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**PLASTIC BEACH UTOPIA:  
GORILLAZ' MULTIMEDIA  
CONCEPT PROJECT IN THE  
CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY  
POPULAR MUSIC CULTURE**

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## **PLASTIC BEACH UTOPIA: GORILLAZ' MULTIMEDIA CONCEPT PROJECT IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY POPULAR MUSIC CULTURE<sup>2</sup>**

The paper aims to provide analysis of the most general problems of the music industry in the digital age. It poses a question about the possibility of innovation and conceptual development in contemporary popular music, overflowed with retromania. A growing popularity of such form as a “concept album” and its transformation into concept multimedia projects is regarded as a positive sign of the changes in music production and distribution. Detailed cultural analysis of one particular case, the multimedia concept project by the British band *Gorillaz*, demonstrates how a substantial cultural and musical innovation can exist today in the framework of popular entertainment. The last studio album by *Gorillaz*, called *Plastic Beach* (2010) works with the concept of Utopia and utopian imagery, presenting music as a space for free and meaningful collaboration among musicians and for the creation of the diverse community of listeners.

Keywords: popular music, cultural studies, Utopia, concept album, multimedia projects, *Gorillaz*

JEL Classification: Z.

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Interviewer: At one point you had discussed doing a *Gorillaz* movie. Is that something that you'd still like to do?

Jamie Hewlett: I think we're doing a movie, but in our own way. It's not two hours long at the cinema. It's a movie that plays out over the next year, and you have to catch all the different scenes by going to concerts and going online and seeing videos and stringing it together.

Entertainment Weekly, 4.06.2010<sup>3</sup>

### ***Popular music: the dimensions of uncertainty***

The main objective of this paper is to provide a thoroughly examined case study of one particular multimedia music project in the context of the broad discussion on the changes in contemporary music industry and, what is even more important, on the actual problems of contemporary popular music as a cultural practice and specific discourse. A tendency to describe the current state of affairs in popular music with the concept of "crisis" is, apparently, typical of any critical analysis at least since the last third of the twentieth century. Nearly every music genre and style has been accused of having exhausted means of expression, turned into a mockery of itself, become totally commercialized, "lost its roots," fallen under the sway of exotic influences, etc. These and other criticisms have, since the 1960s, proven to be a rather productive critical tool encouraging music to evolve, develop in unexpected directions. Among other tasks, this "built-in" critical function tests the musical material for its ability to adequately reflect social and cultural changes. However, the situation of the last 15 years, both in institutional terms and in terms of style and content, has forced observers and participants of this cultural practice to speak of a crisis of different scale, perhaps, even a turning point.

New ways of distributing music (digital technologies and internet) have had an unprecedented impact on the entire organization of this particular cultural field. Music industry suffers losses caused by slumping sales of CD albums and restructuring of consumption. As a result, the industry prefers to invest into fewer amount of the most commercially profitable projects: into already

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<sup>3</sup> Simon Vozick-Levinson. Gorillaz creators Damon Albarn and Jamie Hewlett on the cartoon band's past, present, and future: The Music Mix Q&A. Entertainment Weekly. <http://music-mix.ew.com/2010/06/04/gorillaz-characters-interview/>

known and widely promoted pop-stars, into descendants of the popular TV-shows like X Factor and American Idol, into somehow “containable” sales of singles and hit songs via the biggest internet stores (see, for example, Wikstrom 2005, Baym 2010, Hracs 2012, Arditi 2014). Musicians, especially those who are not signed to the industry’s majors, experience difficulties with both financing their work and attracting audience’s attention. In addition, they face a problem of changing professional rules: nowadays, a recorded album and a concert tour have switched places on the priority scale. It is no longer a tour that supports a new album, but an album that goes with the tour. Meanwhile, the success of a live performance may depend on the unpredictable circumstances of internet marketing and the of the tickets’ sales (see Young 2011).

The audience finds itself in an equally problematic position. On the one hand, contemporary popular music lovers are the luckiest generation ever: they have at their disposal unlimited internet archives, digital devices, and access to an enormous quantity of music-related information on the internet. On the other hand, they are often overwhelmed by this ocean of words and sounds. The infinitely growing internet provided popular music culture with immense opportunities: a website can be used to promote a band, to help fans follow the news of the favorite genre of music, to let people with similar tastes in music meet, etc. But the danger to lose interest in anything at all goes together with the unlimited opportunities. Torrent users frequently comment on their own chaotic non-stop downloading of music records and on never having time to actually listen to them. Let alone the fact that this democratic user-to-user file sharing activity is mostly considered as illegal and is treated with growing severity by prosecutors in many countries, with the strongest support of the music industry. As one of the recent researches demonstrates, in the period of uncertainty the industry tries to win back part of the money by narrowing the possibilities for musicians and listeners:

Whenever it seems that the Internet can foster equality, big business reasserts its dominance. Nowhere is this clearer than in the music industry's reappropriation of digital technology to sell music on the Internet. <...> Theoretically, file sharing put major record labels on equal ground with independent musicians. By creating an easy-to-use online store and suing file sharers, the major record labels could once again direct consumers to a place where they held the power. While iTunes gives independent musicians more opportunity to distribute music than before online distribution became possible, it lends itself to concentrating power in the major

record labels. The walls that digital distribution broke down have been replaced by distribution barriers in the form of iTunes. (Arditi 2014: 421-422)

