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The Second Death of Concept Albums World-Building and Unification Strategies in the Age of Streaming

ABSTRACT: As the end of the album format is apparently drawing near due to the radical change in music consumption habits motivated by streaming services, artists and genres interested in creating musical works with meanings broader than those of single songs find themselves in a situation worth analysing. Despite all appearances and expectations, I argue that nowadays artists willing to create narrative, thematic or generally conceptual contexts for their songs are living in a potential second golden age of concept albums. Some attempts at keeping the (concept) album alive are more alike to an act of resistance, others creatively take advantage of the same means of communication used by their digital enemy, in order to create something unique and capable of taking the place of the supposedly doomed CD/LP format. They are often transmedial works, thus requiring an interdisciplinary analysis. In this paper, I offer an overview of the contemporary situation of the album format (and concept album more specifically) and finally propose a classification of four forms of contemporary musical world-building strategies, starting from a selection of emblematic case studies.

KEYWORDS: concept album, world-building, narration, unification, album apps, streaming, playlists

Introduction

We all thought concept album was dead. Not only once, but twice at least: the first time when the supposed death of progressive rock took place in the late 1970s.¹ The origins of the concept album format (Follero, 2009; Letts, 2010; Shute, 2013) can in fact be traced back to the mid-1960s (Beach Boys, Beatles, Zappa), but such an album format has been more widely exploited by prog bands during the following decade, becoming one of the trademarks of that genre (Macan, 1997; Martin 1998). It is, using Lori Burns' words, an album that "sustains a central message or advances the narrative of a subject through the intersections of lyrical, musical and visual content" (Burns, 2016, p. 95). Yet concept album was not dead, and actually came back multiple times in the decades to follow (think

¹This should be removed now, and replaced with the actual entry, which is: Merlini, 2022.

of artists as diverse as Prince, Iron Maiden, Kate Bush, XTC, Dream Theater and Radiohead).

The second death of concept album was a very easy one to predict, as soon as it became clear that streaming services were changing our way of consuming music in many ways (Decker, 2013; Johansson, 2019). It is probably needless to say that there seems to be no place for the concept album format as people are more and more used to listening to individual songs or to song agglomerates that do not respond to the necessity of creating a coherent musical *Werk* by an artist, yet to put together songs created by different authors, which share a mood, a time and place, or a position in the charts. Of course, I am talking about playlists, which are among the major agents of the ongoing transformation of our musical consumption's habits (Hagen, 2015). In general, we can say that the battle looks like a pointless one: on one side there is a struggle to get the listener's attention for a prolonged amount of time, used as everyone is to the atomisation of music consumption – and this is valid for the album format in general (Olivier, 2018; Wener, 2006); on the other, there is not even a real necessity for labels to continue releasing music in the form of albums, since, after all, what brings most of the royalties is the single hit songs, so all of the surrounding tracks are nothing more than small “extras”. In line with these intuitions, Scott Hiller and Jason Walter's economic analysis of this matter has demonstrated that the album format is no longer the best kind of investment for labels and artists (Hiller & Walter, 2015), and so – they argue – it is only natural to think that music industry will soon adapt to the new affordances offered by the digital context. According to them, a strategy based on hit songs is much more profitable in the streaming context, and so the album format seems to be doomed. After all, the end began with the digitization process: CDs already introduced the possibility of skipping tracks, while mp3 downloads made it possible to even purchase only single parts of an album. Streaming is just the next, natural stage of evolution.

There really seems to be no room for albums in the present (and probably future) digital world, let alone for the concept album. But is it really so? In this paper I will offer an overview of the contemporary situation of the production of concept albums, focusing on four formulas used by artists to reinforce the organicity of tracks, trying to work against the atomisation of listening experience and the disaggregation of album coherence. The result will be a general classification in four kinds of expedients holding together the integrity of the album format nowadays (or partially replacing it in the function of building a broader conceptual, narrative, thematic frame), and my analysis will focus on some emblematic case studies. But, before that, allow me to briefly introduce the matter by defining what a concept album is and which typologies can be identified.

