CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN GENRES AND STYLES OF POPULAR MUSIC IN THE LIGHT OF JACQUES DERRIDA'S CONCEPT OF HAUNTOLOGY

LAURENŢIU BELDEAN[1] , CIPRIAN ŢUŢU[2]

SUMMARY. The article in its first part discusses the concepts of genre and style and the issues these concepts pose in relation to the American popular music of the second half of the 20th century. The second part of the article considers the sources and consequences of the reappearance of those historical genres in contemporary music (since the beginning of the 21st century), situating these considerations in the context of Jacques Derrida's hauntology.

Keywords: Jacques Derrida, hauntology, genre, style, American popular music

Introduction remarks

The subject of this article is the problem of styles and genres in relation to contemporary popular and entertainment music, analyzed within a specific context: Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology, as embodied in his renowned work *Specters of Marx*[3].

We will first attempt to answer how the concepts of style and genre function in Western popular music of the last quarter-century, and whether these concepts are still relevant and useful in the study of this music. We will then ask why certain genres of popular music, declared "dead," have been "returning to life" in the last two decades, what the reasons are for these hauntological returns, and what strategies exist for penetrating these reappearing genres as key issues and concerns for modernity. Thus, as Małgorzata Lisecka and Laurenţiu Beldean put it in their article[4], we will consider

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[1]   *PhD, Transilvania University of Braşov, Braşov, Romania. Email: laurentiubeldeanu@yahoo.com*

[2]   *PhD, Transilvania University of Braşov, Braşov, Romania. Email: tutuciprian@yahoo.com*

[3]   Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

[4]   Lisecka, Małgorzata, Laurenţiu Beldean. *Dead as Disco. O wywoływaniu martwych gatunków muzycznych w kontekście klasycznego dyskursu queerowego*. Typescript, 2025.

Derridian specters of musical genres (whose demise critics long ago declared) as emissaries of musical values in the contemporary world. However, unlike the authors mentioned above, we will show that these genres and styles often refer to old and conservative values and content, using mechanisms such as cultural nostalgia and retro fashion.

In English-language works the distinction between popular and entertainment music, which is neither clear nor functional, is not so important, and the concept used primarily is "popular music," understood most generally – as the entry in *Grove's Great Encyclopedia* states – as music that was born in the USA between the 1880s and the beginning of the 20th century, whose sources, however, date back to the industrial revolution and the development of large urban agglomerations, and whose most important feature is comprehensibility and accessibility for the vast majority of the population, who have no theoretical musical education. This type of music must have a simple structure with a dominant melodic line and strongly limited harmony[5] It should be noted, however, that such a generally constructed definition basically excludes from the area of popular music a large part of the genres which the authors of the same entry (Andrew Lamb and Charles Hamm) include in it and which are included also in the broad literature on the subject – such as progressive rock or various types of jazz. More convincing seems to be the concept of Richard Middleton, who connects the popularity of music primarily with its wide range of influences among a group of people with awakened self-awareness, who perceive themselves as a collective in the sense of the people and who begin to define their social, political and cultural needs independently[6].

The concept of style and genre in contemporary popular music[7]

To examine this issue, let us first adopt definitions of musical style and genre, which will be useful for our subsequent considerations. While the use of both terms raises no major objections in traditional Western music history studies of sources created roughly up to the mid-20th century, the situation changes fundamentally with respect to later music, including both avant-garde

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[5] Lamb, Andrew. *Popular Music* entry in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Stanley Sadie (ed.). Vol. 15. Oxford: Oxford University Press 1980, p. 87.

[6] See Middleton, Richard. *Locating the People: Music and the Popular* in *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*. Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, R. Middleton (eds.). New York: Routledge, 2003 (pp. 251–262), p. 255.

[7] By pointing out the problems that arise from using such broad and general definitions of popular music, we would also like to point out that in the further part of the text we will refer to this concept in the broadest possible sense, but I will focus more on references to specific genres and styles.

and (especially) experimental music, as well as the spectacular flourishing
of popular music culture in the mass media.