Speaking about diversity and the level of innovation in contemporary popular music, many critical observers of the music development note that the last 15 years have not generated a single new music trend comparable to the great stylistic innovations of the past, from progressive rock or punk to hip-hop and electronics. As far as the content is concerned, “the deepest crisis of the music industry over the entire period of its existence” (quoting a well-known Russian-German music journalist: Gorokhov, 2007: 7) goes together with the surge of eclectics, lack of innovation and the general modesty of intentions. For the first time in its history, popular music seems to be looking into the past rather than the future. An influential British musical critic Simon Reynolds calls this phenomenon “retromania.” He coined this word for the characterization of the entire musical decade:

Instead of being about itself, the 2000s has been about every other previous decade happening again all at once: a simultaneity of pop time that abolishes history while nibbling away at the present’s own sense of itself as an era with a distinct identity and feel. Instead of being the threshold to the future, the first ten years of the twenty-first century turned out to be the “Re” Decade. (Reynolds 2011: X-XI)

Reynolds explores at length all obvious expressions of retromania in contemporary popular music culture: reunions of the long inactive bands and their comeback tours; anniversary album reissues; endless imitation and stylization, even by young musicians, of the past styles and genres — without any rethinking, and with much success; the boom of vinyl collecting; the opening of the museums of popular music, and so forth. Besides, Reynolds rightly notes that, for the first time in musical history, it is the twenty-year-olds — a generation usually responsible for innovations in popular music — who now serve as defenders and promoters of retro-strategies:

The very people who you would once have expected to produce (as artists) or champion (as consumers) the non-traditional and the groundbreaking – that’s the group who are most addicted to the past. In demographic terms, it’s the exact same cutting-edge class, but

instead of being pioneers and innovators, they've switched roles to become curators and archivists. The avant-garde is now an arriere-garde. (Reynolds 2011: XX)

Reynolds quotes (not surprisingly) Fredric Jameson and concludes that the intense retromania of the last decade is a legitimate product of our postmodern culture that has taken the form of a total nostalgic pastiche. But for the popular music which has always been deeply enrooted in the culture of its time, this loss of connection to (musically) innovative critical thinking means the loss of one of its important cultural functions. Popular music scenes are oversaturated with names of talented musicians, with updates on new albums and songs, with news about sub-genres and micro-trends. But the deficit of serious musical statements is quite tangible. First, there is the lack of originality and fear of experimentation. It is not coincidental that Reynolds recalls in his book the late 1970s, when the mainstream of pop- and rock scene was defined by such figures as Kate Bush, Peter Gabriel, and David Bowie:

[These artists] were spurred by the desire to create something never heard before. But from the mid-eighties onwards, gradually but with increasing momentum, that changed into an impulse to create something very much heard before, and moreover to do it immaculately, accurately in every last detail. (Reynolds 2011: 176)

Second, a conceptual statement is missing — one that would not only develop musical form, but also relate consciously set goals and objectives to contemporary cultural problems. Having ceased to “belong” to someone as a creative and critical instrument, as it previously belonged to subcultures, with their styles and places, imaginary worlds and ideas of the creation of a better real world, popular music also ceased to be an active participant of the current cultural scene.

### ***“Concept album” as an “assembly point”: from album narratives to the virtual band***

While thinking about this crisis as a general situation in the contemporary popular music field, it is especially important to register all the attempts to restore music to its rights through the process of experimentation with form, content, ways of recording, distribution, presentation and financing. These attempts may not necessarily break the wall that has separated today's popular music from the foregoing tradition, but they contribute to the quest for this contact with it. One of the most visible forms of such experimentation during the last decade has been the return of the concept album. The

term “concept album” is used here in the broad meaning common to the music industry ever since the appearance of *The Beatles’* album *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*: this is not simply a collection of unrelated tracks, but an album organized around a common theme or narrative and claiming to present a consistent statement. This form, previously associated mostly with progressive rock and heavy metal, has become in the 2000s, at the same time, the logical choice for the enforcement of the meaning and coherence of a musical statement, and the equally good point of collection of all new ideas about presentation or distribution of the musical material across different media (see Wener 2006, Letts 2010, Dozal 2012). As one of the research papers on concept albums demonstrates,

concept albums in the digital age have become more focused on communicating a greater immersive experience for the listener through various forms of interaction, which also leads to the concept existing outside of the album's parameters (Dozal 2012).

Concept albums have mostly become concept projects. “Various forms of interaction” today mean different, sometimes quite sophisticated combinations of music and visual material, live performances and online activities, including interactive video, games, iPad applications and “Easter Eggs” for album narratives spread across various media. These forms are explored in some of the most important concept projects of the new millennium: *The Suburbs* (2010) by *Arcade Fire*, *Let England Shake* (2011) by P. J. Harvey, *American Idiot* (2004) by *Green Day*, *Greetings from Michigan* (2003) and *Illinois* (2005) by Sufjan Stephens, *Biophilia* (2011) by Bjork, *Rome* (2011) by Danger Mouse and Daniele Luppi, *30 Seconds to Mars* (2002) by the eponymous band, etc. Behind each of these projects and several other concept albums and projects of a smaller scale there is a concept addressing and connecting together all the stages of production, distribution and presentation. Together with attempts for musical innovation and cultural and political awareness, this conceptual frame makes each of such albums an important event in the contemporary popular music field.