Preliminary Definitions and Taxonomies

Most popular music was once mainly known and distributed in the form of single songs – just like today (or, most likely, tomorrow), someone may argue. During the early era of the recording industry, the “single” format was

the standard: small vinyl discs featuring one song per side, usually one being the “hit” song and the other a sort of bonus track. We are usually told that in the second half of the 1960s some artists began to experiment with broader agglomerates of songs, permitted by the LP format, but they were not actually the very first ones doing so. According to Todd Decker (2013), in fact, the new format had already been explored in the previous decade, including the possibility of creating something very close to what today we might call “concept album”. The main difference was that those albums typically did not feature original songs (as would mainly happen from the 1960s onwards), but pre-existing ones, re-interpreted by famous singers, and organised following a certain rationale – as it happened with *Fancy Meeting You There* (1958), featuring Bing Crosby and Rosemary Clooney singing old songs about falling in love in exotic places in duet, plus one original song closing both side A and side B of the LP.

We might think that this kind of agglomeration is too weak, when compared with the 1960s works by artists like The Beatles, Beach Boys and Frank Zappa, but after all *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) was conceptual more in the visuals and in the unifying idea of creating a virtual live performance, than it was in the musical or lyrical continuity (Emerick, 2007; Letts, 2010). Even *Pet Sounds* (1966) is not a concept album as we tend to define it today and might be seen as a collection of songs sharing a uniform quality, kept together by the same production values and ideals (Tunbridge, 2010). *Freak Out!* (1965) is possibly the best candidate, as the album by Frank Zappa was actually a collection of “songs that all made satirical jabs at American popular culture” (Letts, 2010, p. 15), “delivering their message of the injustice, chaos, and stupidity of contemporary American society” (Borders, 2001, p. 122). The album displays unity from a musical perspective, too, as it mocks forms and clichés of American popular music. James Borders (2001) employs the category of “song cycle” in his analysis of Zappa’s early works: a term that brings us immediately back to the classical musical form of the same name. After all, Schubert’s *Winterreise* (1827) might be seen as an *ante-litteram* concept album, as opposed to any other compilation of random *Lieder* or other kinds of pieces.

This leads me to the next point: if concept albums can be conceived as the popular version of a classical song cycle, it is no surprise that it became a big element of interest for a generation of musicians that was overall fascinated with classical music: the progressive generation. It is widely acknowledged that prog rockers sought to integrate non-rock (and especially classical) elements into their music,² thus trying to bring popular music closer to the status of “high art”. Seeking conceptual unity as it happened in song cycles (but also operas, ballets, and other genres of classical music) must have been a primary objective for prog musicians, and the examples furnished by the recent concept album pioneers arrived just in time to answer to that need. There is no space to linger further in the description of the development of the concept album form during the classic prog era, nor for tracing it in the later eras (beyond what I have briefly done in the

² See, among the others, Macan, 1997 and Martin, 1998.

introduction); suffice it to say that many albums that are considered prog masterpieces were indeed concept albums and this helped the new form to explore new territories and variants. It is on such variants that I will focus now, because they are important for creating a possible definition of concept album and understanding some later development of my categorisation work.

Marianne Tatom Letts has proposed a convincing taxonomy of concept album typologies: narrative, thematic and resistant (Letts, 2010, pp. 22–26). The latter is more of a specific breed that is functional to Letts' analysis of certain Radiohead albums which are located at the core of her book: resistant concepts resist a plain interpretation and may employ blurring lyrics, unclear concepts, musical discontinuity, and an implicit development of the matter. Artists may even deny that such albums are concept albums at all. While I don't deny that this category exists and Lett's book demonstrates that it is worth studying this kind of concept albums as well, I do not think it will be of much use in the following phases of this paper (although some of the albums I am going to mention could indeed be hypothetically labelled as "resistant"), so let me focus on the other two kinds instead.

Narrative concept albums feature songs which are connected by a common plot and most likely by the same characters as well. According to Letts (2010, p. 18), this category should not be overlapped with rock operas, as the latter usually have multiple characters (just like operas), while concept albums often have one single lyrical persona (and usually one single singer). Yet I would argue that rock operas can, after all, be classified as a specific typology of narrative concept albums, where multiple singers and characters gather to give birth to an almost cinematic narration. Nowadays, an artist that relies a lot on this formula is Arjen Anthony Lucassen, the Dutch prog musician responsible for the works of many bands (or, I should say: projects), including Ayreon. All Ayreon albums tell (mostly sci-fi and fantasy) stories featuring several (sometimes even more than fifteen) singers, usually borrowed from the very highest ranks of the contemporary progressive (and power metal) Olympus. Yet, narrative concept albums do not have to be like this. Albums like Pink Floyd's *The Wall* (1979), Dream Theater's *Metropolis Pt. 2: Scenes from a Memory* (1999), Genesis' *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* (1974), The Who's *Tommy* (1969), Jay-Z's *American Gangster* (2007) and Kendrick Lamar's *Good Kid, M.A.A.D. City* (2012) are all examples of narrative concept albums in which the singing voice is but one. Sometimes, albums of this kind can even be instrumental, like Camel's *The Snow Goose* (1975).

