A Culture of Remix:
Nostalgia and Pop in Late Capitalism

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CONTENT

1 INTRODUCTION

The rapper, beatmaker and writer Said (2015) frames hip-hop as "a culture of sampling" (p. 50). By describing sampling in this way, Said references the abilities of the residents of the South Bronx, who, suffering from the fragmentation caused by the South Bronx Disaster, took parts of American mainstream media and converted or flipped them to suit their own needs and values.

In contrast to this description of the origins of hip-hop, which reflects on the late 20th century and the sociocultural significance of the genre's unique use of sampling, I propose the trope of the *Culture of Remix* as a conceptual framework to address the contemporary role of cultural recycling.

In 2011, English music journalist and author Reynolds accused pop culture of being in a state of "Retromania" (p. xxi). Reynolds describes a fundamental shift in the conditions of cultural consumption and distribution at the onset of the 21st century, noting that there has "never before been a society so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of its immediate past" (p. xxi).

To examine the different dimensions and functions of nostalgia inherent to the cultural artifacts of the past, this paper utilizes the work of Russian-American artist and writer Boym, who argues that nostalgia is a "historical emotion" (2001, p. 17) that co-exists with modernity rather than opposes it.

British cultural theorist and author Fisher argues that the capitalist realism of our present creates an atmosphere of cultural stagnation, in which the inability to imagine alternatives to market logics turns all history into a marketable commodity (2009).

The dynamics of this cultural remix are further investigated through the presentation and reflection on my practical Bachelor's work, *8Remix*. An automation workflow that remixes the entirety of two decades of Billboard Hot 100 songs into an endless sound collage.

Given these perspectives, the following chapters examine the nature of the proposed *Culture of Remix* in order to investigate why there is such a cultural demand for the past, and how this tendency affects the impasse of our cultural imagination.

2 A Culture of Remix

Culture has a long tradition of recycling its own past into new cultural forms. In this context, the Renaissance of the 14th to 16th century is often regarded as the first systematic historical precedent for large-scale cultural revitalisation. By rejuvenating the classical era of Greek and Roman antiquity, the period helped shift Europe from a predominantly theocentric (God-centered) to a more anthropocentric (human-centered) worldview (Burckhardt, 1990).

A second example is the Neo-Baroque movement of the late nineteenth century, which re-used seventeenth-century Baroque aesthetics in prestige architecture. These historicist forms functioned as a political tool, linking industrial empires to the perceived glory of earlier European hegemonies and reflecting the wealth generated by the Second Industrial Revolution and imperialism (Bremner, 2022).

These historical events illustrate that cultural progression is not a linear process. Instead, culture operates through strategic revivals, in which the past is continually recontextualized to navigate shifts in power and worldview.

To apply this logic to contemporary popular music, this section defines popular culture and the sociocultural function pop music serves within it. Popular culture refers to representations consumed by a mass audience and consists of shared images and ideas representing "the culture of the people" (Kidd et al., 2017, p. 284).

In this context, popular music functions as a dynamic, socially embedded phenomenon rather than a fixed genre (Pfleiderer, 2018). The Berlin musicologist Peter Wicke (2005) conceptualizes popular music as a discursive instrument of cultural negotiation within the field of commercial music production, positioning it as a site of negotiation between artistic, commercial, and audience dynamics.

In *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past*, Reynolds (2011) describes the 1960s as an era of pop music marked by a strong spirit of innovation.

While emphasizing The Beatles' role as musical pioneers, Reynolds argues that the group simultaneously pioneered revivalism with their musical pastiche "Back in the U.S.S.R." (1968). By incorporating elements from Chuck Berry's "Back in the U.S.A." (1959) and the Beach Boys "California Girls" (1965), The Beatles made rock music the subject of its own retrospective.

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Reynolds (2011) describes the progression of pop culture's engagement with its own past as a series of intensifying phases. The 1970s were characterized by a systematic return to 1950s aesthetics, seen in the success of the film *Grease* (Kleiser, 1978) and the sitcom *Happy Days* (Marshall, 1974-1984), which offered nostalgic portrayals of 1950s teenage romance and everyday life.

During the 1980s, "retro" was established as a stylistic strategy in music: rather than pursuing linear innovation, artists utilized stylistic imitation to recreate the sounds of previous decades, exemplified by the 1960s garage rock revival, where bands emulated the fuzz-tone guitars of the mid-1960s (Reynolds).

In the 1990s, pop culture's focus shifted toward the 1970s. The Britpop movement reflected this trend by incorporating 1970s guitar-rock aesthetics; a prominent example is Oasis's "Cigarettes & Alcohol" (1994), which emulated the glam-rock sound of T. Rex.

Since the 2000s, digitalization has altered pop culture's engagement with the past. Within an effectively infinite digital archive of recorded music, previous eras are recycled simultaneously, resulting in a non-linear cultural environment that displaces the traditional 20-year nostalgia cycle (Reynolds).

