

Another Grey World:  
Darkstar, James Blake, Kanye West, Drake and 'Party  
Hauntology'

'It's a really grey-sounding synth, really organic and grainy. We call them "swells" – where synthesisers start quite minimal and then develop into a huge chord, before progressing. I felt like it wouldn't be right if we just carried on with that dayglo Hyperdub sound of a couple of years ago. I mean I love those songs, but it already feels like a lifetime away.' I felt vindicated when I read these remarks of Darkstar's James Young in an interview with Dan Hancox. When I first heard the album about which Young is talking – 2010's *North* – the phrase that came to my mind was 'Another Grey World'. The landscape of *North* felt like the verdant Max Ernst forest of Eno's *Another Green World* become ash.

. . . *with winter ahead of us*

The depressive's world is black and/ or white, (you only have to remember the covers of Joy Division's *Unknown Pleasures* and *Closer*), but *North* does not (yet) project a cold world entirely swathed in snow. *North* is the direction that the album is heading towards, not a destination it has reached. Its landscape is colourless rather than black, its mood tentative – it is grey as in unresolved, a grey area. This is an album defined by its negative capability of remaining in doubts, disquiet and dissatisfactions that it is unable to name. It is grey as in The Cure's 'All Cats Are Grey' from *Faith*, a record that stood between the spidery psychedelia of *Seventeen Seconds* and the unrelieved darkness of *Pornography*. Yet *North* is ultimately too jittery to muster the glacial fatalism of *Faith* but what *North* has in common with The Cure's great records is the sense of total immersion in a mood. It is a work that came out of method immersion: Young told Dan Hancox that, as they recorded *North*, the group had listened obsessively to Radiohead, Burial, the Human League and the first

album by Orchestral Manouevres in the Dark. The record demands the same kind of involvement, which is perhaps why some found it unengaging. On a casual listen, the very unresolved quality of the tracks could seem simply undercooked. James Buttery's vocals could come off as limp, anaemic. In addition, many were disappointed by Darkstar's failure to provide an album full of the 'robotic 2-step' that they had invented on 'Aidy's Girl is a Computer'. In fact, they made the robotic 2-step album but ditched it, dissatisfied with its lack of ambition. (This wholly completed album that was never released is one of several parallels with Burial.) 'Aidy's Girl is a Computer' apart, if you heard *North* without knowing the history, you wouldn't assume any connection with dubstep. At the same time, *North* isn't straightforwardly a return to a pre-dance sound. It is more a continuation of a certain mode of electronic pop that was prematurely terminated sometime in the mid-80s: like New Order if they hadn't abandoned the sleek cybernetic mausoleum that Martin Hannett built for them on *Movement*.

Except, of course, that it is not possible to simply continue that trajectory as if nothing had happened. Darkstar acknowledge the present only negatively. It impinges on their music in perhaps the only way it can, as a failure of the future, as a temporal disorder that has infected the voice, causing it to stutter and sibilate, to fragment into strange slithering shards. Part of what separates Darkstar from their synthpop forebears is the fact that the synthesiser no longer connotes futurity. But Darkstar are not retreating from a vivid sense of futurity – because there is no such futurity from which they could retreat. This becomes clear when you compare the Darkstar cover of ‘Gold’ to the Human League original. It’s not just that one is no more futuristic than the other; it’s that *neither* are futuristic. The Human League track is clearly a superseded futurism, while the Darkstar track seems to come after the future.

It’s this sense of living in an interregnum, that makes *North* so (un)timely. Where Burial made contact with the secret sadness underlying the boom, Darkstar articulate

the sense of foreboding that is everywhere after the economic crash of 2008. *North* is certainly full of references to lost companionship: the album can be read as an oblique take on a love affair gone wrong.

*Our fate's not to share ...*

*The connection between us gone ...*

But the very focus on the love couple rather than the rave massive is itself symptomatic of a turn inward. In a discussion that Simon Reynolds and I had about *North* shortly after it was released, Reynolds argued that it was a mistake to talk as if rave was bereft of emotion. Rave was a music saturated with affect, but the affect involved wasn't associated with romance or introspection. The introspective turn in 21st century (post)dance music was therefore not a turn towards emotion, it was a shift from collectively experienced affect to privatised emotions. There was an intrinsic and inevitable sadness to this

inward turn, regardless of whether the music was officially sad or not. The twinning of romance and introspection, love and its disappointments, runs through 20th century pop. By contrast, dance music since disco offered up another kind of emotional palette, based in a different model of escape from the miseries of individual selfhood.

The 21st century has often felt like the comedown after a speed binge, or the exile back into privatised selfhood, and the songs on *North* have the jittery clarity of Prozac withdrawal.