It's worth noting that the entry *Genre* does not appear at all in
Grove's Great Encyclopedia. Let's turn, then, to a source with a much more
precise focus: Franco Fabbri, for example, in his study of genre theory,
offers an extremely short (and at the same time generic) definition: ""»a set of
musical events (real or possible) whose course is governed by a definite set of
socially accepted rules«"[8]. Although Fabbri goes on to specify the individual
components of this definition in detail, it does not gain any operational
validity. Charles Hamm also addresses the issue of genre in popular music
in his work *Putting Popular Music in Its Place*. He points out the omission of
a definition of genre by Grove's authors, attributing this to the British and
American traditions of music criticism that do not attach importance to the
term. He also cites several opinions of German musicologists, starting with
Theodor W. Adorno and Carl Dahlhaus, who place the genre at the intersection
of performance circumstances and technique (Dahlhaus) or what is universal
and what is specific and one-off (Adorno)[9].

The concept of style is much more functional and better described in
English-language musicology. In the corresponding entry in *Grove's Great
Encyclopedia*, it is defined as "manner of discourse, mode of expression;
more particularly the manner in which a work of art is executed" and can refer to
a specific composer, a historical period, a center, a geographical location,
or a social function performed by music[10].

We propose to accept, following Lisecka and Beldean, that while the
stylistic affiliation of a musical work depends primarily on the time and place
of its creation, including the center or specific musical group, and is also
evidenced by the aesthetic expressiveness of the work itself, its genre affiliation
depends primarily on two issues: the ensemble and the function for which the
work was intended to be performed[11]. This means that most of the names
of the music discussed in this article – names such as country, heavy metal,
and rap – most likely denote phenomena on the borderline between genres
and styles; and we can treat them as such, considering them appropriately
in terms of the above-mentioned aspects of both methods of categorization.

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[8] Fabbri, Franco. *A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications* in *Popular Music: Critical
Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*. Simon Frith (ed.). Vol. 3. New York: Routledge,
2004 (pp. 7–35), p. 7.

[9] Hamm, Charles. *Putting Popular Music in Its Place*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,
1995. See also: Lisecka, M., L. Beldean. 2025. Op. cit.

[10] Pascall, R. J. *Style* entry in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. S. Sadie (ed.).
Vol. 18. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 316.

[11] See: Lisecka, M., L. Beldean. 2025. Op. cit.

A similar view is also shared by Allan F. Moore (who writes about heavy metal in this way) and Mats Sigvard Johansson, who cites him[12].

In this most general sense, for example, a concerto is intended for a solo instrument (voice) accompanied by a concert band and for a public performance; an opera is intended for a group of vocalists accompanied by an instrumental group and for performance in a theatrical setting; a song is intended for a solo voice or a small vocal-instrumental chamber ensemble and for private, chamber performance. Of course, these parameters may vary depending on the individual subgenres and changes occurring in the history of music[13].

The development of American musical genres and styles: an overview of the issues

Contemporary American popular music stems from rock 'n' roll, which then evolved into two proto- or, as some would say, meta-genres[14]: pop and rock. Traditionally, both genres are described in literature as opposing each other, targeting distinct types of listeners. While the pop "meta-genre" is characterized by a simple, regular, verse-chorus structure, a greater emphasis on vocal melody, simplicity, clarity, and conventionality of musical elements, as well as general lyrical texts that often speak of emotions; rock "meta-genre" accentuates instrumental parts and virtuosity, and its structure (in the case of prog-rock) is often based on extended forms, borrowed from classical music (such as the suite) and the musical aesthetic embraces experimentation and originality. Furthermore, pop emphasizes studio arrangement and production, while rock – the stage, the concert setting, and immediate interaction between artist and audience[15].

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[12] Johansson, Mats S. *Making Sense of Genre and Style in the Age of Transcultural Reproduction* in *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, no 1, 2016 (pp. 45–62); Moore, Allan F. *Categorical Conventions in Music Discourse: Style and Genre* in *Music & Letters*, no 3, 2001 (pp. 432–433).

[13] See: Lisecka, M., L. Beldean. 2025. Op. cit.

[14] See e.g.: Roche, David. *Meta in Film and Television Series*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023, pp. 180–204; Anderton, Chris. *A Many-Headed Beast: Progressive Rock as European Meta-genre* in *Popular Music*, no 3, 2010 (pp. 417–435).

[15] There is a vast literature on this topic. Here are just a few examples: Byron, Tim, Jadey O.Regan, *Hooks in Popular Music*, Cham: Springer, 2022; Fornäs, Johan. *Moving Rock: Youth and Pop in Late Modernity* in *Popular Music*, no 3, 1990 (pp. 291–306); Grossberg, Lawrence. *The Politics of Youth Culture: Some Observations on Rock and Roll in American Culture* in *Social Text*, no 8, 1983–1984 (pp. 104–126); Lena, Jennifer C., Richard A. Peterson. *Classification as Culture: Types and Trajectories of Music Genres* in *American Sociological Review*, no 5(73), 2008 (pp. 697–718); Regev, Motti. *Pop-Rock Music: Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism in Late Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013.

