

Sofie Lykke Stenstrop:

The precarious aesthetic across domains.

An exploration of the allure of imperfection

ABSTRACT

Artiklen undersøger brugen af medium-specifik støj hos pop-producer Tom Krell, der er bedre kendt under aliaset How to Dress Well. Gennem en analyse af hans musik og de der tilhørende musikvideoer, instrueret af videokunstneren Jamie Harley, hvor Gerhard Richters æstetik trækkes ind, vises hvordan elementer, der som oftest opfattes som ufuldkommenheder, eller som direkte fejl, i nogle tilfælde kan være med til at give et værk stærkere kunstnerisk og emotional appel. Med afsæt i russisk, formalistisk teori udfordrer artiklen dermed den gængse overbevisning om, at et kunstnerisk objekt med en fremmed form nødvendigvis virker fremmedgørende.

ABSTRACT

This article explores the use of medium-specific noise in the work of experimental pop producer Tom Krell, the man behind the music act How to Dress Well. By comparing his work and the video artist Jamie Harley's How to Dress Well-music videos to the German artist Gerhard Richter's photo paintings, I aim to make clear how elements that are traditionally thought of as imperfections, as flaws, can in some cases function as a means of making a work of art alluring. Drawing on Russian formalist theory, this article challenges the common conviction that an object cannot be both alien and affecting.

EMNEORD:

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“If everything is crystal clear within the frame, that’s what it is, that’s *all* it is” (David Lynch, in Jerslev, 2012, 2).

Is it possible to create an object that is alien without it being *alienating* to its audience? Can such contradictory impulses as conceptuality and sensuality, the mental and the physical, the detached and the immersive be reconciled? These are questions that preoccupy experimental pop producer Tom Krell (Maloney, 2012) and pervade the body of work executed under his stage name *How to Dress Well* (HTDW). Having often been credited with pioneering a new genre, referred to as bedroom R&B, alternative R&B, ambient R&B, etc., Krell’s music sets itself apart from mainstream acts by merging pop music with elements of noise, sound collage, and avant-garde composition. Through an analysis of selected works from Krell’s debut album *Love Remains*, his sophomore effort *Total Loss*, and his ongoing collaboration with video artist Jamie Harley, I wish to explore the various ways in which HTDW uses medium-specific noise to make its aural and visual expression appear alien, i.e. at once recognisable and unfamiliar. My analysis centres on the concept of ‘enstrangement’ coined by Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky (1917) and includes the German artist Gerhard Richter’s photo paintings as a point of reference. This article aims to elucidate how elements of noise are manifested and translated across artistic domains – from photography to music, from music to music video – in an attempt to better understand how features generally thought of as alienating, as imperfections, or as flaws can in some cases create a work of art’s allure.

What makes HTDW an interesting case for studying medium-specific noise is that the sources of noise are not limited to musical devices of the past, like vinyl scratches or the spectral hiss of a cassette tape. Tom Krell also evokes the *visual* medium of analogue photography in his music.¹ In a comment posted on the music blog *No Genre Music* on June 29, 2011, the songs from HTDW’s first album are described as sounding like they were “bathed in acid, cleaned with scouring pad, and bleached in the scorching kilowatts of the afternoon sun. The tape hiss and feedback gunk that accumulated on these fragile slow jams was part and parcel of their stark beauty.” What is important to note about this apt and poetic description of Krell’s unique aesthetic is the way in which his songs are compared, metaphorically, to decaying images. In fact, Krell himself states that “If you were to think of them photographically: *Love Remains* would be a bunch of really blurred-out photos of fragments of bodies; *Total Loss* would have some blurred edges, but it’d also have moments of real clarity” (Carew, 2012, my italics). The question is, why would anyone want his or her music to sound like “blurred-out photos”?

In defence of flaws

One possible reason involves the benefits of ‘enstrangement’ described by Victor Shklovsky (1917) in his seminal article *Art as Technique*. Here, he introduces the concept of *ostranenie*: a kind of defamiliarisation process ‘making strange’ all things trivial or taken-for-granted. Shklovsky (1917, 6) argues that in order for an object to be truly visible to us, it has to be

¹ The connection is made explicit when he samples what sounds like a 35mm film SLR camera taking a picture on the track *Lover’s Start* from *Love Remains*.

