

Can Affect and Genre Join the “Khru”?



An Analysis on Genre studies, Musical Motion, Affect and
How a ‘Vibey’ Band brings it all Together

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To complete the experience of reading this thesis, I recommend listening to *Mordechai* (2020), by Khruangbin which includes song that will be analyzed.

<https://youtu.be/51aa2rlmaAE>

Introduction

Why do we listen to the music we do? What drives our choice in music? What is it about the label of a genre that makes us click play, or continue our search for ‘the right’ band? How does a band from Texas blend their sound to accommodate music from Thailand, Mali, Mexico, Pakistan, Korea and other ((non-)Western) musical styles? And what does the music market’s engagement and discussion with the band have to do with their success? Khruangbin, a trio band of bass, percussion and guitar from Houston give a clear example of how these questions can be answered. Their latest album *Mordechai* was released in 2020 and includes lyrics in various languages including French, Spanish, English, Japanese and Hebrew. The band released three singles promoting their new album and said upon the release of the single “Pelota”, that the song shows “a Texan band with a Thai name singing a song in Spanish, loosely based on a Japanese movie” (Khruangbin in Skinner). They are influenced by many (cultural) music genres which they incorporate into their music and situate within their western context and origin. The heavily instrumental, ‘groovy’ music of Khruangbin has a powerful positive affectual response by the listener which explains their global success despite not having a distinctive genre label assigned to the band.

Affect, the underlying feelings and emotional response to something, influences how we enjoy or don’t enjoy music, or if we sway to the beat or dance in a mosh pit. Affective expressions in response to music has been studied in relation to musical preference and investigated as part of music research in different contexts. Genre studies on the other hand, have not widely included affect into the study and definition of music genres though affect is, I would argue, one of the most important aspects when listening to a piece. One's affectual response can determine a perhaps life-long emotional relationship to the song, and to a lesser extent, to the

genre to which the piece belongs. In regard to bands whose music blends or incorporates various genres or cultural musical styles, genre studies has failed to adequately address how a band's success can be accredited to the positive affective experience of the listener. It is therefore prudent to call on musical genre studies to actively include a further look into music which blends genre styles from various cultures in their future research and theoretical discussions. And to that extent, to research and include the impact affective expression has on the formation and success of a band. While the success of a band is telling of its positive reception, the popularity of a song is not easily measurable. Interiano et.al. studied songs that were successful (according to billboard charts) and graphed what the differences of the songs were (fast tempo, happy theme, etc) and the duration of their success in order to understand what characteristics made the song succeed. Needless to say, success, even when scientifically researched, is not easily predictable or definable (Interiano et. al 15).

The occurrence of listening to a song or a musical event, as conceptualized by Johnson and Larson, is "an object that moves past the stationary hearer from front to back", the sonic waves travel through the air, with a beginning and end (69). Through musical motion, the movement of the sonic waves, the musician(s) can evoke affective expression from the audience. I aim to fill in the gap within genre studies on the affective response to multi- culturally influenced music. I will show how genre studies do not account for affect which, I will argue, is the reason certain kinds of music are problematic to classify into genres. By taking the notion of affective motion, I will come to suggest a rethinking of genre and genre classifications. My paper will answer the following questions:

How is Khruangbin's "Pelota" an example of music which is classified as a 'boundary object' by expressing influence from multiple (cultural) musical genres? How does the study of

the affective expression in the musical motion of “Pelota” problematize the method of classification in musical genre? How will this exemplify the gap within genre studies on the effect of affective expression to ‘boundary object’ music?

Methodology

The methodology used in this paper is from a predominantly music studies perspective. In this way, I will analyze the case study by first discussing the band, in order to give context to dissecting the paths of cultural influences in the songs’ musical phrases and lyrics. This approach will draw out the intersection between affect and musical motion in the musical event. Utilizing the insights of Lin et. al. regarding the connection between genre classification and emotion classification, and the correlation of common musical characteristics in genre, as discussed by Jennifer Lena and Keith Negus in particular, I will examine genre studies and methods of genre classification with the intention of bringing affect into the classification process. I will be focusing on how the song “Pelota” affects the listener, and to what extent the genre of the song, and the band as a whole is perceived. While other songs from the new album *Mordechai* (such as “Time, You and I”, “Connaissais de Face”, and “Shida”) would provide interesting material to analyze and further substantiate my point, their analysis in this context would burst the scope and purpose of this thesis. In order to carry out the research project I have outlined above, I make use of articles, interviews, and the band’s official website. My analysis draws out the importance of marketing as it speaks to the band’s overall aesthetic and message, as well as who may be inclined to enjoy their unique sound.