One of the largest concept projects of the 2000s aimed at giving a fully developed critical commentary on the contemporary state of affairs in popular music and in contemporary culture on the whole is the band *Gorillaz*. Notably, the band celebrated its tenth anniversary in 2011: all of its activity took place exactly during this muddled “transitional” decade. This activity includes, for the

moment, three big studio albums, that correspond to the three phases of project development, and also the experimental album *The Fall* recorded on iPad during the tour *Escape to the Plastic Beach* (2010) and given to fans for free, a few collections of B-sides and remixes, a documentary, a book of stories about the cartoon characters (musicians in the band), and much more.

The first album of the band, the eponymous *Gorillaz* (2001), had already elevated the understanding of the “concept album” somewhere up to the previously unreachable levels. Not the concept of the album, but the concept of the group itself was a novelty. Two people: singer and composer Damon Albarn, the former leader of the Brit-pop band *Blur*, and cartoon artist Jamie Hewlett, by then one of the celebrated co-creators of the successful comic *Tank Girl*, combined their efforts to create a unique “virtual band.” It consisted of four cartoon characters, who rapidly acquired not only personal tempers and stories, but also the love of the not-so-virtual audience. The first album by *Gorillaz* was sold over 7 million copies, and band entered into the Guinness Book of Records as “the most successful virtual band in history.” With a little help from their friend Damon Albarn, the cartoon characters: bass guitarist Murdoc Niccals, lead singer 2D, guitarist Noodle and drummer Russel Hobbs, recorded two more studio albums: *Demon Days* (2005) and *Plastic Beach* (2010). Jamie Hewlett provided the characters with history, visual appearance and living space, including that on the website (which for the year 2001 was not a very obvious move). In addition to that, he also furnished the band with the necessary “coolness”: Hewlett’s involvement in the creation of *Gorillaz* is known to have helped Albarn make contacts with the American rap world, which was just as keen on comics and street art, as it was on music (Shirley 2005: 260). In his illustrations and videos for *Gorillaz*, Hewlett quotes numerous works of art, from Banksy stencils to cult movies, such as *Dawn of the Dead*, *Blade Runner* and *Metropolis*; however, his own style is always easily recognizable and undoubtedly original.

The music of *Gorillaz* is hard to characterize unequivocally. This is a multi-genre phenomenon defined by Damon Albarn’s collaboration with dozens of musicians from many different genres and styles, at times totally unexpected. Among others, *Gorillaz* worked with the legendary Cuban singer Ibrahim Ferrer; the veterans of rhythm-and-blues and soul Ike Turner and Bobby Womack; young Swedish electronic band *Little Dragon*; hip-hop musicians *De La Soul*, *Mf Doom* and *Del the Funky Homosapien*, and even with the actor Dennis Hopper who recites the text on the second album, *Demon Days*. The first album was a collection of hit songs, largely influenced by hip-hop and electronic dance rhythms. The second album acquired greater consistency: the messages of the songs were closely connected to such an unexpected influence on “alternative rock” album as gospel

music. A children's choir and the London Community Gospel Choir took part in the recording, while the album contemplated on the modern society's pitiful spiritual state, in songs like *Last Living Souls*, *Every Planet We Reach is Dead*, *Don't Get Lost in Heaven* and *Demon Days*. Although, pop hooks and rap flows remained at their places. The unprecedented eclecticism of the third album, *Plastic Beach*, which even included some fragments of symphonic music, will be discussed later. But all these unexpected and sometimes contradictory elements are always layered on top of Albarn's inventive, engaging, melancholy pop-melodies which combine disparate fragments into a paradoxically recognizable mélange. It is a rare experimental mix which leaves the listeners, as one review of *Plastic Beach* put it, with "a seemingly boundless sense of possibility."<sup>4</sup> Breaking boundaries and expanding creative diversity has always been a pronounced and quite sensible objective of *Gorillaz*' musical collaborations.

Thanks to Damon Albarn's former credits as one of the biggest pop-stars of his generation in Britain, the "virtual band" is signed to one of the majors of the music industry, Parlophone Records (an affiliate of EMI during the years of *Gorillaz* activity, and part of Warner Music Group since 2013). In spite of this fact, it is exactly the current state of the popular music industry that constitutes the primary object of criticism for *Gorillaz*. An experiment in creating a virtual band with virtual celebrities was directed primarily against the institution of manufactured stars, hyped up for commercial success: by the beginning of the 2000s this practice has reached a threatening scale. Albarn as the former leader of the highly successful pop-rock band *Blur* has had a chance to experience all creative and personal limitations imposed by excessive popularity.<sup>5</sup> "Celebrity," "ego," and "manufactured crap" have become three most popular swear words addressed to the music industry by the creative community of *Gorillaz*. Albarn himself was so pleased with the concept of the "virtual band" that, during the few live gigs with the first and second *Gorillaz*' albums, he invariably hid behind the screens onto which cartoon characters were projected, thus acting as a shadow theatre puppet.

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4 Ally Carnwath. *Gorillaz* at the Roundhouse, review. 30.04.2010.

