Emotion, Affect and Place in 'Intelligent Dance Music':

After the release of their seminal Intelligent Dance Music *[henceforth: IDM]* album 'Music Has The Right To Children', artists Marcus Eoin and Michael Sandison, collectively known as *Boards Of Canada*, discussed their motivation behind the project:

> *"If it doesn't affect me emotionally it doesn't interest me, I think a lot of it is trying to capture a nostalgic feeling buried somewhere in our minds. We are nostalgic people trying to get back moments from our pasts."* (Marcus Eoin: Hector-Jones, 1998)

Journalist Richard Hector-Jones subsequently described the album as having "a uniqueness, a ghostly sense of yearning, and a depth of emotion that sets them far outside the pack" (*ibid.*); a description echoed in countless other reviews, online comments sections and my own thoughts upon reflecting on the album. The record features no lyrics, a minimal construction, and purely electronic musical instruments, leading me to question how IDM evokes such an emotive response *without* using representational elements which are at the nexus of other music genres (Alwakeel, 2009).

My engagement with IDM epitomises the academic movement towards non-representational approaches in musical geographies, breaking away from the textual and musicological analysis of prior research praxis (*pace* Moss, 1992; 2011; Rhodes & Post, 2021) to investigate the "creative and evanescent qualities" of musical 'performance' in both production and consumption (Wood *et al.*, 2007: 868; Whittaker, & Peters, 2021; Smith, 2000). In this project, I investigate such non-representational methodological approaches by reflexively listening to, and creating my own, IDM, exploring how both the creation and consumption of music are innately performative and relational; building on established literature by introducing a fringe genre which promotes individually performative and pre-recorded consumption. First, the project is grounded in a wider exploration of emotive and affective *[non-representational]* geographies of music and their associated methodological practices, before defining the specific role that Intelligent Dance Music has within the wider Electronic Dance Music spectrum. Subsequently, I discuss both stages of my project, highlighting how music itself has a strong emotional 'power' in localised performances without embodied interaction.

Emotional, Performative & Affective Geographies of Music:

Illustrative of wider 'emotional turns' across disciplines, emotional geographies seek to highlight the omnipresence of emotion in everyday life (Wood & Smith, 2004), additionally exploring how they can be manipulated through various forms of power (Thrift, 2004). Regarded as an 'everyday' and "important route to experiencing and expressing the full range of human emotions" (Wood & Smith, 2004: 536), music, and musical performance, has been thoroughly studied in the realm of emotional and affective geographies (Whittaker, & Peters, 2021). Music, as a form of 'power', has the capacity to affect our mood and emotional state, additionally inviting us to recall/reproduce certain memories and/or places with emotional attachments (Davidson & Milligan, 2004).

Intuitively speaking, it is almost facile to explore the interplay of music and emotion, as an emotional response to music is often regarded as innate and necessarily biological (Purves, 2017). However, methodologically, emotional geographies of music are challenging to communicate given difficulties in accounting for "how and why music works powerfully to shape an emotional geography" (Wood *et al.*, 2007: 884). Representing or capturing the emotive experience of music requires new ways of knowing or sensing outside of textual and representational methods (Wood & Smith, 2004; Smith, 2000), instead focusing on 'performance' through experimental and creative research methodologies.

'Performance' invites researchers to engage with the "embodied, emotional vibrancy of life" (Wood & Smith, 2004: 535), highlighting the active and participatory engagements which come together to make up the moment of *now*. In relation to music, investigating performance allows for *[better]* exploration of the unspeakable/tacit emotional geographies which music enacts, moving away from representational analysis to emotional and affective approaches (Smith, 2000). Whilst embodied musical 'performances' have an axiomatic set of intimate and spatial powers to generate emotional responses for both the audience and performer *[e.g.: stage design, program, dialogue]* (Cook, 2012; Rogers, 2012), pre-recorded music is generally understood as "something less than the concentrated performance event" (Wood *et al.*, 2007: 876). However, Smith's (1998) use of the term 'musicking' elucidates the importance of the listener, 'listening' and associated technologies in creating a musical performance, as all components are necessary to allow communicative flows between actors. Thus, even though pre-recorded music does contain the same embodied power relations as live concerts, the practice of listening to music is *still* bound up within a wider array of power relationships, affects and potentialities which are in constant flux. Referencing IDM, established literature does not account for forms of music designed for pre-recorded consumption, with my later analysis localising 'performances' and emotional experiences into everyday spaces of human-machine interaction.