Chapter 1: The “Khru”

The band Khruangbin was formed in 2009 with Mark Speer (guitar) and Donald (DJ) Johnson (drums and keys), Laura Lee Ochoa (bass) joined soon after. The trio originates from Houston, one of the most ethnically diverse metropolitan areas in the U.S. due to the high numbers of immigrants from countries in Africa, Central and Latin America, and parts of Asia (Gates). The band records and produces their songs in a small barn (now named ‘the Farm’) outside the rural town of Burton near Houston, Texas. The rustic and natural acoustics that can be heard in the recordings have been attributed to the nearby cows, old wooden planks and lack of insulation in the barn farm. However, the musicians have stated this works to their benefit as they try to achieve a particular aesthetic, similar to a 1960s, pre-Internet era of music (Ableton min.13.30). The trio record their songs in instrumental parts, beginning with the drum section, then bass, then adding the guitar. The band aims to structure a song with an equal emphasis on each instrument, while also creating a harmonious piece. The band shaped their genre with a certain set of rules for the way they make music, and work within this construct, thereby, going off a certain sound rather than a specific genre label (Murphy). The band released their first single, “A Calf Born in Winter” in 2014 and, a year later, their debut record “The Universe Smiles Upon You” landing them number 70 on the Guardian’s *New Band of the Week*. While they have since received more media attention, particularly due to their recent collaboration with soul artist Leon Bridges (2020), and music legend Paul McCartney (2021), the band has remained connected to their Houston roots and recorded most of their albums in the Farm. Since their debut album, their music has reflected the multicultural community of Houston and many other non-Western musical styles that can be detected in their music, such as the Thai luk thung style-music (Parker).

With ubiquitous access to today's technological world, magazines, websites, and YouTube channels, offer virtual interaction, the band's musical inspiration, and reasoning behind creative decisions all shared directly with their fans and the public. Khruangbin members have given interviews discussing what drew them to the music they listen to and play, their individual musical taste and how this affects their music making. They explain the electronic modifications they use on their instruments and how this changes the sound and why they choose this effect. Often, they give detailed information on their creative decisions or answer the question as to why they use a certain amplifier or guitar with a very practical reason for their choice. Furthermore, they participate on interactive platforms such as Reddit, where band members can directly interact with their audience. The information they provide on their creative decisions have also informed this piece.

Ochoa and Johnson have explained how the many cultures within the Houston area have influenced some of their songs in their latest album *Mordechai* in which one can hear the influence of disco, luk thung, Chicha (a 70's variation of Cumbia) and other musical styles within different songs throughout the album. Influences of Mexican, Central and South American musical sounds can be heard in the song "Pelota", Ochoa's Mexican American background plays an important role not only this song but others as well. Through Reddit, Mark Speer confirmed the influence of Chicha on this song, and others (Reddit.com). In an interview, Speer, the American guitarist of Khruangbin reflected on his interest in non-Western tones. Stating that he was "always into tones that [he] didn't hear so much in Western music... [, he] wanted to be able to emulate a Rubab or a shamisen or kalimba or a djembe..." with his guitar (Bienstock). These instruments are traditionally from Afghanistan, China, Zimbabwe, and West Africa (Mali) respectively and are used in the country's traditional and contemporary styles of music, such as the revival of traditional

instruments in disco-styled songs in the 60s and 70s. By using electronic pedals to modulate the tone and sound of the guitar to resemble multi-course instruments (instruments with double strings on the octave such as the banjo or the Turkish Baglama), the guitar-holding melody brings these traditionally non-western elements to the foreground. The bass guitarist Laura Lee Ochoa notes that in most songs of the previous album the bass offers its raw and natural sound, remaining on the higher register of the bass which allows the audience to hear the bass more easily. While she was learning to play bass, Ochoa's musical direction ranged from Jamaican reggae, Afghan music, and French 60s pop; these influences can be heard in the looped sections she plays throughout the albums (Reverb). The percussionist, DJ, offers the versatile method of rhythm to the band which underpins the variation of musical descriptors for the band. The rhythm section, and the drummer as a performer, aid in creating a cohesive musical event by keeping a consistent beat.