Thematic concept albums can sometimes be more difficult to recognise as such, since they feature no storyline nor recurrent characters, but are instead characterised by a coherent theme that underlies all the songs. They can be little stories not mutually connected but sharing peculiarities like style or inspiration – as it happens in Steven Wilson's *The Raven That Refused to Sing* (2013), a collection of original ghost stories (Burns, 2018), or in *The Bell* (2019) by Iamthemorning, inspired by 19th Century song cycles and dealing with stories inspired by Victorian England art and culture – or a collection of small "song-essays" on a specific topic – like Phideaux Xavier's so-called "Trilogy", which has dealt with ecological themes from 2006 to 2018, or Pink Floyd's *Animals* (1977), with its

vibrant political satire. According to Letts, thematic concept albums can also be “thematic” in another sense, which is more strictly musical. Concept albums can in fact contain several musical themes, leitmotifs or other kinds of recurring musical elements (like specific instruments or “style flags”)³ spread across songs. Links between songs can be provided not only by lyrics, but also by musical elements, although these things regularly go together. Musical recurrences are often motivated by more strictly narrative or thematic reasons, and it would be odd to argue that an album *only* needs to feature recurrent musical traits to be considered a concept album.⁴ Yet this distinction is interesting, because streaming services do not challenge concept albums only, but also the album format in general. As we shall see later, sometimes the track’s belonging to a broader set of songs (a.k.a. album, and not necessarily a conceptual one) is indeed stressed by stylistic features. It is one of the unity-seeking strategies I am going to explore in the second part of the paper.

An Unexpected Turn of Events

Despite all the premises exposed in the first paragraph, something peculiar is happening, as some articles in magazines have been highlighting since the very beginning of the streaming era (Wener, 2006 and, more recently, Lynskey, 2015 or Powers, 2019): not only can we still witness an undying interest for concept albums, but maybe even a new golden age for the same format, since actually many mainstream artists have recently released concept albums – and not rarely very successful ones. Among the most “famous artists which have been releasing” concept albums in the last fifteen years or so we can find Coldplay, Green Day, Kendrick Lamar, Björk, Beyoncé, Daft Punk and Muse, not to mention the perhaps less known but still very popular Aurora, Bring Me the Horizon, Gorillaz, Nightwish, Angels and Airwaves, The Ocean, Primus, Alter Bridge, Within Temptation, Arcade Fire. Of course, a lot of minor artists coming from the post-progressive realm have been releasing plenty of concept albums these days as well, with notably some of the progressive metal main acts – like Riverside and Pain of Salvation – producing almost exclusively concept albums throughout their entire careers, but this is less surprising, since it is somehow expected from post-progressive artists to carry on features that are typical (or stereotypical) of their parent-genre.

What is probably most important about the reliance on the (concept) album format – and this is especially true when it comes to concept albums – is the capa-

³ A style flag is, according to Philip Tagg’s analytical model (2012, pp. 522–528), a musical element that immediately recalls its belonging to a specific genre of music.

⁴ In this sense, I think it is not wrong to state, together with Borders, that after all “the sequence of related songs that became known as the ‘concept album’ had revealed itself a literary rather than a musical form” (Borders, 2001, p. 125). Lyrics are central to concept albums, and even those which are instrumental (e.g. the aforementioned *The Snow Goose*) have to contextualise the music using song titles and extra-musical references (in the *The Snow Goose*’s case, Paul Gallico’s novel of the same name).

bility of generating broader narrative worlds surrounding the music. The album is a “world-builder” (Olivier, 2018) and can sometimes inspire a whole “concept spectacle” (Burns, 2016), thus delivering a frame for music videos, short films, live concert sceneries and whatever else one might think of – just like one of the most ambitious conceptual productions from the past, Pink Floyd’s *The Wall*, has taught us.⁵ So, this is probably the main reason why concept albums have not given up fighting against the streaming yet – and it is also why they are still capable of fascinating at least a part of the audience. Besides, every album is the portrait of a period of its author’s life. It is not difficult to imagine that there might be something on a psychological level leading many musicians to agglomerating an album’s tracks following a certain logic. If we do not take only the narrative declination into consideration, concept albums can be understood more broadly as albums in which their creator(s) underline(s) the internal coherence of the songs, sometimes explicitly and sometimes more implicitly. What I mean by this is that concept albums can be appealing not only for audiences, but might also come quite naturally out of their creator’s minds, as a way of giving unity (and often additional significance) to songs that are often connected *in the first place*, as they spring out of the same sources of inspiration and experiences.⁶ Yet it remains difficult to determine where to draw the line between a concept album and a standard album organised according to any kind of rationale.