Towards a Definition of 'Intelligent' Dance Music:

Originating in the early 1990s, Intelligent Dance Music is a divisive term used to describe a broad range of Electronic Dance Music *[EDM]* sub-genres which preference a more *ambient* and *minimalist* construction (AllMusic, n.d.). Whether the term itself constitutes an independent genre is highly debated, with prominent artists such as Kid 606 stating that IDM is simply "a label invented by PR companies who need catchphrases" (*ibid.*). The term 'intelligent' stems from Warp Record's 1992 compilation album 'Artificial Intelligence', encouraging listeners to take a more critical and 'intellectual' approach to electronic music by sitting down and listening, rather than actively dancing [1] (Reynolds, 2013). Consequently, an individualised and relational place of consumer performance is created, associating the genre with "spatial and social rules of etiquette" akin to those exhibited at live concerts (Wood *et al.*, 2007: 872; Smith, 1992).

Stemming from the focus on active listening, IDM combines elements from both poles of the electronic music spectrum to create complex records designed to enhance introspection. Breakbeats, sound design and sound effects from "hard-edged dance music" sub-genres like *Breakbeat*, *DnB/Jungle* and *Techno* are combined with ephemeral synths, chord progressions and slow tempos commonly used in *Ambient* and *Dub* records (AllMusic, n.d.). Given the

heterogeneity of IDM music, it is difficult to concisely find an established definition. For my project, I collated records from several IDM producers, including *Boards Of Canada, Squarepusher, Aphex Twin, Marcus Intalex inter alios*, to create my own explanation [2].

The defining characteristic of IDM is the general *ambient* or minimalist construction to the music, with Marcus Eoin stating that it is "[t]he spaces in between the music you're supposed to listen to" (Hector-Jones, 1998). Consequently, the listener is free to use their own experiences and imagination to fill the empty sonic space; axiomatically inviting 'audience' participation and conscious dialogue (Wood *et al.*, 2007). Nearly all songs are without lyrics in the traditional sense, although some feature voices/spoken word: such as the number station in *Boards Of Canada's* 'Aquarius' or the female vocaliser in *Aphex Twin's* 'Xtal'. Moreover, numerous songs use soundscapes to convey inter-subjective notions of space/place, such as *Boards Of Canada's* 'Satellite Anthem Icarus' using a generic beach soundscape. Not all songs include drums, with many artists preferencing acoustic tracks like *Squarepusher's* 'Tommib'. When drums are included, they use breakbeat patterns from jungle music which sample live 'breaks' into syncopated, repetitive rhythms. Further elements are also commonly seen across tracks, with IDM being synth-driven, using 'pads' sustaining long notes to create a sense of continuity. Pads, among other synths, contribute to IDM's ethereal and highly technological sound as sounds are specifically designed to evoke certain emotional responses, similar to the techniques used in film scoring (Kirby, 2021) and *ambient* music production (DeNora, 2006). Additionally, individual instrument tracks are 'soundstaged', a term used to describe the process of panning to create the illusion of a live performance by having sounds play independently in each ear; evidenced in *Boards Of Canada's* 'Dayvan Cowboy'. Consequently, the sonic make-up of IDM provides a middle ground between the bass-driven, energetic dance music played during 'raves' and the downtempo music heard in chill-out rooms and after-parties (Reynolds, 2013).

IDM, Emotion & Place:

As listening is a core component of 'musicking' generally (Smith, 1998), I was initially unsure as to why IDM music had such an emotional impact on myself. However, as IDM is "equally comfortable on the dancefloor as in the living room" (AllMusic, n.d.), a new liminal space of private consumption is formed, with electronic music production no longer bound the socio-spatial norms of either rave or downtempo environments (Smith, 1992; Alwakeel, 2009). In preparation for my project, I found that the combination of sedentary performative praxis and empty sonic space within the songs leaves abstract 'space' for me *[the listener]* to imagine and attribute my own meaning and/or location to songs upon each listen. Just as "physical space for music making...is, then, a potential", so too is the abstract space within listeners' imaginations (Wood *et al.*, 2007: 869). This understanding localises musical performances into everyday, private live, demonstrating the importance of non-representational music methodologies outside of live concerts.