The band members' extensive list of musical influences reflects not only the diverse area from which the band stems, but it also speaks to the diverse audience the band aims to reach. Critics from the music magazine Pitchfork have raised questions on the possibility of the band's success before the internet, as their mix of genres would "have meant pawing through record crates around the world", though they applaud the band remaining distinct in their method of producing music that is "heavy in nostalgia for a nonspecific time and locale" (Cush). It is, however, important to raise the discussion on the notion of cultural appreciation versus appropriation: the act of taking something for one's own use without permission, often with an unequal level of power involved ("Cultural Appropriation"). Specifically, how does Khruangbin negotiate their use of cultural musical practices from other cultures? Is the use of pentatonic scales and inflections, common in many cultural musical practices around the world, though not typical in American music, deemed cultural appropriation? Or do they avoid this and actively appreciate the music by

not playing the actual instruments heard in these cultural musical styles? Speer has said that he tries “to approximate the way that the *Vọng cổ* style guitar player would play... that’s Vietnamese opera” though claims that he cannot due to the limits of sounds his guitar and pedals can produce (Reverb). Does the way in which he explains artists and musical styles from other cultures therefore pay tribute to these styles? These are valid and extremely important questions, Khruangbin has acknowledged them and stated they strive to keep on the side of appreciation, while others remain skeptical (Davis). Critics have described their music as filtering various cultural musical styles through “their own hazy, psychedelic lens” (Dearmore). Due to the restrictions of this paper, I will not be able to thoroughly explore these questions, though I hope the acknowledgement of such a discussion will encourage further thoughts and writings on cultural appropriation/appreciation in music.

As many of Khruangbin's songs are instrumental, the “music largely tries to avoid language barriers and... invit[es] people to have an emotional connection with the music on their own level” (Ochoa in Kalia). This emotional connection or affective response to the music is the intention of a musical event, and Khruangbin does so by blending multiple distinctive cross-cultural musical techniques, such as the use of guitar riff lines influenced by *Vọng cổ*. The way in which these cross-cultural musical techniques are used in “Pelota” and elicit affective responses in the listener will be discussed through an analysis on the musical motion heard in the song.

Chapter 2: Musical Genre Studies and Methods of Classification

Musical genre has a broad meaning, the nuances of which offer small differences in connotation, Franco Fabbri and Jennifer Lena both take a sociological approach to genre: Fabbri describes musical genre as a “set of musical events... whose course is governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules” and solidified through ideological and sociological means (Fabbri 1). While Lena defines genre as “systems of orientations, expectations, and conventions that bind together industry, performers, critics, and fans” in taking an active role in distinguishing the music (Lena 6). The ideological and sociological intentions of a genre must be supported by a community of musicians, “elements of the music industry, critics, and fans”, as the support of these components are necessary for the creation and growth of a genre (Lena 162). For example, at a folkloric Slovakian musical event such as the Východná festival, the sociological intentions are clear; to relive and educate the audience on the cultural importance of the traditional (musical) customs of Slovakia. The traditional Slovakian dress accompanies the music achieving the ideological and sociological intentions of the event. By celebrating the folkloric genre, the national cultural identity of the Slovakian people is sustained.

The sociological approach will also be used in the study of Khruangbin’s single, “Pelota” by examining the impact of the song’s implementation of different cultural musical styles. The blending of cultural musical practices by the band affects many listeners, resulting in the artists’ success. It is therefore important to approach genre studies and genre classification in order to examine how this area of music studies can modify its classification tools to include bands which both stand outside the popular musical genres and are successful in creating a growing supportive musical community.

Growth and freedom of expression in genres are expected, yet there must be consistency in genres; musicians must meet the expectation of the audience, critics, and other performers, while still expressing themselves in the music (Lena 7). This is also why many genres emerge, fade away, transform, or reemerge (Lena 7). The fluidity in genres is noticeable in psychedelic music which came about in the 1960s in the United States and has since been attributed to many different bands and musicians with their own stylistic properties (Farnum). The various styles within a genre also change and influence the way in which a band is described, Moore makes the example of the stylistic similarities of heavy metal and white metal (similar musical techniques and dress but the latter is engaged in an evangelical message); “The sharing of musical techniques would perhaps encourage a musicologist to declare a similarity of style, while the distinction in subject matter calls attention to a difference of genre”(432). This statement indicates that subgenres may share stylistic techniques of a larger branch of genre. Bands within these subgenres attribute their individual sociological and cultural influences to their style of music.