This clear division into "meta-genres," however, began to systematically blur with the emergence of new musical styles and genres throughout the 20th century. In the 1970s, metal, punk and disco (which was based on, among others, funk and soul) developed dynamically; rap stormed into mainstream music in the early 1980s, while electro genres (as techno, house, and trance) also progressed; grunge triumphed on radio stations from the 1990s onward.

This necessarily sketchy characterization of the development of American (and therefore Western) popular music, however, points to something extremely important: all its basic genres were born until the time of the emergence of the Internet. The digitization of music and its introduction to streaming platforms, particularly the introducing of YouTube in 2005, has resulted in enormous changes in the way music is distributed and consumed. This applies largely to popular music in its broadest sense.

However, the situation in question applies particularly to the aforementioned "meta-genres," which, as we saw in the summary above, developed in specific decades and were associated with a unique style distinctive to those decades. Just as the 1970s are associated with colorful, bold patterns, the fashion for bell-bottom trousers and platforms, as well as polyester shirts, psychedelic hippie style and club culture; the eighth decade of the 20th century is connected in today's pop culture consciousness with extravagance, exaggeration, glam and kitsch. In turn, the 1990s in contemporary associations are the careless ostentation of grunge, hip-hop aesthetics and rapidly developing globalization.

It's not without reason that we cite these abbreviated associations, which reduce the complex culture of the second half of the 20th century to just a few pop-cultural traits. The concept of hauntology (discussed in the next section of this text) assumes that our memory works in precisely this way: by filtering events through reminiscences, we retain only the vague character and atmosphere of the past, underpinned by selectively collected moments. The essence of the return of ghosts is nostalgia, and in fact, hauntology grows out of the deep nostalgia we feel for past times, which we always read as a kind of mythological story.

Return of popular genres in the 21st century media culture: the hauntological perspective

Derrida does not develop the theme of music in detail in his *Specters of Marx*. The fleetingness and irretrievable transience of sound in time do not capture his attention as much as the construction of ideas. Yet, as Lisecka notes in her text, it is precisely this nature of sound that makes

music particularly susceptible to the influence of hauntology[16]. This concept, derived by Derrida in the aforementioned work, dates to the beginning of the post-communist transformation in Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Derrida observes a certain duality in this historical moment, which in the following decades will result, on the one hand, in accelerated development to the rhythm of constantly accelerating capitalism, and on the other, in a sense of nostalgia and longing for a world that has vanished into the past. This, according to the philosopher, provokes us to constantly "evoke" the past – not as an attempt to return to specific historical moments, but rather as an immersion in the magma of memory-based impressions and sensations connected with the "long-gone times" of the last decades of the 20th century, inducing the vague apparitions of their elements of cultural and ideological reality:

> […] haunting is historical, to be sure, but it is not dated, it is never docilely given a date in the chain of presents, day after day, according to the instituted order of a calendar. Untimely, it does not come to, it does not happen to, it does not befall, one day, Europe, as if the latter, at a certain moment of its history, had begun to suffer from a certain evil, to let itself be inhabited in its inside, that is, haunted by a foreign guest. Not that that guest is any less a stranger for having always occupied the domesticity of Europe. But there was not inside, there was nothing inside before it. The ghost would displace itself like the movement of this history. Haunting would mark the very existence of Europe[17].
> […]
> Repetition and first time: this is perhaps the question of the event as question of the ghost. What is a ghost? What is the effectiveness or the presence of a specter, that is, of what seems to remain as ineffective, virtual, insubstantial as a simulacrum? Is there there, between the thing itself and its simulacrum, an opposition that holds up? Repetition and first time, but also repetition and last time, since the singularity of any first time, makes of it also a last time. Each time it is the event itself, the first time is a last time. Altogether other. Staging for the end of history. Let us call it a hauntology[18].

As we can see, Derrida assigns a special function to repetition in the hauntological restoration of the contemporary nature of objects and events from our past.

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[16] Lisecka, M. *Dźwięki-widma: o tym, kogo i jak nawiedzają nagrania i sprzęty audio w serialu "Ostre przedmioty" (2018, HBO)*. Typescript, 2025.

[17] Derrida, J. 1994. Op. cit., p. 3.