Within this non-linear cultural environment, sampling serves as the primary technical mechanism for the direct incorporation of recorded history into contemporary music production. Sampling is the technical process of integrating segments of existing sound recordings into a new musical
composition. The defining characteristic of a sample is its status as a pre-recorded audio file, which can consist of any recordable sound source.

According to Needham (2022), the origins of sampling can be traced back to 1940s musique concrète, where pioneers such as Pierre Schaeffer and Daphne Oram manipulated tape recordings into sound collages.

The term "sampling" was later coined in the late 1970s by Kim Ryrie and Peter Vogel to describe the Fairlight CMI's ability to replay pre-recorded audio via a keyboard (Howell, 2005). Parallel to its application in pop and EDM, the technique emerged as a central element of hip-hop culture.

Said (2015) characterises hip-hop as a "culture of sampling" (p. 50), highlighting the South Bronx residents as the pioneering force behind the emergence of the technique. Technologically, the roots of this practice are often traced to 1960s Jamaican dub music; producers such as King Tubby and Lee "Scratch" Perry reused existing reggae rhythms to create "riddim" tracks (Prahlad, 2001). While

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Jamaican-born DJ Kool Herc is frequently credited with introducing these techniques to New York in the 1970s, the direct lineage remains contested (McCann, 2017). DJ Kool Herc himself explicitly rejects the "Jamaican-origins narrative," asserting that hip-hop did not stem from Jamaican music culture (Said, 2015, p. 50).

The repeated use of a single sample has played a decisive role in the emergence of new musical genres. A prominent example is the "Amen Break," a 5.2-second drum sequence from The Winstons "Amen, Brother" (1969), performed by Gregory C. Coleman. This recording became afoundational rhythmic element in hip-hop, notably in N.W.A's "Straight Outta Compton" (1988), and provided the structural basis for the development of jungle and drum and bass (Holbrook, 2020). In parallel with broader shifts in popular culture's engagement with its own past, Reynolds (2011) identifies an evolution in the function of sampling, from a pioneering to a curatorial practice.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the technique was used primarily for stylistic innovation: artists such as Public Enemy and Wu-Tang Clan manipulated short snippets of vinyl recordings to create entirely new hip-hop beats and tracks that functioned independently of their source material (Reynolds).

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, producers increasingly sampled entire loops or textures to give a song a vintage or "authentic" feel; Reynolds calls this "museum-isation of music" (p. 31), a development in which sampling functions as the curation of historical moods and aesthetics rather than as a purely technical innovation. Sampling functions as both a creative tool and an acoustic bridge between past and present.

To address the temporal and spiritual dimensions of historical musical artifacts, this paper analyzes sampling through the lens of hauntology. Originally introduced by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx* (Derrida, 1993), hauntology refers to the persistence or return of elements from the socio-cultural past (Gallix, 2011).

In this framework, samples are audible cultural artifacts reintegrated into contemporary soundscapes. Sterne (2003) describes sound recording as a process of disembodiment, as it separated the human voice from the physical body for the first time. Consequently, a recording serves as a ghost or a trace of a human

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presence, and sampling further amplifies this inherent supernaturalism (Reynolds, 2011).

In order to understand the cultural motivations and economic conditions driving this transformation, the following chapter examines nostalgia through Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) and Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* (2009). Boym categorises the individual and collective functions of nostalgia, while Fisher outlines the socio-economic conditions underlying contemporary cultural production.

3 Nostalgia and Capitalism

"The music of home, whether a rustic cantilena or a pop song, is the permanent accompaniment of nostalgia" (Boym, 2001, p. 4). Boym identifies auditory stimuli as particularly effective triggers for nostalgia. In a capitalist system, this emotional response is exploited through commodification—the process of turning immaterial goods, such as memories or feelings, into marketable products. As a result, music acquires a form of nostalgic capital.

The term *nostalgia* is derived from the Greek roots nóstos (return home) and álgos (longing). It was coined in 1688 by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer in his dissertation *Dissertatio Medica de Nostalgia* to describe a medical condition observed in Swiss mercenaries serving abroad. Hofer classified nostalgia as a disease resulting in "painful yearning" for the homeland (Anspach, 1934), or, as Boym (2001) describes this period, "the nostalgic was possessed by a mania of longing" (p. 4). While originally conceptualized as a medical condition, nostalgia has since become a central topic in psychological and cultural studies.

Reynolds (2011) characterizes contemporary nostalgia as a security blanket against an overwhelming present and a future perceived as threatening by climate change and economic instability. As Shaw and Chase (1989) argue, the phenomenon emerges when "elements of the present are felt to be defective" and there is no "public sense of redeemability through a belief in progress" (p. 15).