It's significant that most of the digital interference on *North* is applied to James Buttery's voice. Much of the vocal sounds as if it has been recorded on a shaky mobile phone connection. I'm reminded of Franco Berardi's arguments about the relationship between informational overload and depression. Berardi's argument is not that the dot.com crash caused depression, but the reverse: the crash was caused by the excessive strain put on people's nervous systems by new

informational technologies. Now, more than a decade after the dot.com crash and the density of data has massively increased. The paradigmatic labourer is now the call centre worker – the banal cyborg, punished whenever they unplug from the communicative matrix. On *North*, James Buttery, afflicted by all manner of digital palsies, sounds like a cyborg whose implants and interfaces have come loose, learning to be a man again, and not liking it very much.

*North* is like Kanye West's 2008 album *808s and Heartbreak* with all the gloss removed. There is the same method melancholia, the same anchoring in early 80s synthpop, explicitly flagged in *808*'s case by the cover design's echo of Peter Saville's sleeves for New Order's *Blue Monday* and *Power, Corruption and Lies*. The opening track 'Say You Will' sounds like it has been worked up out of the crisp synthetic chill of Joy Division's 'Atmosphere' and the funereal drum tattoo of New Order's 'In A Lonely Place'. As with *North*, though, the 80s parallels are disrupted by the digital

effects used on the voice. *808s and Heartbreak* pioneered the use of Auto-Tune, which would subsequently come to dominate R&B and hip-hop from the late 00s onwards. In a sense, the conspicuous use of Auto-Tune – that is to say, its use as an effect, as opposed to its official purpose as a device to correct a singer's pitch – was a 90s throwback, since this was popularised by Cher on her 1998 single 'Believe'. Auto-Tune is in many ways the sonic equivalent of digital airbrushing, and the (over) use of the two technologies (alongside the increasing prevalence of cosmetic surgery) result in a look and feel that is hyperbolically enhanced rather than conspicuously artificial. If anything is the signature of 21st century consumer culture, is this feeling of a digitally upgraded normality – a perverse yet ultra-banal normality, from which all flaws have been erased.

On *808s and Heartbreak*, we hear the sobs in the heart of the 21st century pleasure dome. Kanye's lachrymose android shtick reaches its maudlin depths on the astonishing 'Pinocchio Story'. This is the kind of



Auto-Tuned lament you might expect neo-Pinocchio and android-Oedipus David from Spielberg's *AI* (2001) to sing; a little like Britney Spears's 'Piece Of Me', you can either hear this as the moment when a commodity achieves self-consciousness, or when a human realises he or she has become a commodity. It's the soured sound at the end of the rainbow, an electro as desolated as Suicide's infernal synth-opera 'Frankie Teardrop'.

A secret sadness lurks behind the 21st century's forced smile. This sadness concerns hedonism itself, and it's no surprise that it is in hip-hop – a genre that has become increasingly aligned with consumerist pleasure over the past 20-odd years – that this melancholy has registered most deeply. Drake and Kanye West are both morbidly fixated on exploring the miserable hollowness at the core of super-affluent hedonism. No longer motivated by hip-hop's drive to conspicuously consume – they long ago acquired anything they could have wanted – Drake and West instead dissolutely cycle through easily available pleasures, feeling a combination

of frustration, anger, and self-disgust, aware that something is missing, but unsure exactly what it is. This hedonist's sadness – a sadness as widespread as it is disavowed – was nowhere better captured than in the doleful way that Drake sings, 'we threw a party/ yeah, we threw a party,' on *Take Care*'s 'Marvin's Room'.

It's no surprise to learn that Kanye West is an admirer of James Blake. There's an affective as well as sonic affinity between parts of Kanye's *808s and Heartbreak* and *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* and Blake's two albums. You might say that Blake's whole MO is a partial re-naturalisation of the digitally manipulated melancholy Kanye auditioned on *808s*: soul music after the Auto-Tune cyborg. But liberated from the penthouse-prison of West's ego, unsure of itself, caught up in all kinds of impasses, the disaffection languishes listlessly, not always even capable of recognizing itself as sadness.

You might go so far as to say that the introspective turn reached a kind of conclusion with Blake's 2013

album *Overgrown*. In his transformation from dubstep to pop, Blake had gone from digitally manipulating his own voice to becoming a singer; from constructing tracks to writing songs. The initial motivation for Blake's approach to the song no doubt came from Burial, whose combination of jittery 2-step beats and R&B vocal samples pointed the way to a possible vision of 21st century pop. It was as if Burial had produced the dub versions; now the task was to construct the originals, and that entailed replacing the samples with an actual vocalist.