According to genre studies scholars, an artist whose genre is difficult to determine, or whose musical style does not aid in defining them in any distinctive way, “often face depressed demand because critics within the field are confused about the product’s identity, and don’t review it,” sociologists title these product’s ‘boundary objects’ (Lena 153). Boundary objects go against established musical forms of genre dimensions (qualities of the artists and their music) (Lena 15). They “inhabit several intersecting social worlds... *and* satisfy the informational requirements of each of them” yet with the potential of becoming invisible to the record store consumer (Star and Griesemer in Lena 153). They can, however, also create a distinction for similar artists to articulate a perspective on genre classification. My analysis of the boundary object can therefore generate a rethinking of the classification of genre(s). I aim to present precisely this discourse for

the band Khruangbin whose musical style is categorized into multiple genres and whose song, released through through musical motion, generates a strong affective expression.

Genre studies aims to pinpoint the boundaries of genres and musical styles. Some music study authors engage in examining the corporate music industry and others examine how genres develop through streams, forms, or styles and eventually turn into sub genres or new genres altogether (Negus 14,15). The debate on the genre of a new emerging band includes examination of the band's ideological propensities, and which musical context the band could be placed, represented, and marketed. The way in which the genre communities (fans, critics, label companies, etc.) organize to support the emerging band is dependent on the level of development of the band (Lena 3). Considerations for a band to be signed to a record label include the discussions of their global success, "the international market, outside the United States... can provide the corporation (and musicians, directors and novelists) with extra income for proportionately less additional investment" (Negus 156). However not all bands are marketable enough to 'make it' outside their regional scene, Negus explains that most international departments of major record companies prefer artists whose style includes English lyrics with little to no accent (158). Contrasting with 'regional repertoire' in which a band is successful within its broader linguistic or cultural area, international repertoire, includes "judgements about the instruments, tempos, rhythms, voices and melodies that are able to 'travel well'", such as ballad songs and pop music genres (Negus 157).

The discussion on genre raises the question of where Khruangbin fits within the classification of what a boundary object is and what makes a successful band. The band's global success is evidenced by their recently released single on Paul McCartney's new album (2021) and multiple global tours. Furthermore, while the band originates from an American city, lyrics are

uncommon in their songs and when included, are often multilingual including Spanish, Thai, French, English and other languages. Therefore, the musical community Khruangbin supports is that of Spanish, Thai, French and English (etc.) speakers and supported by the various styles the band conveys in their music. Their tours have spanned the United States, Europe, Asia and Australia, including stages as renowned as Coachella (2019) in collaboration with artists such as Leon Bridges and Tame Impala. The advertisements and articles regarding the band's tours utilize the various genres the band seemingly represent in order to create a clear, marketable image. Some articles, such as the Guardian, Class Music, Reverb, Guitar World, and Riffpedia, brand Khruangbin as psych-funk, psychedelic rock, others as American Thai funk with explanation of their sound as "rooted in the deepest waters of world music infused with classic soul, dub and psychedelia" ("Khruangbin Live in Bangkok"). Touring websites such as Bands in Town, Riffpidea, and Ticket Master, classify Khruangbin under R&B, or Rock, while others provide a list of genres that the band falls into including Reggae, Dub, and Soul ("Khruangbin"). In this way, the unclassifiable nature of Khruangbin can be used to their advantage because they can diversify their audience and have access to platforms that will promote their music in different ways. While Khruangbin is an example of the boundary object, their musical community is spread across the world and supports the blending of genres, as seen through the bands success and ability to perform in high-ranked venues with musical merit.

In short, the method of classification of genre studies includes a look into the band's ability to succeed and make money for the record company, not only regionally, but abroad as well. By looking at the way in which Khruangbin's song musically allows for a wide audience to access and enjoy their culturally influenced music, I will then come to the conclusion of how the shortcomings of genre studies can be resolved.