'enstranged', meaning that a complication of form is needed to remove a work of art from the sphere of automatised perception. This approach resonates, albeit conceived close to a hundred years ago, with a recent statement made by Tom Krell in a video interview (RBMA 2013) in which he explains that:

One of the formal aspects of pop music is that you're supposed to make the seams disappear, that you don't hear it as a song, or as a voice, a drum etc. You just hear it as a finished whole product with no history almost. And I like to take that pop form and then, in one spot, push the sound too far, so it becomes awkward. And then you see all the seams. It's like you're looking at it, and then one seam is revealed and you can see the way the whole song is constructed. And then you become aware of it as not just a song, but also a sound, a voice, a person standing there.

Here, Tom Krell explains his reasons for defamiliarising his work and making it appear alien. By distorting the sound, he consciously breaks the illusion of transparency that, musician Brian Eno (1999) claims, people take for granted when a technology is current. Instead of striving for seamlessness, Krell draws attention to the limitations of the technology, favouring an aesthetic that is more *precarious* than clear. The term 'precarious' has recently been re-contextualised by Arild Fetveit (2013a) to describe the uncertain, insecure, and unstable in relation to aural and visual material. Fetveit speaks of a *precarious aesthetic* that "can be tentatively characterized as an aesthetic style or artistic strategy which is reliant upon compromising this perceived transparency associated with visual and aural recordings, so that our access to something that we want to see or hear is partly blocked" (2013b, 1-2). In other words, a precarious aesthetic places the viewer or listener at a threshold of desired knowledge by simultaneously prompting and precluding interpretation. Seen in this light, the estranging 'mistakes' start to make sense. Examples of such 'mistakes' are songs recorded beyond set levels, employing medium-specific noise, and burying the vocals of the artist underneath a thick layer of reverb as in the Krell's song *Ready for the World* from his album *Love Remains*.

Tom Krell, Gerhard Richter, and R. Kelly

To Tom Krell, another reason for showcasing the shortcomings of different media is the belief that the flaws of a 'bad' recording are evidence of a humanness that is at times lacking in the auto-tuned, polished, impenetrable, and perfected pop songs of the digital era (RBMA 2013). In this way, Krell is representative of a recent trend in artistic expression in which noises are recoded from something unwanted and rejected, to become useful 'musical instruments' in their own right (Fetveit, 2013a, 5). However, what is different about HTDW is the fact that the noise is not only aural. Rather, by simulating visual *photographic idioms*, Krell creates a 'transmedial blurriness' reminiscent of the experiments with photographic effects in painting carried out by the respected artist Gerhard Richter since the 1960s. Rosemary Hawker (2002) has used the concept of *photographic idioms* to describe how Richter creates photographic 'affects' within painting through an evocation of effects that are thought to be medium specific (to photography). In other words, Hawker explores the use of medium-specific noise within Richter's photo paintings. In

the context of this article, it is Richter's use of *blur* that is particularly interesting to consider in relation to Krell.

In HTDW's blog entry '2 things', posted on July 17, 2012, Tom Krell states "what [i] want is a song that does this," referring to two of Richter's Photo Paintings: *Gilbert & George* (1975) and *I.G.* (1993)². Once again, Krell's evasive cross-media comparison leaves one wondering exactly what he means. Many contemporary art critics see Richter as a supreme ironist and theorist whose photography is predicated on conceptual issues of art history (Hustvedt, 2012, 285). Therefore, although referring to an intellectual reserve that might help articulate *questions of affect*, this same reserve would, allegedly, neither experience nor aim to precipitate affects (Hawker 2001, 1). Such attitudes among critics seem to suggest that intellectual concepts that call for "complex seeing" (Brecht, 1964) – or hearing for that matter – and the experience of profound emotion are mutually exclusive acts.