Getting back to the main point of the discussion, while some articles argue in favour of a resurgence of the concept album format (Lynskey, 2015; Powers, 2019; Wener, 2006), others are more convinced that such a format is doomed, together with the album format in general (Hiller & Walter, 2015; Olivier, 2018). While it is impossible to predict the future, we can surely state the persistence of interest for such a format despite all the expectations, and some easily retrievable statistics (in the absence of more precise inquiries) can support my statement. In fact, using the Google “Trends” utility, you can easily find out how frequently a term has been searched on Google within a given time frame. The results for my query (Fig. 1) about the term “concept album” show no significant drop of interest in the term from 2004 to the present: there are some peaks here and there – especially in 2004/05 – but today’s values are not very different from those of 2007/08, for instance. If you confront these results with the “trends” about the word “CD” (Fig. 2) you get an idea of what a real drop in interest is. Curiously, among the related terms we can find BTS, a South-Korean boy band that released several concept albums, demonstrating that even the younger audience is still willing to engage with music that implies a wider narrative or thematic frame, and might approach a “new” way of organising music via kinds of music that are most familiar to them.

⁵This eclectic, intertextual and transmedial nature of the album’s world-building power is the main reason why it is necessary to employ an interdisciplinary approach in the study of such cultural products.

⁶From this same perspective, it is easy to understand why – using Letts’ words – for such artists “the song sequence is no longer an indifferent organizational aspect, but a prime location of meaning and significance” (Letts, 2010, p. 12).



Figure 1. Google queries 2004–2021 for the term ‘concept album’



Figure 2. Google queries 2004–2021 for the term ‘CD’

Given this general context, I would now like to focus on some case studies capable of highlighting four contemporary ways of trying to keep the unicity of the concept album as musical *Werk* and world-builder alive. That is: how do artists not only swim against the stream (in every sense of the word) and still create concepts in the age of atomisation, but also take advantage of the digital context to deliver unique musical and conceptual experiences? As you shall read, some of the ways I am going to highlight are more alike to acts of resistance, while others are more interested in exploiting the creative affordances of contemporary media. So, it is not just about keeping an old musical form/organisation alive, but also about exploring other ways of building narrative and thematic worlds in a digital context, thus challenging the atomisation of listening. Thus, I would like to focus more on what the digital era can inspire in the creative minds that are willing to embrace a new world of affordances – instead of singing litanies to a supposedly long-lost golden era of music swapped away by streaming services.

Type 1: Transmedial Concepts

The first form of the concept album survival is transmedial. Here we need to go beyond the musical text and take into account other surrounding media that contribute to the world-building process (Corbella, 2015).⁷ By doing so, artists can go beyond the single song and offer the fans transmedial worlds

⁷For transmedial narration more in general, see Thon, 2016 or Ryan, 2014.

definitely worth exploring. It works the same way Lori Burns (2016) described in her article on Coldplay's *MyloXyloto*, but here I am going to use two different examples, probably more linked with the digital dimension.