Chapter 3: Musical Motion and a Ball, 'Pelota'

Music is a vibration of sound passing through the air, the music industry monetizes its notation by recording and marketing it through the classification of genres. In this section I will refer to a visual representation that constitutes the musical score, with this I aim not to equate the visual perception with the sonic experience, but rather to illustrate how we perceive musical motion and how the sonic experience affects the listener. Music is, primarily, a sonic experience, so to express this experience orally to others, we must employ metaphors in order to convey meaning clearly. Metaphors help explain not only what the music itself 'does', such as the changes in pitch or rhythm, but also how the music 'moves' us affectively and even physically, through swaying, dancing, or other expressions (Johnson and Larson 63). Johnson and Larson introduce musical motion as a concept to aid in understanding how music is perceived and conveys (affectual) meaning. According to the scholars, musical motion employs multiple metaphors related to the spatial and temporal dimensions of the embodied understanding of experiencing music. The way in which we understand "musical motion is entirely metaphoric", as "our basic bodily experiences of physical motion" inform our use of language and thereby, the metaphors we use to describe a sonic experience (Johnson and Larson 63, 64).

Furthermore, as the embodied experience of motion occurs over time, so do the metaphors used in describing a sonic experience. As we listen to a song, one might say "the melody goes up here", though actually, the music does not physically change its location. The individual tones have different pitches with various frequencies. The sounds may be occurring with lower sound frequencies, or with less temporal frequency (and more frequent silences) but can be described

through metaphors. As discussed previously, there are certain musical qualities that are specifically attributed to a genre, for example an upbeat tempo is often heard in the pop musical genre, or a slower tempo with often a lower, melodic pitch in the ballad genre. To further discuss the way in which genre studies address culturally diverse music, the song “Pelota” can be examined as a musical event. In doing so, the analysis of the musical motion of Khruangbin’s single will aid in situating the importance of affect within genre studies. By establishing the musical event as an affectual experience, along with the impact of musical motion in the discussion on genre classification will become clear and pertinent to genre studies.

The musical ‘movement’ in “Pelota” is created through the repetitive alternation of pitch and rhythm. The song’s structure can offer an interesting perspective on musical motion and the musical metaphors, as the song is composed of a diverse interplay of lyrical, rhythmic and melodic components. This analysis of “Pelota” will utilize the notion of musical motion insofar as it will dissect some dominant musical lines of the song in order to show how the musical motion in “Pelota” affects the listener.

The drum kit is the first instrument heard in the song, setting up the tempo and ‘movement’ of the piece (0.00-0.02), with guitar and bass entering in the second measure, ‘holding’ the melody and ‘lower’ pitched harmony. The melodic line begins with ascending notes to then alternate between two notes, producing musical motion with a perceived ‘bouncy’ effect. The way in which the melodic line repeatedly ‘moves’ between two notes is a stylistic choice common in Chicha music. The Peruvian cumbia, psychedelic rock subgenre, Chicha, includes among others, the use of bongo drums, percussive shakers, tambourines, bass, and guitar; commonly employing a similar melodic structure, tempo, and rhythm as heard in “Pelota”. A main musical line played by Mark Speer in “Pelota” before the repeated chorus,

can be heard in this excerpt of “Elsa” by Los Destellos, specifically in the guitars musically descending riffs (heard here: <https://youtu.be/ge3-8yB3P-Y?t=142>). Furthermore, the guitar section clearly emphasizes the Chicha influence through the repetitive descending riffs and alternation between two or three notes with the use of hammer-on’s. The ‘hammer-on’ technique is a method of playing a note by putting a finger down on a string that has already been strummed, and pulling the finger off, allowing for a new note to sound (Owens). This allows the guitarist to play more notes on one string without having to strum again.

The guitar’s introduction holds a fast tempo which is counterbalanced through the bass line. Mark Speer often uses a hammer-on in Khruangbin’s songs, though this musical motion is not shown in the visual representation, the score, below. In the musical lines seen in the score (the representation of the music itself), Speer implements this technique on the highest note in the ascending riffs. The technique incorporates a soft transition of notes with a short duration. The transitions from one note to the next are strategically switching from being played staccato (where the note is detached from others) to slurred (where the transition from one note to the following is ‘tied’ or smooth), thereby emphasizing a fluid and fast tempo musical motion in the guitar section. This flow is contrasted with the musical break after the third iteration of the chorus in which the riff is predominantly played in staccato, or that the string is plucked for each note heard, allowing for the listener to hear the individual notes more clearly.