This dichotomous thinking, I believe, is a consequence of the common usages of *alienation effect* as a catch-all term to describe effects or elements that explicitly call attention to the constructedness of a work. For Bertolt Brecht (who introduced the concept, drawing inspiration from the Russian formalists), the idea behind employing effects of this kind was to distance the audience from the action on stage, to provoke reflection on – rather than mindless absorption in – the drama of hypnotic empathy (Bordwell, 2003, 562). However, in the appropriation process of the term *ostranenie*, the process of *enstranging* has become synonymous with *estranging*, which translates to alienating. This (con)fusion of the two terms has slightly changed not only the spelling but also the original meaning: The alien object has somehow gone from 'merely' being something 'made strange' by being taken out of its familiar context and reworked formally to being an object that aims at preventing identification and feeling altogether, an object not only peculiar but also downright disaffecting. An illustrative example of the continuation of such Brechtian ideals within art cinema can be found in the film *Funny Games* (1997), directed by the Austrian auteur Michael Haneke. In this film, scenes of brutal violence are interrupted by sudden interventions by the director, such as having the main characters comment on the action as it unfolds and addressing the audience directly by looking into the camera, deliberately breaking the fourth wall and shattering the cinematic illusion. In Haneke's hands, then, as in Brecht's, alienation effects are applied intellectually and confrontationally, as a means of creating enough emotional distance between the spectator and the drama unfolding on screen that there is room for critical reflection. The fact that Brecht's idea of distance and emotional detachment has become a precondition for the intellectual function of art (Grodal 2009, 206) makes Tom Krell's aim of creating a work of art that is at once alien and alluring seem near impossible to achieve.

Remediation: opacity through hybridity

But a closer look at the work of Richter and HTDW suggests that it might be time to rethink this oppositional relationship between reflection and emotion as well as re-evaluate and reinvestigate the operative logic behind the so-called alienation effect as a means of exploring its affective potential. Both

² <http://howtodresswell.com/2-things/> Accessed November 22

Krell and Richter appear to be echoing the American art critic Clement Greenberg, who claimed that in order to restore the identity of an art form, the *opacity* of the medium must be emphasised (Greenberg 1940, V). It is important to note, however, that what Greenberg envisioned when he wrote this in 1940 was a *separation* of music/painting from the other arts: a kind of purification process, a re-mediation in reverse if you will, and not an increased level of hybridity. To Greenberg (1940, V), purity in art consists of acceptance of the limitations of the medium of the specific art, and the work of Richter and HTDW would therefore be considered a “confusion of the arts.” But in the case of Richter, the gesturing towards an aspect of photographic idiom that signifies an accident or mistake is paradoxically what makes the paintings work. The medium-specific noise – the imperfections, the blurriness, etc. – makes them seem all the more photographic (Hawker, 2001). In other words, it is not through an *elimination* of effects that might be borrowed from other arts but rather through a *re-appropriation* of their traits that Richter succeeds in both emphasising the opacity of the medium of photography *and* painting simultaneously. It is in this high level of hybridity and deliberate obstruction of vision that the parallels between the two artists become most striking. Demanding an enduring effort from their audiences, both Richter and Krell make their works appear alien by slurring and blurring respectively, in a way that increases the difficulty and length of perception. Like Richter within the art world, Krell is constantly oscillating between the abstract and the figurative in his music, between wordless singing and moments of audible lyrics – in his case to restore the identity of music in the digital age of the auto-tune. However, whereas Richter imports the noise of his work from just one rival medium, namely photography, the sources of opacity in Krell’s work are manifold, ranging from evocations of earlier analogue media to simulations of internet-related pitfalls. This suggests that Krell is less interested than is Richter in exploring the essence of digitally produced music relative to earlier, analogue forms. Rather, Krell’s interest seems to lie in the ‘flaws’ themselves, which he operationalises in a way that not only shows the opacity of the construction of the songs but also introduces in the palimpsestic works a humanness and a unique emotional charge that somehow transcends its ‘damaged’ and alien expression.

Krell does not estrange modern R&B and pop music in order to mock “a style that has been of late, marred by over-commerciality, monotony, and – well, lets [*sic*] face it – Chris Brown” (Colletta, 2012). On the contrary, he is making its seams visible through noise in an effort to bring to the fore the beauty and affective power of popular genres. The unique sensibility with which Krell appropriates various R&B songs shines through in his reworking(s) of the R&B singer R. Kelly’s ‘I Wish’ from 2000. On August 22, 2010, Krell’s best friend died suddenly, and only four weeks later, he uploaded a video to his blog (Krell, 2010) in which he covers R. Kelly’s song. I had heard ‘I Wish’ before, but it was not until I listened to Krell’s completely stripped-down version of it that I became aware that the song was about the death of a friend and about loss: “Rollin’ through the hood, just stopped by to say, what’s up?/ And let you know your baby boy ain’t doin’ so tough/ Even though you passed, goin’ on four long years/ Still wakin’ up late at night cryin’ tears”. On the track ‘Suicide Dream 1’ from *Love Remains*, Krell references the song when he sings, “Now, I’m just missing you.” This particular sentence is one of the only pieces of the lyrics that you can actually

make out from beneath the veil of noise that distorts and obscures Krell's voice – and that makes it stand out. Instead of being part of a narrative flow (as it was originally sung), Krell pulls the song out of the flow as if creating a sonic equivalent to a freeze frame: a moment that immediately prompts an interpretation of the intention behind it – not unlike the closing shot of Jean-Pierre Léaud in *Les quatre cents coups*.