Let us start with Wilson. His album *Hand. Cannot. Erase* (2015)⁸ is a narrative concept album loosely inspired by the story of Joyce Carol Vincent, a British woman who, despite her popularity among friends, died alone in her city apartment in 2003, without anyone noticing her death until three years later (Simon, 2015). Lyrics are not the only means Wilson has used to tell his version of the story – which is overall much more introspective, as the protagonist reflects on her tendency to isolate herself from other people, recalling episodes from her past, and finally she apparently decides to “disappear” (whatever it might mean exactly).⁹ First of all, several music videos accompanied (and partly anticipated) the album: the first for the trip-hoppy “Perfect Life” and later for “Routine”, “Happy Returns” and the title track, the latter two featuring the main character of the concept, portrayed by the same actress who was also to be featured in many of the videos screened during the live shows – on the occasion of which the album was played in its entirety.¹⁰ Thanks to the collaboration with the Israeli singer Ninet Tayeb, Wilson was also able to make his female protagonist sing on the song “Routine”, thus creating an even more layered representation of the concept. Yet probably the most interesting feature of *Hand. Cannot. Erase*. is its official website (Wilson, 2015a), which was launched in the middle of the promotional campaign preceding the album's publication and was periodically updated with entries from the protagonist's diary in the form of blog-like posts. Some of the entries were accompanied by photos portraying the characters the fans had already met in the videoclips, edited in such a fashion that they really looked like personal pictures the protagonist had taken at different stages of her life. Despite exploiting some of the possibilities offered by the internet to expand the narrative world created by the album, Wilson also thematises a possible problem related with the digitization of the reality. In an interview (Simon, 2015), he states that the line “Download the life you wish you had” included in the album's lyrics points to the way in which online social networks can often work as anti-social agents, since they only give us the illusion of communication, while we can still be isolated, just like the protagonist of the concept. This first kind of world-building is more akin to an expanded and partly digitised version of classic concept albums. It may be the least innovative way of resisting the dissolution of song organicity, but it works well nevertheless, and also takes advantage of contemporary media to convey its message.

⁸ For an in-depth analysis of the concept, see Burns & McLaren, 2020.

⁹ Some fans have even concluded that the concept's ending might involve aliens, and in this case the disappearance would signify some kind of extra-terrestrial abduction (u/hatton93, 2020), as suggested by the last pictures posted on the album's blog. To try solving the mystery, it is necessary to analyse not only music and lyrics, but also the blog and the deluxe edition package, to say the least (some more theories can be read in u/[deleted], 2020).

¹⁰ All videos are available on YouTube (check Kscope, 2015; Wilson, 2015b; Wilson, 2016 and Kscope, 2016).

A sort of variation on the same theme, but even broader and involving cross-album narratives, comes from the Swedish band Ghost. They focus more on the performative level of the conceptual world-creation, creating albums that are not really conceptual *per se*, but nevertheless situated within a wider narrative frame that lives, once again, mainly on the internet and on the stage. Ghost treat the satanic matter in an unusual fashion, joking about both satanic metal clichés and Catholic traditions and iconography. Their lyrics are pervaded by puns and innuendos, while their music sometimes exasperates the sense of evilness and other times takes the shape of joyous religious celebrations that sound all but satanic. Yet the very thing holding everything together, conceptually, lies mostly outside of the single album's frame. Everyone in the band is disguised as a "Nameless Ghoul" (and also credited as such) except for the leader, Tobias Forge (whose identity was actually unknown until 2017), who is disguised as an anti-pope – or, more recently, a cardinal. Moreover, at the end of every "era" (usually an album-tour cycle) the pope is deposed on stage and replaced by his successor (always portrayed by Forge). Lately things are growing a bit more complicated, as the anti-pope – currently Papa Emeritus IV – is being accompanied by new characters as well, like Papa Nihil or Sister Imperator, all concurring in a larger narrative frame, developing across different albums and different media. The absence of definite identities gives the band the opportunity to play not only with their music, but also with their identities and fictional background stories (Hoad, 2018), building a grotesque diegetic world that has recently colonised the world of short films as well. In fact, Ghost periodically release videos on YouTube in which the stories of the characters are further developed, often contextually to the launch of new singles or the announcement of new tour dates.¹¹ As the band's fame is growing bigger and bigger, Ghost's stage production is also allowing grand sceneries and more sophisticated gags, involving more characters and costumes. A true "concept spectacle" (Burns, 2016), which in this case almost takes the album's place as warden of song unity and world-building operations! Anyway, this does not mean that the unity of the single albums disappears, as every one of them is fictionally sung by a different pope, features quite diverse stylistic traits (e.g. *Opus Eponymous*, sung by an old and reactionary pope, is obscure, moody and rough, while *Prequelle*, sung by a funny and young cardinal, is softer, more poppier, catchier and more song-oriented).¹² Every album is a chapter of a story portrayed in several parallel ways.

Type 2: Intertextual Hints

The second form in which concept albums can find their way to the ears of contemporary listeners is the intertextual one (Lacasse, 2000). Nothing really special is going on here, except maybe for the fact that this is also happening in the very mainstream of music. Indeed, last year's ruler of the Grammys

¹¹ The series of short movies can be watched online (for the first, see Ghost, 2018).

¹² This aspect traces a common ground for this first type and type 4.