The image shows a musical score for the first four measures of the song "Pelota". It consists of two systems. The first system has two staves: "Lead Guitar" (treble clef) and "Bass" (bass clef). The second system has four staves: two for piano (treble and bass clefs) and two for guitar (treble and bass clefs). The music is in 4/4 time and features a repetitive rhythmic pattern in both the guitar and bass lines.

Fig. 1: the first four measures of “Pelota” with Lead guitar and bass lines. Transcribed by Yannick Coville.

The visual representation of the sonic experience, the score, shows the musical motion of the bass, the ascension and descension of pitch which visually creates a ladder in the musical lines. The bass holds a consistent rhythmic harmony which compliments both the percussion and guitar section. These riffs, or changes, alternate from high to low pitches, are common in bass lines and can be heard throughout many genres, including Chicha, funk, Reggae dub, and R&B. Laura Lee Ochoa provides a fullness to the chords by playing the lower pitches, a counterbalance to the faster-paced guitar. Once the lyrics are introduced, the bass and guitar play repetitive riffs, harmonizing and evoking a metaphorical sense of physical and musical movement supporting the sung melody.

The ‘bouncy’ effect of the guitar’s melody is further realized through the lyrics; the first line is “Soy una pelota” (“I’m a ball”) and this concept is repeated in the chorus, “Ahorita yo, puedo ser una pelota” (“Now I, can be a ball”; Genius.com). This line is repeated often, particularly towards the end of the song as the instruments slowly fade and the mantra is continuously repeated, leading to the musical conclusion. The notes sung in the first lines are similar in pitch to the guitar’s first riff and are therefore familiar to the listener, encouraging a

positive affective expression to the piece. The lyrics depict an incoherent narrative, a dreamlike experience of being a ball, in “una casa surreal” (“a surreal house”) and transforming into a demon to then be released with the help of family. The poetic description of being creatively stuck, wanting to be purely in one’s own chaos and to not run “de este paseo” (“from this path”), concludes with the affirmation of becoming a ball. After the transformation, passage and truth, the narrator of the song can now be a ball, free of human or worldly concerns.

While the non-vocal instruments introduce the pitch, carry the rhythm and drive the musical motion of the song, the affective expression in the listener is achieved through the combination of lyrics and melody. The band members sing in unison, creating a subdued effect of the articulation of the Spanish words that adds to the psychedelic, dreamlike characteristic of the song. The cryptic message of the lyrics is, however, only accessible to audience members who understand Spanish (or have researched the meaning of the lyrics beforehand), other listeners hear the melodic prosody of the Spanish words and resort to focusing on the instrumentals and musical motion. These audience members can invest themselves not in the poetic narrative of the lyrics but relate their sonic experience mostly to the musical motion of the instruments, including vocals, emphasizing the affectual expression of the musical event of the song. Despite some audience members not having Spanish language skills, the lyrics' poetic narrative can be heard through the musical motion that suggests the bouncing of the ball described in the lyrics.

The way in which the music’s rhythm, pitch and musical motion are perceived by the audience determines the affective experience and expression of the listener. Lundqvist, Carlsson, Hilmersson and Juslin conducted a study on physiological and emotional responses to music of different popular genres with English lyrics. The researchers analyzed whether the emotional

responses, detected through facial expressions and autonomic activity (functions of the nervous system) by listeners are induced by the music, or a perception of the assumed emotions expressed in the music. The findings concluded that happy music induced “greater feelings of happiness, whereas sad music induced greater feelings of sadness” with the facial expressions and autonomic activity supporting this claim (Lundqvist et. al. 74). The scholars thereby concluded that the “emotion induced in the listener was the same as the emotion expressed in the music”, therefore this study could suggest that despite not understanding Spanish lyrics in “Pelota”, the conveyed “emotions [will] give rise to affective experiences... and lead to expressive behaviors” (Lundqvist et al. 62). In the case of Khruangbin’s music, they can express a certain emotion through musical motion in a song which allows the listener to have an affective experience, without understanding the lyrical characteristic in the song. Non-Western or lyrically English music has not been extensively, quantitatively studied, particularly in regard to affect and affective expression in the listener. The affective potential of the song also speaks to the global audience the band has accrued. With the understanding that the impact of a song’s musical motion results in an affective expression, the global success of a song is not hinged on understanding the lyrics, but rather on the musical communities’ agreement of the positive affective expression the song produces.