Moreover, to augment the sedentary experience, listeners often use dissociative and analgesic drugs such as ketamine and wear blackout eye masks to amplify the ethereal and emotive potentiality of the music [3]. Of course, questions over the veracity of disassociation are highly subjective; although, liminal and phantasmagorical imagery can be seen in numerous album covers, such as *Boards of Canada's* 'Music Has The Right To Children' or *Aphex Twin's* 'Come To Daddy'. Consequently, the interplay between disassociate consumption and liminal

spatialities of production amplifies the affective experience of IDM. Whilst some albums encourage listeners to access an immediate utopia by creating the "fleeting presence of a life that momentarily forgets anxiety and isolation" (Anderson, 2016: 21), others access a range of negative emotions such as "paranoia" [1] (Richardson, 2002), "disorientation" [2] (Dack, 2021), or "wonder and dread" [3] (Lynskey, 2013).

Album artwork for 'Come To Daddy' by Aphex Twin (1997) [left] & 'Music Has The Right To Children' by Boards of Canada (1998) [right].

In addition to emotions, IDM has a long-standing history of representing spaces and places through specific sound design and soundscapes. Reviewing various albums by *Boards Of Canada*, Lynskey (2013) discusses how 'Music Has The Right To Children' and 'The Campfire Headphase' are "redolent of northern fields and forests", while their later album 'Tomorrows Harvest' evokes the "American desert, specifically the secret landscape of atom bomb tests, peyote trips, religious sects and Area 51". The specificity of spatial description elucidates the importance of non-representational and affective sonic phenomena in our understanding of space (Saldanha, 2005; Wood, 2005), with seemingly minor sonic details evoking vivid memories and/or conceptualisations of specific spaces.

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[1] *Boards Of Canada:* 'Geogaddi'
[2] *Aphex Twin:* 'Richard D. James'
[3] *Boards Of Canada:* 'Tomorrow's Harvest'

Record Production:

After reflexively listening and investigating IDM, I wanted to explore the interplay of performance and pre-recorded music through the creation of three IDM songs. All production was conducted using a combination of FL Studio 21, Ableton and Audacity digital audio workstations *[DAWs]*, with GMS, Serum and Vital being used for sound design and synth construction. Although there is a myriad of technical, theoretical and practical detail involved in electronic music production, I refrain from vast explanations of the digital production process given my familiarity with the software and musical praxis. Instead, I regard the 'creative' element of my project to be the communication of emotion and/or place through music through a non-representational, performative medium (Whittaker & Peters, 2021).

Employing the same record base used to construct my definition of IDM, I decided to categorise my proposed tracks into three distinct categories to inspire my own production: 'Futurism', 'Nostalgia', and 'Anger'. As discussed earlier, repetitive drums, soundscapes and spoken word is frequently seen in IDM songs, with these elements also included in my own production. In my own experience as a listener, these sonic aspects are fundamental to enhancing the emotive experience of IDM, as the repetitive drum breaks create a trance-like rhythm, and *[trans-]*subjective meaning can be attributed to the co-action of spoken word and soundscapes. Stemming from the use of modular synthesisers, IDM music generally has a 'futuristic' and less recognisable quality, as sounds are created using 'wave tables' which allow for endless combinations of tones which cannot be feasibly achieved using embodied recording methods. An example of me creating a pad from the 'Bladerunner' track is included in this video: https://youtu.be/gvNuHHMlYZ8.

Screenshots of synthesisers used: Vital [top left], Serum [top right] & GMS [bottom].

Designing the synthesiser patches [4] illustrates the performative nature of electronic music production, digitally mimicking the ecologies of embodied improvisation through "the rapid exchange of strategies between" producer and technology (Payne, 2018: 118; Love, 2017). Borrowing the language of 'tinkering' (*ibid.;* Knorr, 1979), a hermeneutic approach is adopted

through trial and error, incremental adjustments and note transposition to create a sound which can be 'interpreted' as emotive or representative. For example, the bass design on 'Inner City Commute' mimics the sound of a tube, yet it is not a direct sample so some room for *[abstract]* interpretation is left open. Moreover, the dynamic and improvisatory nature of IDM sound design meant that a lot of my production was 'incorrect' according to standardised music theory. Instead of following pre-prescribed actions, I 'tinkered' with the controls until I felt happy with the sound I created; characteristic of IDM's subversion of musical theory (Alwakeel, 2009) and the issues of transposing representative theory to embodied performance (Wood & Smith, 2004). Further interpretive approaches were adopted to the soundscapes and spoken word, utilising several digital effects to change the sound to varying degrees. This was done to create the abstract space for individual and imaginative engagement with the music.