When We All Fall Asleep Where Do We Go? (2019) by Billie Eilish is not just a collection of very successful singles like “Bad Guy” or “Bury a Friend”, but also a sort of thematic concept album on the monsters that dwell in our dreams, as a reflection of our weaknesses and fears (Mench, 2019). I argue that the sense of organicity of the album is strongly reinforced not only by the shared themes, but also by some intertextuality we can witness within songs. There is no need to dig very deeply to find bonds between songs that are as strong as mentioning (totally or partially) the title of one song in the lyrics of another one. For instance, “Ilomilo” references “Bury a Friend” with the line “the friends I’ve had to bury they keep me up at night”, while the latter song refers directly to the title of the album, and the closing “Goodbye” directly mentions “All the Good Girls Go to Hell” and “Bad Guy” (but also several other songs, indirectly), also reprising many of the hooks from the entire album (as if it were a sort of epilogue). The songs are thus shouting their proximity to other songs that must be experienced as well, in order to get the full picture of the world built by the album. Small mutual references between songs can, at least partially, fight against fragmentation, taking songs spread across multitudes of playlists back where they originally belonged.

Another variation could be the intertextuality present in most of the albums made by German post-metal band The Ocean. When the severance of all internal bonds between songs seems inevitable, working on the surface of songs can be a solution. The Ocean have been keeping their ecological-geohistorical concept albums together by building a net of cross-references in the titles of the songs. Most of their albums are named after a geological eon (e.g. Precambrian, Phanerozoic), and the songs’ titles follow the sequence of geological eras (e.g. Rhyacian, Stenian) or periods (e.g. Triassic, Pleistocene).¹³ Without even mentioning the presence of cross-reference at a musical and lyrical level (e.g. the “You feel so disconnected” part present in both “Triassic” and “Holocene”), these songs try to stick together starting from the title level. They even dictate the right order in which the listeners should play the songs – as long as they possess a degree in geology. It is enough to know the titles of two songs by The Ocean, to know what a listener should do (and *not do*) with them.

These examples of intertextual bond-building are probably the less relevant among the four because they can be seen, rather, as remainders of an organic conception of the album-*Werk*. They are not really innovative instances of conceptual music which could not exist but in our present digital era, and they are not necessarily ways of resisting the dissolution of the album-form. However, they are still existing modes of building broader contexts around music and tying songs together, in more or less convincing fashions.

¹³ Other times, The Ocean employed other kinds of science-inspired rationales. For instance, *Pelagial* (2013) is organised according to the classification of ocean depth zones, and every song is entitled to one of those zones (e.g. Mesopelagic, Abyssopelagic, Demersal).

Type 3: Album Apps

The third way I would like to briefly present is the interactive one, exemplified by the so called “Album Apps” (or “App-Albums”). Like the first way, and perhaps even more so, this one really takes advantage of the affordances offered by the digital age, by offering to the listener a kind of experience that was not possible prior to our entry into the new era of digitised music. It is a kind of contemporary version of the “open work” we could already find in some of the last century’s avant-garde music (Sa Dias, 2014): not only happenings and interactive live performances, but also music made *for* the record and thus taking advantage of the medium. For instance, records by composers like Costin Miereanu (1975) and Martin Davorin Jagodic (1975) contained specific instructions in the liner notes, explaining how the listener could manipulate or play the disc in particular ways, thus getting access to different versions of the compositions. Today, such things can happen using applications, although this kind of work cannot as easily be exploited by every artist (and this is why I do not have a vast pool of examples from which to choose a couple of case studies), because its creation involves competences and budget that go far beyond what most artists can afford. Of course, cheaper versions of interactivity are possible, like remixing campaigns akin to those launched by Nine Inch Nails (Wikström, 2019) or Pendulum, but this does not necessarily have anything to do with creating narrative worlds or reinforcing the organicity of the album – a thing that is more likely to happen with an album app, which often requires a concept behind its design and its very reason for existence. On the other side, it is more accessible for the wider audience than a traditional open work, and it is thus perhaps possible to predict a future popularisation of the format (Sa Dias, 2014).