[www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/live-music-reviews/7657144/Gorillaz-at-the-Roundhouse-review.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/music/live-music-reviews/7657144/Gorillaz-at-the-Roundhouse-review.html)

<sup>5</sup> He says revealingly in a TV interview given to Jonathan Ross after the launch of the second *Gorillaz*' album: «Being in a band can make you feel like a cartoon. So – just become a cartoon, accept it». [www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZiN07lah8M&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BZiN07lah8M&feature=related)

Another moving force of this “virtual band” concept was an understanding of multiple unrealized possibilities provided by the growing tendency to visualize popular music on television and by the first attempts to use the internet for communication with fan communities. By then, visuals were actively employed in commercial promotion of bands and performers, but they were rarely used to package the sense-bearing message, thereby tying together content and music. *Gorillaz* not only used images meaningfully. They created the whole new imaginary world, matching all the criteria of a proper world-building (Wolf 2012). It was the universe which, while criticizing the industry and mocking the pop-music scene, provided fans with the space for their own creative imagination<sup>6</sup>. Finally, the ostensible veneer of “flippancy” and “cartoonishness” of the *Gorillaz* project (which from the very beginning got many children “hooked” on as a kind of encyclopedia of quality music and a beautifully animated world<sup>7</sup>) rid the band of the pathos of rock-exclusivity usually connected to the ideas of “speaking from the first person”, “being sincere”, etc. Having transferred the “instance of authority” onto the cartoon characters and having distributed rights for sending messages to the audience between multiple collaborators with their individual styles, voices, and energies, Albarn paradoxically recovered his own freedom of experimentation and the pleasure of combining the unexpected, thus redefining the very notion of possibilities in popular music.

The majority of researchers who analyzed the concept of the virtual band based on the first and second albums give credit to the results *Gorillaz* have achieved via the concept. For example, Lars Eckstein emphasizes Albarn’s and Hewletts’s accomplishment in destroying traditional notions of music authorship:

The crucial innovation of *Gorillaz* is that they manage to experiment rather freely with both romantic and modernist discourses of authenticity, while remaining strictly within the world inhabited by major label commercial music rather than resorting to exclusive avant-gardism... (Eckstein 2009: 243)

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<sup>6</sup> One of the obvious signs of that is the existence of fan fiction about *Gorillaz* fictional characters. See, for example: <https://www.fanfiction.net/cartoon/Gorillaz/>

<sup>7</sup> Participant observation in the *Gorillaz* fan community in 2010–2012 allowed me to establish that a significant percentage of the most active fans of the band are current college students, “hooked” on the virtual universe of animated characters after the launch of first album, that is, at the age of 12-15. Most of the fans keep track of all the artists who have ever collaborated with *Gorillaz*: in this sense, the educational potential of this project has always been significant.

John Richardson, in his detailed analysis of the *Gorillaz*' greatest hit, points out their strife to create "open forms" allowing for a musical variety:

*Clint Eastwood* is characterized therefore by its general piecemeal feel and by the principle of interchangeability that finds its expression on several interlocking levels. Given this significant shift away from the more tightly circumscribed sonic landscapes of Britpop toward an eclectic approach to materials incorporating influences from reggae, hip-hop, punk, dub, and dance styles, it is understandable that critics of Albarn's earlier musical output have responded more favorably to *Gorillaz*. (Richardson 2005: 14).

John Richardson did not yet know how far the "interchangeability" of *Clint Eastwood* would increase during *Gorillaz*' 2010 concert tour, when British grime rappers Kano and Bashy, as well as the West Coast gangsta rapper Snoop Dogg would try out their styles and texts within the same ready-to-use framework. He also did not know what Damon Albarn would tell *The Sun* journalist in the spring 2010 interview while introducing the third album, *Plastic Beach*, and answering questions about the new unbelievable style mixes under the *Gorillaz* brand name. Albarn's words could indeed be considered as the credo of the band on the whole and its artistic director in particular: "If the vibrations are right, anything can work together."<sup>8</sup>

### ***Gorillaz, phase three: Utopia***

A place where everything is arranged well, everyone works together and finds joy in collaboration is, as is well known, called Utopia. This is a space of fair and rational social order, a zone of existential fullness and meaningfulness. The lack of utopian imagination in the modern popular culture was addressed back in 1982 by the eager discoverer of Utopian shores Fredric Jameson in his classical text on science fiction literature (Jameson 1982). But along with this deficiency, another cultural feeling is becoming ever more perceptible. In the most general sense it can be identified as "a longing for Utopia" — a yearning which includes everything from impulses, or a "utopian drive," to the work of genre constructions in literature and cinema<sup>9</sup>. Even Simon

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<sup>8</sup> See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUjmtSULjrs>.

<sup>9</sup> Contemporary utopian studies distinguish between the utopian impulse, typical of many types of human activity, and utopia as a genre, primarily in literature. On this and other distinctions

Reynolds dedicates a whole chapter of his *Retromania* to the phenomenon of “nostalgia for the future,” that is to say, nostalgia for the time when futuristic texts did not leave a reader (or listener or spectator) indifferent and when future was still a subject of discussion and presupposed something unexpected, something different.

It is Jameson again who reminds us in his recent book *Archeologies of the Future* about the goals and objectives of any Utopia:

Utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and on the systemic nature of the social totality, to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence which has not first thrown off Utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet. (Jameson 2007: XII).