In addition to assimilating samples and parts of lyrics from other people's songs in a way that makes it hard to tell them apart from his own work, Krell intentionally challenges the listener, for example when, the song title for the track 'Decisions' on *Love Remains*, states "Feat. Yüksel Arslan" even though – since the name of this collaborator belongs to a Turkish artist approaching his eighth decade – it seems implausible that Arslan has at any point been in the same studio as Krell (Richardson, 2010). Another example can be found on the EP *Can't See My Own Face – The Eternal Love 2* on the track 'You Won't Need Me Where I'm Goin' (Live): At the end of the song, you hear a "small smattering of applause obviously sampled from somewhere else entirely" (Richardson, 2010). This manner of making uncertain the relationship between representation and represented goes beyond the use of medium-specific noise to a more general use of disturbance to interfere with a signal (Fetveit, 2013a, 23).

The question is how this influences the listening experience. For Mark Richardson (2010), a writer for the music site Pitchfork, the confusion is a source of pleasure "I like how you can't assume anything in How to Dress Well's world. By subtly tweaking how he presents his work, he's able to destabilize it in a pleasing way. You can't trust this guy's mp3 tags, see, and that adds another subtle layer to his art." This constant ambiguity caused by hyper-referentiality and hybridity is a large part of what constitutes HTDW, and it represents a way of making music that is symptomatic of the digital era.

Adding soul to zeroes and ones

According to music journalist Stephen Seigel (2012), what makes Krell different from other remix/sample artists is his unique ability to make zeroes and ones *soulful*. His precarious, patchwork-like soundscapes are highly complex, stitched together by so many different and anachronistic components. Yet Krell outweighs the heavy conceptuality of his records by putting them in a sometimes incredibly catchy, always emotionally intense, context. Krell makes the music of HTDW soulful not just through his voice – "expressing or appearing to express deep and often sorrowful feeling"³ – but also through an inscription of humanness – in the sense of flaws, confusion, and fragility – to genres that have thrived on their impeccability. "Giving soul to zeroes and ones," then, has a double meaning that both implies formal aspects of the music and Krell's anthropomorphisation of the digital recording. By using medium-specific elements that evoke "the warmth, authenticity, humanity, and even sexuality of analogue sounds [...] as compared to the coolness, inauthenticity, and disembodied character of

³ OED's definition: <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/soulful?q=soulful> accessed June 4, 2013.

digital recording” (Eno, 1999), Krell infuses the “dead” and “indifferent” digital sphere with life’s real, raw emotions. For Richardson (2010b), “the thin recording and distant-sounding vocals cause the physicality of the music to dissipate into a spectral fog.” But as I have already argued, it is the noisy recording that provides HTDW’s music with a sense of physicality in the first place, and it therefore seems more plausible that the noise will heighten rather than dispel the impression of embodiment, the feeling that HTDW’s music “comes from inside” (2010b).

Krell seems to present the songs of *Love Remains* to us through a bodily filter that distorts the output as a means of mirroring inner processes of the body and mind. What we get is a highly (first) personal, point-of-view kind of pop music that gives the impression that the artist’s inner feelings and thoughts are actively shaping the sonic expression. The fragmentation and distortion that pervades the way in which Krell presents his music seems at once to simulate and stimulate the experiencing of strong emotions. In an interview, Krell discusses hi- and lo-fidelity affective states, suggesting that “mourning is a more hi-fidelity affective state than melancholia, which is just burnt-out, grinding, crunchy depression” (Carey 2012). To Krell, there seems to be a correlation between the degree of despair and the level of precariousness in his songs: The sadder they get in subject matter, the more blurred, fragile, unstable, and obscured their sonic expression becomes. In an article, Tamara El Essawi (2012) writes that “a crystal clear sharpness would hardly fit with his heart-on-sleeve aesthetic,” which seems intuitively true. But why? In order to answer this question, I will move on to explore how the elements and applications of noise I have identified in HTDW’s music are transferred to their visualisations, to the music videos of Jamie Harley, in order to find out whether the precarious aesthetic works in similar ways across the divide between aural and visual media.