The case of Björk’s *Biophilia* (2011) album app is a good example of how an app can brilliantly serve a concept. The application is actually a container for several sub-apps, one for every song on the album (which was also released in traditional formats), with every one of them offering a different way to interact with the concept and structure of the songs (Dibben, 2013). As there is a “mother app”, there is also a “father concept” that justifies the way in which everything works. Once again, we can define it as a thematical concept album, revolving around the relationship between nature, technology and music (*ibid.*). This link is further developed, since Björk’s idea of the touchscreen being a more intuitive way of interacting with music resonates with the thematization of nature and technology, by emphasising the “instinctive” element via the interaction with a piece of highly developed technology (*ibid.*). The way in which the interaction is possible often involves natural elements, like crystals and constellations, in the design of the apps, and of course such choices are related with the lyrics of every song, in a general attempt to increase the interest of people in music-making (Sa Dias, 2014). In addition to this, the album’s organicity has been emphasised outside the app’s domain as well, namely by the costumes used by Björk on stage, and by the concert film later to be distributed in theatres.

In this way, potentially every album is a unique concretisation of an aesthetic plan and of a way of interacting with the listener, who becomes an integral part

of the musical result. Its potential weakness (if we may call it so) is that this kind of album is probably doomed to live confined within a realm that only partially overlaps with that of standard albums. Fixed versions of the songs can be produced and potentially put into a playlist, but then the interactive nature of the product becomes implicit.

Type 4: Interstylistic Bindings

The last way in which the concept album survives in the contemporary scene I would like to present here is the one I call “interstylistic”, and has more to do with the musical material itself. There are certain artists – like the Scandinavian bands Pain of Salvation and Ulver – that recreate their sound basically from draft every time they release a new album. I am not saying that they do this to deliberately strengthen the organicity of their albums (which are always concept albums in the case of Pain of Salvation, but the same cannot be said in Ulver’s), yet that is what actually happens. Pain of Salvation started the transformation process with the album *Be* (2004), a very eclectic album featuring an orchestra alongside metal, liturgical, rap, ethnic (etc.) elements. Its follow-up, *Scarsick* (2007) featured a more straightforward selection of influences, ranging from rap and industrial, to punk and even disco music. The two following albums, *Road Salt One* (2010) and *Two* (2011) featured a completely vintage sound, heavily influenced by classic hard rock and blues. *In the Passing Light of Day* (2017) marked the return to more metal-oriented sounds, but in a very different fashion from what the band used to do back in the early 2000s. In such a context, songs from the same album are so different from those taken from other albums, that they almost stick together in an automatic way. They call for a certain kind of organic listening experience – something particularly important since every single Pain of Salvation’s album is a concept album. Something similar is described by Letts when she lists “reoccurring musical elements or orchestration (particularly if the latter is marked as distinct from the band’s overall style as defined over the course of several albums)” (2010, p. 17) as one of the possible factors that create coherence in (concept) albums. Genre is also listed under the features that characterise a musically thematic album (*ibid.*, pp. 12, 14).

Things become a bit more abstract as we move towards the case of Ulver, since only some of their albums can be considered as concept albums, and several of them were made way before streaming services even existed (so it is difficult to argue that this way of doing music was specifically motivated by them, in the first place). Yet Ulver manage to take the transformational process at an even higher level, with even more diversity involved, creating a strong sense of discontinuity between tracks belonging to different albums. In their vast discography (Table 1) we can count six concept albums – although some others might be classified as “resistant” concept albums, and maybe even albums like *Perdition City* (2000) or *Flowers of Evil* (2020) are not so overtly conceptual – but almost every single album sounds like a separate world.

Table 1: Classification of Ulver albums

Year	Album	Main Style(s)	Concept
1993	<i>Vargnatt</i> [Demo]	Black/folk metal	
1995	<i>Bergtatt – Et eeventyri 5 capitlet</i>	Atmospheric black metal	Narr.
1996	<i>Kveldssanger</i>	Neofolk	No
1997	<i>Nattens madrigal</i>	Lo-fi black metal	Them.
1998	<i>Themes from William Blake's 'The Marriage of Heaven and Hell'</i>	Industrial	Them.
1999	<i>Metamorphosis</i> [EP]	Electronica	
2000	<i>Perdition City: Music to an Interior Film</i>	Electronica	Them.
2001	<i>Silence Teaches You How to Sing</i> [EP]	Electronica/ambient/glitch	
2001	<i>Silencing the Singing</i> [EP]	Electronica/ambient/glitch	
2002	<i>Lyckantropen Themes</i> [Original Soundtrack]	Electronica/ambient	
2003	<i>A Quick Fix of Melancholy</i> [EP]	Experimental	
2003	<i>Svidneger</i> [Original Soundtrack]	Experimental	
2005	<i>Blood Inside</i>	Experimental rock	No
2007	<i>Shadows of the Sun</i>	Experimental ambient	No
2011	<i>Wars of the Roses</i>	Experimental rock	No
2012	<i>Childhood's End</i> [Covers]	Classic rock	
2013	<i>Messe I.X-VI.X</i>	Orchestral/ambient	No
2014	<i>Terrestrials</i> [with Sunn O))))]	Dark ambient/drone	
2016	<i>ATGCLVLSSCAP</i>	Experimental ambient	No
2016	<i>Riverhead</i> [Original Soundtrack]	Dark ambient	
2017	<i>The Assassination of Julius Caesar</i>	Synthpop	Them.
2018	<i>Sic Transit Gloria Mundi</i> [EP]	Synthpop	
2019	<i>Drone Activity</i>	Dark ambient/drone	No
2020	<i>Flowers of Evil</i>	Synthpop	Them.