Chapter 4: How the “Khru” can improve Genre studies

I have established that Khruangbin, the trio band from Houston, plays predominantly instrumental music with an emphasis of influence from various cultural musical genres and styles. Their single “Pelota” is a clear example of their unique style with evident inspiration from the Peruvian Chicha subgenre. The Chicha influence was expressed through the musical motion of the song which can lead to a positive affectual expression in the listener. Furthermore, in the chapter on musical genre studies, I examined the importance of a musical community supporting a band and how the ‘boundary object’ is most often a music piece or band which expresses (musical) characteristics of multiple genres and therefore difficult to classify with one genre (Lena 153). These boundary objects “spark(ing) innovation with the classification system” and should be taken as serious and legitimate works of music (Lena 153). As Lena has outlined in her book “Banding Together”, the genre that is attributed to a band or musician is determined by the audience and critics that review the music. Music critics bring attention to the band by stimulating “debates [that] serve not only to sort bands and songs into groups but also to identify those who are aware of current distinctions from those who are outsiders or hapless pretenders” (Lena 7). The audience that listens to the music supports the band, not only through monetary funding, but, as I have argued, also the affectual resonance heard through the musical motions of the music.

An affective expression in response to or due to music is inevitable. The attempt to classify a piece of music into a genre, based on the sociological approach taken by Fabbri and Lena, should include affect in the set of rules encouraged by multiple actors. These actors include the musical community supporting the band, music critics, and the music industry marketing the genre (Lena 11,15). Khruangbin produces their music with a set of rules and aesthetics they structure for themselves which is similar to traditional genre classification methodology.

By combining the approach taken by Lena, Negus, Johnson and Larson, and Lundqvist et.al, it is clear that the musical motion of the piece, the way in which the piece affects the listener, and how a band is marketed have an impact on the listener. The band's marketing style gives the listener an idea of the broader audience the band plays to and can influence the expectation the listener has for their experience of the music. By analyzing Khruangbin's marketing strategies, specifically the musicians' official website, their implied musical community and aesthetics can be understood.

Khruangbin's website promotes the band with a galactic or space-related theme and displays few terrestrial reference points. The background includes stars, planets and other galactic objects with some symbols referring to relevant background information on the band, such as a red barn, denoting an American farm, and connoting the band's recording space "The Farm" (khruangbin.com). The page functions as a moving collage, the band members float by in a UFO along with planets referring to various links within the website; the small red barn on its own suspended planet, leads to the sign-up form for their newsletter and to become part of "The Khru". The aim of the website's aesthetic, it appears, is to capture the band's theme of music. By omitting reference to an individual country, Khruangbin can target a musical community that aims to blend international cultural musical sounds and thereby detach themselves from specific musical traditions.

It is important to include the impact affect has on the field of music which leads us to a reevaluation of the classification system. It can therefore be deduced that a change within genre studies research on the 'boundary object', which produces and induces affect, is similarly profitable and worth studying. Musical motion is an important facet of the sonic experience as it elicits affective expressions in the listener regardless of the genre attributed to the song. Our

understanding of musical genre, as classified through common (musically) stylistic choices by the musical communities and genre studies, is limiting its scope and problematizing bands who lie outside these systems; in particular, bands which include and blend non-Western musical attributes. By emphasizing the positive or strong affective expression in music, genre studies and scholars will then be able to discuss bands, like Khruangbin, that blend various cultural musical styles, at length, in both the academic and commercial. By creating new tools to discuss the significance affective expression has in terms of musical motion, genre studies can contribute to a growing field within affect theory.