Post-digital Romanticism

Jamie Harley is a Paris-based video artist who has collaborated with many critically acclaimed music acts, including Twin Shadow, Memory Tapes, Memoryhouse, and HTDW.⁴ Shying away from publicity, Harley has managed to maintain an aura of mystery around his persona despite the growing success of his work since he turned from music supervisor to found-footage filmmaker only three years ago. Harley has achieved his now-coveted style by using and re-editing found footage, cross-processed with lucid colours and psychedelic imagery in search of perfect visual counterpoints to the songs he accompanies.

In his video for HTDW’s *Suicide Dream 2*, Harley evokes medium-specific noise through his use of retrograde, lo-fi imagery and post-production effects that simulate some of the malfunctions and quirks of older media. We see visual noise in the form of horizontal lines obscuring the greenish and grainy image, suggesting the demagnetisation and slow decay of a videotape. In the video for ‘Ready for the World’, the use of double exposure mimics the effect of motion blur specific to photography, which gives the characters a translucent, ghost-like appearance.

⁴ I want to thank Jamie Harley for letting me use his beautiful images.



Fig. 1 Still from Jamie Harley's music video for HTDW's *Ready for the World*, 2010.

However, the similarities between Krell and Harley go beyond their love for a lo-fidelity aesthetic. Both Krell and Harley employ a precarious aesthetic in a way that echoes Romantic sensibilities, as a means of mirroring lo-fidelity affective and mental states such as melancholy and loneliness. Harley's music videos stand in sharp contrast to the traditional 'promos' of the 1990s since

they are more concerned with creating a visual universe that complements HTDW's songs than with selling a product. Moreover, Harley uses *found footage*, which is a practice not usually associated with commercial music videos but instead with avant-garde filmmaking (Branco, 2009, 2). In Harley's own words, this means that he does not create the footage or the music that he uses. Instead, he provides the works with a new resonance and sometimes meaning by altering their context (Fury, 2011). In the music video for 'Decision's, Harley uses footage from Les Blank's *Always for Pleasure* (1978), in 'Lover's Start' it is from *Franz* (1971), and in 'Ready for the World' the footage stems from Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *In einem Jahr mit 13 Monden*. A comment posted to the blog *verb/re/verb* in 2010 touches on the similarities between Harley's use of found footage and Krell's use of sampling:

Both of these guys together fragments of the past - old footage, new editing techniques in the case of Jamie, while HTDW is a blur of disparate sources from Cocteau Twins to a modern day R&B. It works, and it's exhilarating to see these two artists forge new terrain from the cultural detritus that surrounds us.

According to artist Rick Prelinger (2013), the recycling of pre-existing materials is often used merely as a style, a kind of "anti-glossiness" counteracting the transparency of commercial works. But as the above observation implies, in the case of Krell and Harley, the recycling goes beyond such superficial usage and instead functions as a means of exploring and re-contextualising old and 'orphaned works'⁵ that are wasting away. In fact, they do not merely appropriate, since, Prelinger (2013) argues, appropriation has negative connotations of a superficial recirculation of pre-existing material. Instead, they integrate old material into their works, attaching new *significance* to it. The artists are thus "redeeming recycling from a reactive mode and moving it into a formative" (Prelinger, 2013), reflecting on the future of pop forms, the boundaries of which they are exploring rather

⁵ A term used by artist Rick Prelinger to describe the copyrighted works that someone still owns, even though that someone cannot be found. See: <http://contentsmagazine.com/articles/on-the-virtues-of-preexisting-material/>, accessed June 4, 2013

than clinging to the past. The use of medium-specific noise can easily invoke nostalgia (Fetveit, 2013a, 10). And in alluding to, by exposing the shortcomings of, outmoded media such as vinyl, cassette, and VHS, the work of HTDW (both aural and visual) is often automatically described as nostalgic. But such a conclusion is presumptuous, as argued by Joseph Auner (2000, 2):

The resurgence of interest in old and out-moded media, sounds, and machines goes far beyond any simple "retro" aesthetic or nostalgia, but raises issue about how musicians and listeners use music to generate meaning, to locate themselves in a tradition, as well as to produce and transform that tradition.