To summarise, the first three studio albums (1995–1997) explore two different sides of the black metal realm (the soft and folk one in *Kveldssanger* vs the heavy and distorted one in *Nattens madrigal*), starting by putting them both together (*Bergtatt*). With *Themes...* (1998) there is the first major shift, and the kind-of-industrial result remains pretty much a *unicum* in Ulver’s discography. The year after, Ulver opened a new and relatively long phase (1999–2002) based on electronic elements: *Perdition City* (2000) is the only studio album from this period, surrounded by three EPs and one original soundtrack. The phase I labelled as “experimental” (2003–2011) is actually all but static, since the three albums I grouped there sound actually quite different one from the others. Their being not easily subject to categorisation is what keeps them together in my list. *ATGCLVLSSCAP* (2016), though belonging to a later era, is much more alike to those albums than to the other albums released around the same time by the band. After a cover album in 2012, Ulver began (2013–2020) to explore several kinds of ambient possibilities on the one side, and their own way of making pop-oriented music on the other. This way, most of the albums can be considered as conceptual, as was *Pet Sounds*. There is not necessarily a story nor a theme binding every song together, but rather a coherent sonic plan, a strong aesthetic vision building a world – this time not diegetic, but musical. Could “Aesthetic concept albums” fit in the Letts’ classification?

Conclusions

The musical landscape is changing, no doubt about it. With it, our ways of listening to music are changing too. Yet listening to situational or mood-oriented playlists keeps us in a familiar territory, where songs are grouped following a certain logic, criterion, rationale. There is still a possibility that younger generations will grow up knowing what it means to understand songs under the light of a broader context. Music-zapping is not the only way we can listen to music, and streaming services often try to deliver to the listener sets of songs organised in a way that can be considered meaningful. Yet this is but the vestibule of what can happen, in terms of building broader signification via the binding of more songs, even in the age of fragmentation and fluidification. The examples I briefly described in this paper are but a few of the possible instances of meaningful album organisation happening nowadays (and even more are yet to come). Although the album format has become unnecessary, apparently even unprofitable, there are still reasons why people keep their interest for listening and creating complex and layered groupings of songs. After all, playlists *are* songs grouped according to a specific rationale, so people are perhaps even more familiar with this way of doing things, nowadays. Given this, many artists could conceive their albums in the same way, and since they are releasing a group of songs, why not make sense of them as a whole? Why not make a concept album?

Streaming and concept albums are not mutually incompatible, and my brief overview should have demonstrated something in favour of this idea. Streaming is more akin to a *challenge* for concept albums, but this does not imply that one

of the two must lose. Indeed, albums can find even more diverse forms of being unitary, organic and meaningful, and develop their forms while the digitization process is developing new affordances and challenges as well. What is most important here is that we, as listeners, remain curious and willing to explore the background and context of songs found in playlists, discovering forms of musical meaning that go beyond the fragmentation that is the most obvious consequence of streaming services (which should, maybe, do more to foster this kind of attitude). The success of many mainstream albums mentioned above is evidence that this model can work. It is still interesting to make an album capable of creating thematic bonds, narrative worlds or just a strong aesthetic synergy between songs, and actually the possibilities for doing so are nowadays greater than ever, and the very end of the generic album as a standard for musical distribution will only make the surviving (and thoughtfully organised) examples more special and potentially meaningful. When making an album will stop being an obvious choice, deciding to make one will carry a specific meaning and denote the presence of a precise “conceptual” intention in the artist’s plans.

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