Listening back to Blake's records in chronological sequence is like hearing a ghost gradually assume material form; or it's like hearing the song form (re)coalescing out of digital ether. A track such as 'I Only Know (What I Know Now)' from the *Klavierwerke* EP is gorgeously insubstantial – it's the merest ache, Blake's voice a series of sighs and unintelligible pitch-shifted hooks, the production mottled and waterlogged, the arrangement intricate and fragile, conspicuously

inorganic in the way that it makes no attempt to smooth out the elements of the montage. The voice is a smattering of traces and tics, a spectral special effect scattered across the mix. But with Blake's self-titled debut album, something like traditional sonic priorities were restored. The reinvention of pop that his early releases promised was now seemingly given up, as Blake's de-fragmented voice moved to the front of the mix, and implied or partially disassembled songs became 'proper' songs, complete with un-deconstructed piano and organ. Electronics and some vocal manipulation remained, but they were now assigned a decorative function. Blake's blue-eyed soul vocals, and the way that his tracks combined organ (or organ-like sounds) with electronica, made him reminiscent of a half-speed Steve Winwood.

Just as with Darkstar's *North*, Blake's turn to songs met with a mixed response. Many who were enthusiastic about the early EPs were disappointed or mildly dismayed by *James Blake*. Veiling and implying an

object is the surest route to producing the impression of sublimity. Removing the veils and bringing that object to the fore risks de-sublimation, and some found Blake's actual songs unequal to the virtual ones his early records had induced them into hallucinating. Blake's voice was as cloyingly overpowering as it was non-specific in its feeling. The result was a quavering, tremulous vagueness, which was by no means clarified by lyrics that were similarly allusive/elusive. The album came over as if it were earnestly entreating us to feel, without really telling us what it was we were supposed to be feeling. Perhaps it's this emotional obliqueness that contributes to what Angus Finlayson, in his review of *Overgrown* for FACT, characterised as the strangeness of the songs on *James Blake*. They seemed, Finlayson said, like 'half-songs, skeletal place-markers for some fuller arrangement yet to come.' The journey into 'proper' songs was not as complete as it first appeared. It was like Blake had tried to reconstruct the song form with only dub versions or dance mixes as his guide. The

result was something scrambled, garbled, solipsistic, a bleary version of the song form that was as frustrating as it was fascinating. The delicate insubstantiality of the early EPs had given way to something that felt overfull. It was like drowning in a warm bath (perhaps with your wrists cut).

On Blake's albums, there is a simultaneous feeling that the tracks are both congested and unfinished, and that incompleteness – the sketchy melodies, the half-hooks, the repeated lines that play like clues to some emotional event never disclosed in the songs themselves – may be why they eventually get under your skin. The oddly indeterminate – irresolute and unresolved – character of Blake's music gives it the quality of gospel music for those who have lost their faith so completely that they have forgotten they ever had it. What survives is only a quavering longing, without object or context, Blake coming off like an amnesiac holding on to images from a life and a narrative that he cannot recover. This negative capability means that *Overgrown* is like an

inversion of the oversaturated high-gloss emotional stridency of chart and reality TV pop, which is always perfectly certain of what it is feeling.

Yet there's an unconvincing – or perhaps unconvinced – quality to so much of mainstream culture's hedonism now. Oddly, this is most evident in the annexing of R&B by club music. When former R&B producers and performers embraced dance music, you might have expected an increase in euphoria, an influx of ecstasy. But the reverse has happened, and it's as if many of the dancefloor tracks are pulled down by a hidden gravity, a disowned sadness. The digitally-enhanced uplift in the records by producers such as Flo-Rida, Pitbull and will.i.am is like a poorly photoshopped image or a drug that we've hammered so much we've become immune to its effects. It's hard not to hear these records' demands that we enjoy ourselves as thin attempts to distract from a depression that they can only mask, never dissipate.

In a brilliant essay on The Quietus website, Dan Barrow analysed the tendency in a slew of chartpop over the past few years – including Jay-Z and Alicia Keys’s ‘Empire State of Mind’, Kesha’s ‘Tik Tok’, Flo Rida’s ‘Club Can’t Even Handle Me Yet’ – ‘to give the listener the pay-off, the sonic money-shot, as soon and as obviously as possible’. Pop has always delivered sugar-sweet pleasure, of course, but, Barrow argues, there’s a tyrannical desperation about this new steroid-driven pop. It doesn’t seduce; it tyrannises. This, Barrow argues, is ‘a crude, overdetermined excess, as if pop were forcing itself back to its defining characteristics – chorus hooks, melody, “accessibility” – and blowing them up to cartoonish size.’ There’s an analogy to be drawn between this artificially inflated pop and Berardi’s discussion of internet pornography and drugs such as Viagra, which, similarly, dispense with seduction and aim directly at pleasure. According to Berardi, remember, we are so overwhelmed by the incessant demands of digital communications, we are simply too busy to engage in