Fig. 2 Still from Jamie Harley's music video for HTDW's *Decisions* (feat. Yuksel Arslan), 2010.

Both Krell and Harley use noise to locate themselves in the contemporary, post-digital reality, where processes of digitisation enable uninhibited sampling of sources originally disparate in time. For Krell, this means sampling music and films from the 1980s and 1990s while drawing out certain lines and lyrics and re-contextualising them in order to enhance their emotional impact and meaning, as with "now I'm just missing you." Krell reacts to the transparency of current

commercial music by inscribing a higher degree of humanness into popular genres by infusing his songs with sincere feeling, fragility, and flaws – a strategy that is extended in Harley's *lyrical* visualisations.

The lyrical mode of expression is traditionally linked to the poem. In literary theory, this form of expression is defined as "a lyrical I' that conveys sensations and feelings. What is conveyed is a universe that appears as a mediation between the inner and outer world, where the concrete (the real) object is portrayed in a sensory, experienced, corporeal perspective" (Højbjerg 2008, 22, my translation). This description immediately leads one to think of the 19th-century Romantics and their idea that poetry should hold a spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings. This mediation between the inner and outer world is experienced especially in Harley's music videos for 'Suicide Dream 2' and 'Ready for the World', as one seems to be seeing the subjects *and* their emotional states simultaneously. According to Krell, the record sounds the way it does because he wanted to make an album that was "a sonic presentation of melancholy; the way that melancholy can be really self-enclosed, and the affect can drown out everything in your life, and you want to get out of melancholy and try and scream, but all that happens is a muffled cry, under layers of sadness" (Carew, 2012). Similarly, the footage of Harley's videos seems to be presented to us through a "sensory, experienced, corporeal perspective," charting intense emotional territory. Since Krell does not physically appear anywhere in the videos, it is as if the emotions

expressed in the song are automatically transferred onto the subjects we see in the video – not in the sense that they are now the ones *expressing* them but in the sense that they are now the ones *feeling* them. This impression is emphasised by the fact that, in both videos, we see the main subjects up close, crying. The medium-specific noise in both videos, then, functions as a way of presenting, at one and the same time, the seen and the process of seeing, a feeling and the way it feels. To clarify, it is as if the surfaces of Harley's videos are embodied, belonging to (or stemming from) the characters that he is portraying and whose pain we, as an audience, vicariously experience. Such a complex viewing experience surpasses synaesthesia and provides one with the phenomenological experience of "seeing oneself seeing" while watching others – through eyes with vision that is obscured as it is embodied.



Fig. 3 Still from Jamie Harley's music video for HTDW's *Suicide Dream 2*, 2011.

The works of Richter, Krell, and Harley – however different in artistic expression – all share a certain preoccupation with contrasting the human and the mechanical. In Richter's photo paintings, the perfect camera-vision, the all-seeing eye, is juxtaposed through blur with the imperfect and unfocused human vision, tainted by past experiences and expectations. In this way, Richter simultaneously challenges the infallibility of photography and highlights the instability of human vision. His work prompts complex seeing while reminding us of *how* we see, reminding us that our vision is closer to the blurred than to the all-capturing and crystal clear. Similarly, in the work of HTDW, a precarious aesthetic is applied as a means of countering digital perfection and inscribing humanness and soul onto genres that have (thus far) been praised for their impeccability. Paradoxically, this process of anthropomorphisation of digital technologies – the inscription of human shortcomings – is simultaneously what makes the work of HTDW appear alien *and* what prevents it from being alienating. The murky and blown out recording of *Love Remains* both functions as a way of "making it strange" to producers in the music industry who "continue to dream of 'transparency'" (Eno, 1999) and as a means of luring in its listeners.

The allure of imperfection

In his article 'Post-Cinematic Affect: On Grace Jones, *Boarding Gate* and *Southland Tales*' Steven Shaviro (2010, 10) uses the philosopher Graham Harman's concept of *allure* to describe the appeal of objects that "explicitly call attention to the fact that they are something more than, and other than, the bundle of qualities that they present." Krell does this by recording in a way that distorts the sound and buries his high-pitched vocals underneath