Structurally, this combination of radical otherness and totality implies several more indispensable conditions. Utopia is spatial.<sup>10</sup> Utopia has limits: ideally it is an island or an enclave in the existing social fabric, just like it was described five centuries ago. Utopian thinking is critical and binary, it functions according to the principle “what was —what has become” and does not accept half-tones: the ordinary and habitual injustice of the everyday life must be completely eliminated in Utopia, all laws rewritten, all relationships reset. Utopia is communal: the new foundations are intended for all of its free citizens united in a community. Finally, Utopia “has no alternative”, as Jameson states: even when it suffers an inevitable defeat due to one or another deficiency (and deficiency and incompleteness always befall Utopia), its critical potential in regard to the existing order of things is indispensable.

Popular music as well as popular recreation in the broad sense of the word are rather close to the roots of Utopia in general (see, for example, a thoughtful book by Scott A. Lukas on theme parks: Lukas 2008). The ritual effect of collective musical action and the escapist objectives of entertainment contribute to this proximity. Utopian elements are present in the very form of a live concert: this is a place excluded from the everyday routines and blessed by the presence of a star endowing the event with meaning and fullness. The utopian drive of popular music on the whole is

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regarding Utopia and utopias, see: Jameson 1982; Jameson 2007; Sargent 1994; Sargent 2010; Rusen, Fehr, Rieger 2005, etc.

<sup>10</sup> Some social theorists have, by now, learned to conceive of a non-spatial Utopia: such is sociologist Zigmunt Bauman’s critical concept of a consumerist and individualized Utopia of everyday experience (Bauman 2003). But this is rather an exception broadening the concept to an excessive degree.

sometimes described in a similar way, as reputed researcher of popular forms of entertainment Richard Dyer does:

Alternatives, hopes, wishes — these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realized. Entertainment does not, however, present models of utopian worlds... Rather the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies. It presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized. (Dyer 2002: 20)

Finally, utopian dimension of popular culture finds a visible and sensible realization in the communication of fans (regardless of whether they are music or TV series fans). Fans create alternative social communities parallel to everyday life:

“... fandom offers not so much as an escape from reality as an alternative reality whose values may be more humane and democratic than those held by mundane society. Fan culture finds that Utopian dimension within popular culture a site for constructing an alternative culture. <...> Fans, like all of us, inhabit a world where traditional forms of community life are disintegrating, the majority of marriages end in divorce, most social relations are temporary and superficial, and material values often dominate over emotional and social needs. <...> Fans react against those unsatisfying situations, trying to establish a “weekend-only world” more open to creativity and accepting of differences, more concerned with human welfare than with economic advance. (Jenkins 1992: 286-288)

At the “phase three” of their project, embodied first of all in the *Plastic Beach* album and the eponymous tour, *Gorillaz* activated all these utopian impulses and community elements. But it also complemented them with direct Utopian imagery and with some practices that incarnated Utopian attitudes to the most important thing for any band: for the production and presentation of music. Their Utopia of the third album is a fully fledged island (an image and a place recreated with every live concert) where rules of the outside world ceased working. They are intentionally redefined from scratch not only for the sake of general human dignity and equality, although this is an important

precondition for peer collaboration. But primarily these rules are reinvented for the purpose of free and meaningful musical creativity. *Plastic Beach* is a full-scale multimedia concept project constructed with an eye to all contemporary realities of the music industry, but produced against its rules, limitations, and customary ways of the commodification of music.

World Café: Can we now see *Gorillaz* not just as a band but kind of your private creative workshop?

Jamie Hewlett: That's exactly what it's become, I think. The characters have their role to play that allow us to go places and do things we wouldn't normally be allowed to do. And we in turn are able to do things they can't do. But yeah, I mean *Gorillaz* is more like an organization now. A network of musicians, artists, writers, even a few comedians thrown in there as well, so... which means, it gives us the mobility to do whatever we want, really.<sup>11</sup>

Incidentally, the very concept of Utopia plays in the *Plastic Beach* project a role of a secret word acted out in a charade. Having given dozens of interviews during the promotional campaign and live tour, Albarn and Hewlett have never uttered it. From time to time journalists have tried at least to point to elements of “dystopia” (a “negative Utopia”) in the image of a plastic island on the periphery of the (presumably) post-apocalyptic world. The creators of *Gorillaz* did not argue with these interpretations: post-apocalyptic trash science fiction is, indeed, one of the important stylistic resources of *Plastic Beach*. Nevertheless, they were always much happier to talk about the principles of communication in the *Gorillaz* creative community.

But between the artists and the audience there had always been a full understanding of the rules of conduct on the *Plastic Beach*, and of the whole concept. Apparent pleasure, with which the numerous collaborators of the band played together on concert tour, found reflection in the lifted spirits, hopefulness, and the sensation of music hitting just the right spot that the spectators took away from concerts.<sup>12</sup> Damon Albarn had a full right to assert in an interview: “People who come to

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<sup>11</sup> Radio interview “Gorillaz On World Café”. 29.12.2010.  
<http://www.npr.org/2010/12/29/127741494/gorillaz-on-world-cafe?ft=1&f=10001>

<sup>12</sup> For the duration of the live tour, the fan community <http://gorillaz-news.livejournal.com> established the practice of publishing detailed accounts after every gig. These comments, including

see us – they get it completely”.<sup>13</sup> Resources for this deep understanding were successfully provided on the conceptual map of *Plastic Beach*, thus obviating the need for verbal explanations.