Holistically, I found the creation of IDM to be highly therapeutic (Wood *et al.*, 2007), allowing me to represent my "unspoken and unspeakable" experiences of certain places and emotions through the medium of sound. Through careful design and highly technological production techniques, IDM epitomises trans-subjective experiences of music which is so integral to non-representational theory (Simpson, 2017), inviting listeners to engage in their own localised performance and attribute their own meaning*[s]* to songs in sonic context.

Listening as 'Performance':

After creating my songs, I invited my friends and family to not only listen to my music, but also engage with the wider performative praxis of IDM through dissociative consumption in private environments with headphones and blackout eye masks. I invite the reader to do the same after this conclusion. I hope that their individual performance will mimic that of my friends and family, allowing them to attribute their own trans-subjective understanding to songs which communicate personal emotions and places which cannot be examined lexically.

The purpose of this project has been to strip-back the proliferating theory within emotional and affective geographies of music to focus on the raw 'power' that sounds have to convey complex and trans-subjective emotions. Engaging with music within emotional and affective geographies is highly dependent on performance, yet that doesn't need to be constrained to embodied concerts. By utilising an ambient, minimal and pre-recorded genre, IDM localises spatialities of performance to an individual scale, consequently providing vital insight into the role of emotional and affective geographies in an age of increasing digital music consumption.

Songs:

https://soundcloud.com/nagzdnb/bladerunner-geom130/s-lilzkJ7l52f?si=a022dd26b7b5484f9a4a6822152b9df2&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing

https://soundcloud.com/nagzdnb/carlisle-geom130/s-ZRfPtMDfAaW?si=8592b1366cc94179b54b18abd1c97f73&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing

https://soundcloud.com/nagzdnb/inner-city-commute-geom130/s-YttPFLoGGXQ?si=9c1a1aa3f9fd4de0b4d8e73d6a6b855d&utm_source=clipboard&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=social_sharing

Appendices:

Song Constructions:

Bladerunner –

Carlisle –

Inner City Commute –

Endnotes:

1. *However, categorising dance music as 'intelligent' consequently insinuates the presence of 'stupid' dance music. This elitist notion of labelling music as 'intelligent' has been extremely contentious, especially given that IDM and countless other EDM genres stylistically originated from Afro-American/Afro-Caribbean music such as Hip-Hop, Jungle and Dub (Reynolds, 2012; Alwakeel, 2009). In UK Drum & Bass [DnB], a fringe sub-genre predominantly created by white-British artists such as Marcus Intalex and Blame was termed Intelligent Drum & Bass [IDB] and included in the IDM charts (Reynolds, 2013). Despite largely being a marketing move to make DnB more appealing to "white middle-class hipsters" (Murphy & Loben, 2021: 181), issues of racism and classism embedded in the lexicon of the music industry continue to plague the term. Nevertheless, the expression continues to be used, with the music industry continuing to assert that 'intelligent' music is that which is consumed in a sedentary and attentive manner (Frere-Jones, 2014).*

2. *The definition is by no means an exhaustive one, yet a blueprint for creating music was needed to ensure that my production sat within the discussed genre.*

3. *Whilst referencing this point is difficult outside of internet hearsay, there are numerous online forum posts, comments section discussions and blog posts about ketamine consciousness and IDM. Here is one example taken from Reddit user geo-matrix on the r/AphexTwin subreddit:*
   > *"Blue Calx is the most incredible soundscape i have EVER listened to when exploring ketamine consciousness. With a MindFold sleep mask (which slows you to have complete darkness with your eyes open) and hq headphones creates a fully immersive, and extremely visual and tactile experience that is off the fucking hook."*
   > *[sic]*

   Whilst I strongly discourage the use of ketamine, I do support the performative praxis of 'disembodied' consumption using blackout eye masks and high-quality headphones, as I believe this enhances the affective and emotive experience of the music.

4. *Each configuration for each sound designed is commonly termed a 'patch'.*

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