the term ›misandrist‹ and other pejorative terms for feminists have been worn gleefully, if with a degree of irony, by some feminists. And it is difficult not to admire the antagonist in a great many examples of art – The Queen of the Night in Mozart's ›The Magic Flute‹, for example, has a bravura aria featuring spectacular musicalised laughter, not to mention a wardrobe to die for.

Music's power and instability, and that Crampton's music particularly, lies in the fact that it is ambiguous who is laughing and why. Music doesn't reflect identities and ideologies – it creates them. Yet in so doing it blurs the line between reality and imagination, between subject and object, between ›laughing with‹ and ›laughing at‹, to the point where it simultaneously conceals and empowers the politics of musicians and listeners alike. Its laughter is a provocation, and one with political consequences that should be continually reassessed. ◆