What, after all, is this island, where is it situated, what does it look like and why is it plastic? The original concept, responsible both for the album title and for its main, ecological, theme (the destructive human intervention into the natural environment) was coined by Damon Albarn. It grew out of observing omnipresence of plastic trash on the beach in Devon county where the musician spent his vacation. Later an ambivalent dystopian or utopian island of a toxic pink color, in the shape of an atomic cloud, showed up on Jamie Hewlett’s drawings, morphed into a huge model, became the album cover, the space on the internet site<sup>14</sup> (where it can be visited by anyone wishing to do so), and a meeting place of virtual characters in visuals and computer games — in other words, a part of the scrupulously constructed virtual world of *Gorillaz*.



Illustration 1. Album cover (Japanese edition).

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also information on the structure of the audiences and types of reactions, are still available on the internet, as well as comments on amateur videos from concerts posted on YouTube. In addition, the author of the paper relies on personal observations and fan interviews during the two *Gorillaz*’ gigs in London in November 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Video interview with Alan Cross: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ed\\_oDF6SSOU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ed_oDF6SSOU)

<sup>14</sup> See: [www.gorillaz.com](http://www.gorillaz.com).

Simultaneously, the *Plastic Beach*, or Island is also a space of the stage and the auditorium at each of the concerts of the *Gorillaz* world tour: a unique meeting place both for the musicians performing live and for the community of listeners. The scale of musical collaboration at this point turned out to be such as to bring up to sixty musicians onto the stage at once. Over the course of the tour *Gorillaz* played at major international arenas, including the O2 in London and the Madison Square Garden in New York (both containing up to 20,000 people).

Thus, human irresponsibility brought about the destruction of nature: nothing is left in the world except for water and plastic. But plastic is not just the rubbish piled up in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Once plastic is washed with water and completely cleansed, its essence comes through.<sup>15</sup> As Roland Barthes notes in his famous 1957 essay *Plastic* from *Mythologies*,

more than a substance, plastic is the very idea of its infinite transformation; as its everyday name indicates, it is ubiquity made visible. And it is this, in fact, which makes it a miraculous substance: a miracle is always a sudden transformation of nature. Plastic remains impregnated throughout with this wonder: it is less a thing than the trace of a movement. (Barthes 1991: 97)

Purified plastic is no longer rubbish, but a matter ready for shaping: it is perfectly suitable to begin sculpting the destroyed world anew, on some better foundations, and with the hope for wonder. How is that not a perfect premise for constructing a Utopia?

The opposition of *Plastic Beach* as a birthplace of something new to our world in its deplorable state is emphasized starting from the very first song, *Welcome to the World of the Plastic Beach*. After the orchestral introduction illustrated for the live concerts' audience with the beautiful image of the rotating plastic island, rapper Snoop Dogg in a pirate attire greets the newcomers to the island. He leaves no illusions about the state of affairs of contemporary culture: one of his first phrases is a postmodernist cheeky makeover of a famous line from one of the founders of rap, the poet and musician Gil Scott-Heron: "The revolution will not be televised." However, the Master of the island, a live reincarnation of *Gorillaz*' bass guitarist Murdoc, does not shoo the guests away. On the contrary, he assures the "kids" (everyone on the island must become a child, metaphorically: to

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<sup>15</sup> This interpretation of plastic's purity is offered by Damon Albarn himself in the documentary *The Making of Plastic Beach* accompanying the launch of the album: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpN2TUJHOS4](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpN2TUJHOS4).

acquire a child's vision) that he is willing to entertain them and that in the process their world will change irreversibly because they had reached the Wonderland:

The revolution will be televised  
And the pollution from the ocean

Now with devotion  
Push peace and keep it in motion

Kids, gather around  
Yeah, I need your focus  
I know it seems like the world is so hopeless

It's like Wonderland.

The need to awaken child-like vision, to turn to childhood dreams, which know no limits, is expressed even in the shape of the Plastic Island: while creating it, Jamie Hewlett consciously alluded to Tracy Island, the secret base of brave rescuers from the 1960s television series *Thunderbirds*, beloved by several generations of British kids.

The Wonderland opens up in all its beauty in the very next, a flagship song of the album, called *White Flag*. This song reshapes the *Plastic Beach* guests' expectations and reframes their optics so radically that nothing would surprise them anymore. A Syrian National Orchestra for Arabic music, playing traditional Arabic melodies on folk instruments, is well settled in on the island. Thanks to Albarn's composer's skills, in the album version of *White Flag* the orchestra's sound is exquisitely intertwined with the rhythm of the song. During the live performances, Arab musicians, who participated in the tour alongside many others, had also been given extra time between songs for presentations of their traditional melodies. That is to say, a live concert of one of the trendiest and most successful rock-pop groups had a folk orchestra with fragments of authentic Arabic music performing practically at the beginning of the show, while the stars of *Gorillaz* were happily dancing to the music.

As a rule, at the beginning of this act Albarn as a frontman told the audience that the album *Plastic Beach* had started from a recording in Syria with the National Orchestra for Arabic music

and that *Gorillaz* had been the first Western band in history to give a concert in Damascus during the *Plastic Beach* tour. He then asked to give the guests a warm reception (which invariably followed). Finally, the orchestra plays an introduction to *White Flag* and... rappers Kano and Bashy fly out onto the stage. They exchange impressions from their arrival to the newly acquired island and set up (utopian) rules of proper conduct on *Plastic Beach*:

...look no feds no stress no rent  
No superficial shit it's real folk  
Where the women look hot but the beats cold

[...]