[18] Ibidem, p. 10.

Repetition can be understood in the context of popular music genres in two ways: first, the very structure of popular songs (especially those originating from the "meta-genre" of pop) is repetitive in nature. There are numerous studies demonstrating that this repetitiveness favors reception, makes the music understandable, and evokes a sense of listening comfort[19]. It would be trite to say that we like music we already know well, and to which our listening habits lead us, but this is precisely the case.

On the other hand, the repetitiveness of popular music can also be understood as the constant (at least since a certain point in music history, which we have already identified in this text as the turn of the 21st century) return of musical genres that have fallen into oblivion, or – as Derrida would say – dead. The lifespan of musical genres and styles is not eternal, after all, even though some of them are remarkably resilient. In the text we've already cited, Lisecka and Beldean point out that genres such as disco, punk, grunge, and even country have often been declared "dead" by the critics. Aforementioned researchers note that this death can vary: in the case of disco, it was a sudden decline, coupled with a symbolic "execution" in the form of the infamous Disco Demolition Night; punk, after less than two years of existence, simply metamorphosed and evolved into a number of subgenres, while country – one of the oldest genres of popular music, dating back to the early 20th century[20] – seems to be slowly dying to this day and is clearly facing death from old age[21].

Regardless of how they "died," these genres have been making comebacks since the turn of the century, and their resurgence isn't always linked to Internet culture and its archival tendencies. Sometimes, it's linked with the creation of new genres – as in the case of the funk- and groove-infused nu-disco of Daft Punk, Lizzo, or Bruno Mars; but simply a sentimental return to roots – as in Madonna's album *Confessions on a Dance Floor* (2005). In other cases, it can be a kind of homage to a genre that's already "dead" – and therefore classic – as in Beyoncé's album *Renaissance* (2022).

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[19] See e.g.: Björnberg, Alf. *Structural Relationships of Music and Images in Music Video* in *Popular Music*, no 1, 1994 (pp. 51–74); Middleton, R. *'Play It Again Sam': Some Notes on the Productivity of Repetition in Popular Music* in *Popular Music*, no 3, 1983 (pp. 235–270); Paddison, Max. *The Critique Criticised: Adorno and Popular Music* in *Popular Music*, no 2, 1982 (pp. 201–218), pp. 205–207; Rösing, Helmut. *Listening Behaviour and Musical Preference in the Age of 'Transmitted Music',* in *Popular Music*, no 4, 1984 (pp. 119–149), pp. 124–126; Tagg, Philip. *Analysing Popular Music: Theory, Method and Practice* in *Popular Music*, no 2, 1982 (pp. 37–67), pp. 40–42.

[20] See: Schäfer, Stephanie. *Manifestations of Collective Identity in Country Music – Cultural, Regional, National.* Hamburg: Diplomica Verlag GmbH, 2012, pp. 28–35.

[21] Lisecka, M., L. Beldean. 2025. Op. cit.

The practice of hauntology in contemporary music undoubtedly draws heavily from the fact that pure meta-genres are no longer present. In other words, genres are increasingly unable to function in isolation. Hence the vitality of country, which – though no longer embodying the values of the conservative, masculinist, and traditional culture of the American South[22] – continues to permeate genres bordering pop, electro, and dance as well as rap, trap, and even folk rock, alternative rock, and other, somewhat more experimental genres. This seems to primarily concern the musical element, not the lyrical poetics characteristic of country. This isn't always the case, though, even though one might get such an impression after reading Lisecka and Beldean's text[23]. A closer look at this phenomenon reveals that, beyond the ironic take on American culture, typical of Kacey Musgraves, or the parodic Western tropes of Lil Nas X's *Old Town Road* (2019), there are also entirely literal and sentimental returns to the simplicity, naivety, and binary value system of country music. How else can we interpret the childlike melodramatics of Taylor Swift or the music of Lady A (formerly Lady Antebellum), which attempts a kind of historical reconstruction of the genre?