layers of reverb and samples of industrial noise to the point where the lyrics are almost impossible to make out. In a similar fashion, Harley obstructs our view in his videos by superimposing images and adding effects in post-production (on top of the pre-existing material), which simulate the decay of VHS tapes, making them very low in visual information. By refusing to provide any explicit reasons for, or possible meanings of, these strategies of distortion, the work of Krell and Harley place us at the threshold of knowledge, implying a “lucid depth” (Colletta, 2012). According to Shaviro (2010, 10), it is precisely this strategy of forcing the viewer/listener to acknowledge the hidden depth of an object while denying them full access to it that makes it alluring. The way in which Krell and Harley present their work as *other than* “the bundle of qualities that they present” has to do with the reusing and re-contextualising of pre-existing material. In both cases, the strategy at first seemed to be employed *reactively*, simply as a means of distinguishing themselves visually and sonically, by direct comparison, to their predecessors and peers. A closer analysis, however, shows that the reworking of borrowed materials (without recognising the source) seems to evoke internet-related phenomena such as file sharing, pirating, open source vs. copyright, etc. According to Shaviro (2010, 10), the concept of allure may well be strongest when it is experienced *vicariously*, in relation to an object, person, or thing that is not known to you in advance: “Vicarious allure is the ground of aesthetics: a mode of involvement that is, at the same time, heightened and yet (as Kant puts it) ‘disinterested.’”

This explains why, even if you have not experienced loss or melancholy that is “drowning out everything in your life” (Carew, 2012), you can still appreciate the work of HTDW because Krell allows you to experience loss *vicariously* through his two albums. It becomes cathartic in the therapeutic sense: You can experience it without having ‘been there’ or felt it before. The same principle applies to the Harley’s videos, from which the viewer “feel[s] the pain of the characters” because they are presented to us visually through a sensory, corporeal perspective, and it is thus the precarious aesthetic that affords the vicarious experience and “draws you beyond anything you are actually able to experience” (Shaviro, 2010, 10). This goes to show that it is not a matter of making objects alluring *despite* their initial estrangement but that it is in fact precisely the process of defamiliarisation and de(con)struction that makes an object alluring because it presents it as intransparent and imperfect, inviting you to explore its hidden depths. This shows that it is indeed possible to make an alien object that is not alienating.

Affective avant-garde

Is it possible, however, for an alien object to be *affective*? It seems paradoxical, to say the least. But despite his heavy use of elements that draw attention to themselves, so-called alienation effects, Krell says “If I have a vision, it’s about following out the emotional power of music in the way music can be an impressionistic medium for sketching and drawing out affects.” I have touched upon the ways in which Krell indeed simulates affects by means of noise. The question is, can his highly conceptual work, or the intellectual, self-referential avant-garde videos of Jamie Harley for that matter, *produce* affects in an audience? Prelinger (2013) writes that “remixing is estrangement in the way the classic writers like Viktor Shklovsky and Bertolt Brecht describe it. Yet the raw material remains familiar and recognizable. It is at once a

subversive and reassuring process,” suggesting that defamiliarisation and the experience of pleasure (reassurance) are not mutually exclusive. In a similar vein, Sean O’Neal (2010) writes in a review on the music site Pitchfork that:

For all its hermetic remove—spelled out by samples from Todd Haynes’ *Safe* on the opener, “You Hold The Water”—*Love Remains* is an immersive experience that transcends its chilliness (and speaker-crackling sonic limitations) through pure emotion, whether it’s the stroboscopic swirl of “Ready For The World” or the pocket symphony build of “Decisions.

This, to me, suggests that it is the Romantic sensibility that Krell and Harley share – their infusion of overflowing feeling into their work – that outweighs the conceptuality and coolness that is attached to their, admittedly not very Romantic, practice of reusing pre-existing materials.⁶ In his review of *Love Remains*, Richardson (2010) writes that the music “seems to be breaking apart as you’re listening to it,” and Tamara El Essawi (2012) too emphasizes how the music of the debut record “crackles and shivers engagingly, as though the whole thing might fall to pieces at any second.” It is exactly this vulnerability and fragility of Krell’s sonic expression that causes people to immerse themselves in his “delicate world of heightened feelings” (Essawi, 2012) and respond with such strong emotions to the allure of his imperfect music, despite its alien expression.

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⁶ HTDW’s effort to create a correlation between the emotions he is conveying in his songs and their sonic and visual expression can be traced in recent acts such as Abel Tefsaye’s *The Weeknd* where we begin to see an approximation of an artistic expression within the mainstream that is, to a higher degree, concerned with merging subject matter and sound.

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