White flag, White flag  
No war no guns no poor just life  
Just love no hype just fun no tie  
Just me and my mic just me and my wife  
But tell me if I'm dreaming  
Cos I don't want to wake up till the evening  
And I don't want to be left sleeping  
From all the diseases that I breathe in  
Look respect the island no stealing  
And don't bring religion here no three kings  
Integrated and we ain't leaving  
We come on a peace thing  
White flag? White flag.

This energetic, full of drive rap by Kano and Bashy is accompanied by the virtuoso orchestra of Arabic music, the female string quartet *Demon Strings*, guitars (among the guitarists are two former members of the legendary punk group *The Clash*, Mick Jones and Paul Simonon - they joined *Gorillaz* for the entire *Plastic Beach* project), two drum sets, keyboards. On a large screen over the stage, onto which all visuals are projected and where virtual band members sporadically appear, hip-hop street performers spin in turns with Arab dancers in traditional costumes;

inscriptions in Arabic complement enormous neon lettering of the word “Gorillaz”. Above all this profusion of visual textures, behind the wall of vivid sound, stands a creator of all this happening, Damon Albarn, waving a white flag.

Many other joyous and melancholy things take place on the Plastic Island, ranging from lyrical meditation to carnival. A lonely guitarist Noodle, impersonated by the *Little Dragon* solo singer Yukimi Nagano, deplures a fallen Empire in *Empire Ants* and looks to Damon Albarn for solace and gentle support in the touching duet *To Binge*. Cheerful rappers *De La Soul* jokingly warm up in the microwave a deft yet, obviously, not deft enough sea nettle in the song *Superfast Jellyfish*. Nine trumpeters of the *Hypnotic Brass Ensemble* help Albarn mourn the extinct nature in *Broken*, while in *Stylo* the Last Great Soul Man Bobby Womack, the owner of an unbelievably powerful voice, backs virtual characters fleeing in a wrecked Chevrolet from Bruce Willis himself (who, having embraced the craziness of this creative Utopia, agreed to act in the band’s video for free). One of the most influential rockers ever, Lou Reed in his minimalist manner dispassionately suggests to wrap someone in plastic in *Some Kind of Nature*, while Albarn wraps Lou Reed himself in a gleaming electronic arrangement. And so on, and so forth.

But the starting point to all this incredible diversity and enthusiastic co-working was that exact moment when white flag was flapping over the stage. Well thought-out eclecticism of *Plastic Beach* singles out the essence of every type of music but eliminates generic limitations which do not allow sounds to blend. It conveys on the level of music the same message as the one communicated in live performance by the presence on the same stage of rappers, the female string quartet, and the orchestra of Arabic music. As one of the many insightful spectators remarked in an online review: “Only the musical genius of Damon Albarn can make such a grand idealistic statement without saying a word about it.”<sup>16</sup>

For us in this case not “genius” is important but the “grand idealistic statement,” that is, an attempt to construct a musical Utopia here and now and to prove that it may become a reality. One just has to go against the stereotypes of perception and against the dominant tendencies of the music industry. One must not join retromania by making another cover or reproduction of Bobby Womack’s songs, but rather invite Bobby Womack to record something new together (inventing this new thing together as well). One should not “buy” young voices in order to train them and to resell them in a worse condition, like producers of TV music shows do, but look for single-minded people

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.deathandtaxesmag.com/32122/gorillaz-land-on-american-beaches/>

from all generations and offer them collaboration on the common ground (as in the case with a twenty-two-year-old singer Daley, the youngest collaborator of *Gorillaz*, with whom Albarn composed catchy pop single *Doncamatic* together). One need not lament the difficulties of digital distribution and the loss of the audiences' attention. Rather, this attention ought to be focused on a single bright concept workable in all actual media. One does not have to give up using popular music as a means of making serious statements. While properly used, the language of music still enables understanding between different cultural segments, perhaps, better than anything else. This is what Josh Kun calls in his book the work of "audiotopia":

Because of music's ability to do just this — to point us to the possible, to help us remap the world we live in now — and because of its uncanny ability to absorb and meld heterogeneous national, cultural, and historical styles and traditions across space and within place, the possibility of the audiotopia makes sense: sonic spaces of effective utopian longings where several sites normally deemed incompatible are brought together, not only in the space of a particular piece of music itself, but in the production of social space and the mapping of geographical space that music makes possible as well. (Kun 2005: 23)

### ***The Island and the Ocean: achievements and limitations***

By filling their project with numerous elements of entertainment and funny play, but at the same time producing memorable statements about important contemporary problems, the masterminds of *Gorillaz* eliminated multiple artificial barriers and prejudices. Eventually they found themselves, among other things, in a different anthropological reality regarding their audience. After the launch of the *Plastic Beach* the band acquired one of the most multi-generational fan audiences in music history. The diversity of this audience fades in comparison only to that of musicians themselves, whose ages vary from seventy to twenty-two years. In spite of the influence of the internet which blurs the boundaries of all activities, the age barriers and limitations related to subcultural styles and types of behavior have so far always been and remain almost an impassable dividing factor for popular music. The freedom to like one or another kind of music, to attend one club or another is to a great extent still linked to one's age, one's racial and social background. Needless to mention how contrary to musical utopia, or "audiotopia", this state of affairs is.