Some genres that seemed peripheral in American music, their duration short and fleeting, such as bubblegum pop[24], have been returning since the turn of the century on a wave of nostalgia in characteristic stylistic "splinters" of some artists and bands. In the case of bubblegum pop, these include: turn-of-the-millennium pop (Britney Spears, NSYNC, Backstreet Boys, early singles by Mandy Moore, Jessica Simpson), early-21st-century pop punk (Avril Lavigne, Bowling for Soup, Good Charlotte), electro pop (Aqua, Katy Perry, Carly Rae Jepsen, Kesha), and the genre known as hyperpop (Charli XCX, Kim Petras, Olivia Rodrigo, PC Music). A noticeable trend is evident: the further we delve into the 21st century, the more conscious, distanced, and characteristically distorted these references become, creating a kind of simulacrum of the original genre, clearly interfering with the source. While in the case of turn-of-the-millennium pop, the aesthetics are simple and clear, the patterns of easy, catchy choruses and "sugary" melodies directly refer to bubblegum pop, and the whole thing is saccharine, infantile and simply music for children and teenagers, in the case of hyperpop we are dealing with a conscious flirtation with "syrupy", "plastic" sounds, transferred into

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[22] See more on the genre: Fox, Pamela. *Recycled "Trash": Gender and Authenticity in Country Music Autobiography* in *American Quarterly*, vol. 50(2), 1998 (pp. 234–266); Geary, Daniel. *"The Way I Would Feel About San Quentin": Johnny Cash and the Politics of Country Music* in *Daedalus*, vol. 142(4), 2013 (pp. 64–72).

[23] Lisecka, M., L. Beldean. 2025. Op. cit.

[24] See more on the genre: Schafer, William J. *Beyond Bubblegum: Randy Newman and Harry Nilsson* in *American Quarterly*, no 3, 1970 (pp. 742–760).

a digital aesthetic, and the source is treated almost caricatured and streaked with other genres, such as indie rock or emo music.

Even more interesting is the case of hypnagogic pop, which appeared in alternative music in the late 2000s. The term was coined by critic David Keenan in "The Wire" magazine in 2009. The very existence of this genre has a hauntological provenance – its most important features are: the aesthetics of nostalgia (inspired by pop, rock, and radio music of the 70s, 80s, and 90s, but viewed as if "through a dream", blurred, often lo-fi), a deliberately distorted sound (the recordings often sound amateurish, as if copied onto cassette or VHS), psychedelia (a lot of reverb, echo, effects that give the impression of a dream, memory, hallucination), and collage-like nature (artists take fragments of old mass culture, such as advertisements, game soundtracks, radio music, and process them in a new context)[25]. Artists of this trend, such as Ariel Pink, James Ferraro, and John Maus, deliberately appeal to the nostalgic feelings of their listeners, creating a genre that does not value changing trends, but rather tries to achieve something that we could call a warping of space-time – to return to old, already repressed listening habits – while Derrida called it evoking specters.

Conclusions

For Derrida, nostalgia is one of the most important concepts, crucial for understanding *Specters of Marx* – even if the concept does not appear often in the book itself. In Derrida's understanding, nostalgia is linked to the sublime[26]. This nostalgia, however, is not just the retromania Simon Reynolds writes about. In his foundational work on the subject, Reynolds writes:

This kind of retromania has become a dominant force in our culture, to the point where it feels like we've reached some kind of tipping point. Is nostalgia stopping our culture's ability to surge forward, or are we nostalgic precisely because our culture has stopped moving forward and so we inevitably look back to more momentous and dynamic times? But what happens when we run out of past? Are we heading towards a sort of cultural-ecological catastrophe, when the seam of pop history is exhausted? And out of all the

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[25] See more on the genre: Graham, Stephen. *(Un)Popular Avant-Gardes: Underground Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* in *Perspectives of New Music*, vol. 48(2), 2010 (pp. 5–20), pp. 11–14; Haworth, Christopher, Georgina Born. *Music and Intermediality after the Internet: Aesthetics, Materialities and Social Forms* in *Music and Digital Media: A Planetary Anthropology*. G. Born (ed.). London: UCL Press, 2022 (pp. 378–438), pp. 392–406.
[26] Derrida, J. 1994. Op. cit., p. 169.

things that happened this past decade, what could possibly fuel tomorrow's nostalgia crazes and retro fads?[27]

Derridean perspective differs, as he sees nostalgia not as a result of a kind of "cognitive laziness" that mass culture instills in its audience, but rather as a consequence of our unresolved traumas, difficult reminiscences, and memory that protects itself from the complete disclosure of our minds. Evoking specters is therefore a kind of necessity and applies not only to popular or mass culture but, more generally, to the entire cultural experience of contemporary human being. It would be extremally interesting to examine this process in recent avant-garde music, but that is a subject for an entirely different study.

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[27] Reynolds, Simon. *Retromania. Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*. New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2011, p. xiv.

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