arts of enjoyment – highs have to come in a no-fuss, hyperbolic form so that we can quickly return to checking email or updates on social networking sites. Berardi's remarks can give us an angle on the pressures that dance music has been subject to over the last decade. Whereas the digital technology of the 80s and 90s fed the collective experience of the dancefloor, the communicative technology of the 21st century has undermined it, with even clubbers obsessively checking their smartphones. (Beyoncé and Lady Gaga's 'Telephone' – which sees the pair begging a caller to stop bugging them so they can dance – now seems like a last failed attempt to keep the dancefloor free of communicational intrusion.)

Even the most apparently uncomplicated calls to enjoyment can't fully suppress a certain sadness. Take Katy Perry's 'Last Friday Night'. On the face of it, the track is a simple celebration of pleasure ('Last Friday night/ Yeah we maxed our credit cards/ And got kicked out of the bar'). Yet it's not hard to hear something

Sisyphean, something purgatorial, in the song's evocation of a (not so) merry-go-round of pleasure that Perry and her friends can never get off: 'Always say we're gonna stop/ This Friday night/ Do it all again . . .'

Played at half-speed, this would sound as bleak as early Swans. David Guetta's 'Play Hard' calls up a similarly interminable repetition. Pleasure becomes an obligation that will never let up – 'us hustler's work is never through/ We work hard, play hard' – and hedonism is explicitly paralleled with work: 'Keep partyin' like it's your job'. It's the perfect anthem for an era in which the boundaries between work and non-work are eroded – by the requirement that we are always-on (that, for instance, we will answer emails at any hour of the day), and that we never lose an opportunity to marketise our own subjectivity. In a (not at all trivial) sense, partying *is* now a job. Images of hedonistic excess provide much of the content on Facebook, uploaded by users who are effectively unpaid workers, creating value for the site without being remunerated for it. Partying is a job in

another sense – in conditions of objective immiseration and economic downturn, making up the affective deficit is outsourced to us.

Sometimes, a free-floating sadness seeps into the grain of the music itself. On their blog No Good Advice, the blogger J describes the use of a sample from Kaoma's 1989 track 'Lambada' on Jennifer Lopez's 2011 hit 'On The Floor': 'The snatch of 'Lambada' functions as a buried-memory trigger, a sort of party hauntology that lends the song a slight edge of wistful, nostalgic sadness.' There is no reference to sadness in the official text of the track, which is a simple exhortation to dance. So it's as if the sorrow comes from outside, like traces of the waking world incorporated into a dream, or like the grief which creeps into all the embedded worlds in *Inception* (2010).

'Party hauntology' might even be the best name for the dominant 21st century form of pop, the transnational club music produced by Guetta, Flo-Rida, Calvin Harris and will.i.am. But the debts to the past, the failure of the

future are repressed here, meaning that the hauntology takes a disavowed form. Take a track like the Black Eyed Peas' immensely popular 'I Gotta Feeling'. Although 'I Gotta Feeling' is ostensibly an optimistic record, there's something forlorn about it. Perhaps that's because of will.i.am's use of Auto-Tune – there seems to be Sparky's Magic Piano-like machinic melancholy intrinsic to the technology itself, something which Kanye drew out rather than invented on *808s and Heartbreak*. In spite of the track's declamatory repetitions, there's a fragile, fugitive quality about the pleasures 'I Gotta Feeling' so confidently expects. That's partly because 'I Gotta Feeling' comes off more like a memory of a past pleasure than an anticipation of a pleasure that is yet to be felt. The album from which the track comes, *The E.N.D. (The Energy Never Dies)* was – like its predecessor, *The Beginning* – so immersed in Rave that it effectively operated as an act of homage to the genre. *The Beginning*'s 'Time (Dirty Bit)' could have actually passed for a Rave track from the early 90s – the

crudeness of its cut and paste montage recalls the ruff ‘n’ ready textures that samplers would construct at that time, and its borrowing from *Dirty Dancing*’s ‘(I’ve Had) The Time of my Life’ was just the kind of subversion/sublimation of cheesy source material that Rave producers delighted in. Yet, the Black Eyed Peas’ Rave-appropriations didn’t function so much as revivals of Rave as denials that the genre had ever happened in the first place. If Rave hasn’t yet happened, then there is no need to mourn it. We can act as if we’re experiencing all this for the first time, that the future is still ahead of us. The sadness ceases to be something we feel, and instead consists in our temporal predicament itself, and we are like Jack in the Gold Room of the Overlook Hotel, dancing to ghost songs, convincing ourselves that the music of yesteryear is really the music of today.