To *Gorillaz*' credit, *Plastic Beach* eradicated these barriers. This was first of all noted by Damon Albarn himself, who had had vast experience of live performances with *Blur* since early 1990s. In many interviews of 2010 Albarn proudly repeated: "The diversity of our audience is just incredible." This was a surprise for spectators as well, especially those accustomed to attending rock and pop concerts. Their comments are noteworthy. An anonymous American left a comment in the *Gorillaz* internet community on October 25, 2010, after attending a concert in Denver:

First time seeing the *Gorillaz*. Incredible. I have seen over 1000 concerts and this will go down as one of my alltime favorites. Crowd was great. Adults, kids, teenagers, stoners, dweebs, rockers, goth, ravers - allsorts and kinds. Much of crowd looked ready to depart on their temporary vacation to Plastic Beach, wearing sailor hats, captains caps, striped shirts and I even saw a few Red Octopus hats, peg legs and a pirate eye patch or two. Lol. A very communal feeling. <...> Completely blown away!!! 60 musicians in complete synchronicity on a psychedelic voyage to the world of Plastic Beach. See this show!!!

Another beholder commented on a YouTube video from Los-Angeles concert:

There was so many factors that collided to make this one of the best performances ever given (the best in my life). 1) The diversity: <...> this crowd was diverse in every aspect and came literally from all walks of life. The enthusiasm for *Gorillaz* was unlike anything 2) My niece & I were eating at a nearby pizza joint on citywalk people were cheering and chanting for *Gorillaz*. It didn't matter if you were young or old, random strangers shaking your hand. 3) it was different from many concerts I've been to in that this wasn't a bunch of strangers in a building, but more like a community getting together. <...>



Illustrations 2 and 3. Young generation of *Gorillaz*' fans dressed as the virtual characters, after the London gig (November 2010). Photo by the author.

The personal observations of the author from two London concerts are in complete accord with these reports: curiosity about *Plastic Beach* provided the participants with a rare sense of community. Parents attended with children, young fans dressed as 2-D and Noodle discussed the latest *Gorillaz* news with adults in their 40s. A similarly democratic atmosphere and warm relationships between musicians of different generations were plainly visible also on stage. Various online and radio sources mention mutual respect between the architects of Utopia on *Plastic Beach*. The only figure with star superiority complex among the members of *Gorillaz* is still the cartoon character: bass guitarist Murdoc. "I feel myself a part of a big family," Bobby Womack repeated in his interviews. Also the barriers separating the musicians from fans were lowered as far as possible during *Plastic Beach* world tour. Thanks to the internet, such details become publicly known more often nowadays than they used to earlier. They certainly partly define band's image and its reception. *Gorillaz* has always been very successful with internet promotion. The official page of *Gorillaz* on Facebook now has nearly 10 millions of subscribers from all over the world, of all ages and ethnic backgrounds.

The main problems for the existence and development of this musical Utopia in the reality it has challenged are, as is easy to guess, financial difficulties and the principles of organization of the most traditional zones of the music industry. For example, there is a radio: a very conservative channel of musical distribution with programming formats strictly oriented at particular age and genre (on the influence of music radio on different aspects of music production see: Percival 2011). *Gorillaz* had problems with radio rotation of the *Plastic Beach* songs because of their mixed nature. Also, the tested model of musical collaboration with dozens of musicians from different countries,

as well as the richness of the album's sound invariably led to a high production cost. One of the already scripted and planned-out videos (based on the song *Rhinestone Eyes*) could not be filmed for the same reason. A very large, by previous *Gorillaz*' standards, concert tour, during which they gathered full stadiums, barely covered the expense of financing the "phase three" of the project. Band members repeatedly acknowledged that the tour was not profitable. Needless to mention also the fact that a desire to realize the most idealistic dreams always requires extra money.

Thus, pacifist Albarn's dream to perform in Damascus and to prove that peaceful communication with the Middle East is feasible for musicians cost enormous efforts, both financial and administrative (after having completed a painful bureaucratic obstacle race, the band performed in Damascus for free). An accumulated potential for success and the exceptional talent of the creators of *Gorillaz* allowed Utopia of the *Plastic Beach* to become reality. It is apparent, however, that the *Gorillaz*' concept model, all its accomplishments notwithstanding, cannot be "mass produced" or used, for example, by a new alternative band, even one sharing identical ideological premises and with an identical assessment of the state of contemporary music industry. Everything has to be invented from scratch nowadays.

Even a materialized Utopia remains an enclave. But an opportunity to peek into it even once changes one's perception of the surrounding reality forever. "If you can't get what you want / Then come with me," sings Damon Albarn in *On Melancholy Hill*, perhaps, the most personal song of the *Plastic Beach* album. This call can hardly be ignored by his audience as well as by his colleagues. This is not a guaranty, of course, but an invitation to a zone of innovation and diversity in contemporary popular music. While on temporary hiatus in 2014, *Gorillaz* can return one day with a new album and a new concept, new answers to the challenges to the music industry and new questions to listeners. See this show.

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