I would further argue that the marketing strategies and aesthetics of the band, including their website, merchandise and music videos attempts to invoke similar affective expression felt their songs (Bienstock, Davidson, Gotrich, Murphy, Pittman, Reverb.com). The galactic aesthetic on the website is reflected through the musical motion in their songs and by extension, as, the desired affectual response. This is heard particularly through the mix of various cultural musical styles, heavy use of reverb, and multi (or non-) lingual lyrics. In an interview with *The Guardian*, the band's sound was described to have been “inspired by Thailand, Mexico and west Africa, [and] perfected the art of ‘Earth music’” (Kalia). In response to this, the band members stress the importance of reevaluating the musical classification of ‘world music’, “when you normalize English-language music in the west and decide to call everything else ‘world’, [you are] belittling [the world] in the process” (Speer in Kalia). For this reason, the band’s concert aesthetic aims to “look like we just fell on to this planet” as a way of solidifying the band’s presence on the stage accompanying their instrumental heavy music and ‘stripped down’ characteristics (Speer in Kalia). Furthermore, by accrediting their music as being influenced by various cultures in and around their home city of Houston, they seem to surpass the accusation of cultural appropriation. By giving

credit to the various styles that influence their music they undermine the power relations involved in cultural appropriation. In doing so, they are able to reach out to various audiences beyond the west, including musical communities which influenced their own music, such as Central and South American psychedelic sub genres, Chicha, Southeast Asian rock, Afghan music and more.

By looking at the way in which Khruangbin markets itself through their website and reviewing interviews on the discussion of their (stage) aesthetic, I have exemplified a problem within genre studies. The current understanding of musical genres presents a lack of discussion on the success of a genre-blending artist and neglects the influence of (positive) affective expression through musical motion in the music. A closer analysis of the musical motion present in the song “Pelota”, showed how the musical lines evoke a distinct affective reaction in the listener, shedding light on the way in which musical motion expresses affect. This thesis can be an indication for genre studies scholars to reevaluate the classification and significance of the many genre-obscured bands and musicians that inhabit the musical world.

Conclusion

In this thesis I exposed the problematic deficiency of affect within genre studies, specifically in regard to genre classification systems, and concerning musicians (or songs) who are a 'boundary object'. Furthermore, I explained the way in which the movement of the sonic experience transmits affect that is "induced in the listener", therefore, "the music [which] serves as the medium of discovering the nature of one's feelings" is also the medium through which the musicians express their feelings through musical motion (Laszlo 134). I sought to contextualize Khruangbin as a band from a multicultural environment, who, through culturally influenced instrumental styles and multilingual music, successfully play to an international audience. In their single "Pelota", their musical cultural influences are heard through (including but not limited to) the musical movement of the song. Genre studies scholars such as Negus explain how marketing a band that is part of a genre may help the band succeed on a global scale, though it was made clear by Lena that this was less common in the case of boundary objects. I, therefore, contest the boundary object as a sustainable classifier of bands or songs and insist on including the viability of affect as a part of the genre classification systems to dismantle the assumptions of success for bands like Khruangbin. Bands who play outside or blend the common genre tropes ought not to be forgotten or less successful, but rather be discussed as affective expression.

The description of genre given by scholars, including Fabbri, Lena, and Negus, similarly conclude that genre is "governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules" (Fabbri 1). However, as Lena writes in her fifth chapter of *Banding Together*, bands that intersect social worlds or systems of (musical) classification are often faced with smaller demands and less visibility due to their 'confusing' identity (153). Khruangbin keeps a consistent musical theme throughout their albums through a set of rules designed by the members to structure the way they create their songs.

They work within this frame, implementing predetermined guidelines rather than aiming to fit into a specific genre (Murphy). I have made the connection between affect and the field of genre studies by bringing awareness to the influence affect has on our music preference, and through the affectual characteristic in making affiliations between bands and genre classifiers. In this way, the categorization of artists in genre studies has been problematized due to the lack of studies on musicians playing culturally mixed musical styles. I have then proposed the viability of affect as a qualifier of music and viable in reclassifying music, especially music (bands and songs) considered to be a ‘boundary object’.

Affect as a unifying element in music, should be kept in mind upon further discussion of genre studies classification systems. “Pelota” is a good example of the existing cultural influences Khruangbin expresses in their music with affective musical motion. The expansion of interest in the popularity of blended music, and the ease of access to any era or genre of music due to the internet, is why I have every confidence that genre studies can include affect in its systems of classification; thereby including and promoting bands whose cultural musical styles are more nuanced and equally affectively stimulating.

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