Nostalgia operates on personal, cultural, and collective levels, linking individual history to a shared sense of community (Boym, 2001). The interplay between music and nostalgia facilitates "autobiographical remembering" and the construction of social identity (Van Dijck, 2006).

In this context, music serves as a tool that helps individuals make sense of their personal past, connect with their cultural heritage, and develop a sense of collective belonging. Boym (2001) distinguishes between two primary modes of nostalgia based on the relationship between individual memory and collective influence. While individual nostalgia focuses on the internal experience of the nostalgic, Boym is primarily interested in how collective nostalgia shapes this internal experience, categorizing these responses into restorative and reflective modes.

Restorative nostalgia focuses on the *nostos*, the return home. Boym describes the restorative mode as an attempt to "rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps" (p. 41), often presenting itself as objective truth or tradition rather than as a nostalgic construction. This mode frequently fuels "antimodern myth-making" (p. 41) and nationalist movements by utilizing national symbols tocreate a sense of belonging, reducing the complexity of memory to a one-dimensional narrative, potentially leading to conspiracy theories and radical revivalism (Boym).

Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, focuses on the *algia*, the longing itself. Unlike restorative nostalgia, it recognizes that the past is irrevocable and cannot be recovered; it is "more concerned with historical and individual time, with the irrevocability of the past and human finitude" (p. 49). This mode values the fragmented and temporally displaced nature of nostalgia and remains "aware of the gap between identity and resemblance" (p. 50). Rather than rebuilding, the reflective nostalgic constructs a relationship to the irrecoverability of the past, often resulting in bittersweet irony or melancholy (Boym). The tension between these two modes defines the modern experience of nostalgia. Boym (2001) notes that a "modern nostalgic can be homesick and sick of home, at once" (p. 50).

In this context, the return to the past is not a literal restoration but provides a new perspective from which to reevaluate the present. Citing Jorge Luis Borges interpretation of the Odyssey, Boym suggests that "Ulysses returns home only to look back at his journey" (Borges, as cited in Boym, 2001, p. 50).

Alongside the distinction between restorative and reflective nostalgia, Boym identifies a creative potential within the reflective mode. By focusing on the creative potential of loss, reflective nostalgia allows for the imagination of

alternative historical paths that were not taken but remain relevant for contemporary critique. This act of reimagining the past suggests that the reflective nostalgic does not merely revisit the past but actively constructs a new place (Boym).

As nostalgia emerges from a perceived lack of stability and a deficiency of the present (Shaw & Chase, 1989), this section draws on Fisher's (2009) concept of capitalist realism to analyze the underlying late-capitalist atmosphere and its influence on contemporary cultural production.

The Industrial Revolution, from the late 18th to the mid-19th century, provided the technical and economic foundation for a globalized, Western-centric collective nostalgia by establishing the infrastructure for mass entertainment, including professional music publishing, sound recording, radio, and television (Pfleiderer, 2018). Consequently, popular culture became a central vehicle for disseminating the American way of life and its underlying capitalist values (Boym, 2001).

As Fisher (2009) famously observes, it is now "easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (p. 1). This framework manifests itself as a pervasive atmosphere that stagnates and conditions sociocultural production.The 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union and the secularization of the late 20th century established capitalism as the dominant global framework, effectively rationalizing away any systemic alternatives (Fisher).

Fisher links this cultural stagnation to the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s. The systemic erosion of social security and the privatization of non-commodified spaces under the Thatcher and Reagan administrations created a precarious environment for the cultural sector (Fisher).

This shift installed a "business ontology" (p. 17), where every aspect of society, including music and art, should be run as a business (Fisher). As a result, neoliberalism culturally "subsumes and consumes all previous history" (p. 4), turning the past into marketable commodities (Fisher).

In late capitalism, nostalgia and authenticity function as forms of cultural capital (Fisher). Nirvana's lead singer, Kurt Cobain, serves as a case study for this commodification of authenticity. Fisher argues that Cobain's anti-corporate stance, combined with the band's music, was effectively commodified and sold as a product. This dynamic is also visible in the commercial success of hip-hop. The genre's emphasis on "realness" became a primary driver of its marketability.

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Reynolds distinguishes two dimensions of this realness. First, it represents an uncompromising attitude that rejects music-industry standards; second, it reflects a socioeconomic reality defined by precariousness, systemic racism, and state surveillance (Reynolds, 1996, as cited in Fisher, 2009, p. 14). In late capitalism, lived experiences of instability and marginalization thus become a marketable aesthetic of authenticity.

The 2008 financial crisis served as a decisive stress test for this framework. Rather than leading to structural reform, the crisis demonstrated the system's dominance: the global financial architecture was stabilized through extensive state intervention and taxpayer-funded rescue packages, effectively socializing private losses to preserve the existing order (Fisher). Fisher argues, that the economic demand for safe, low-risk investments restricts cultural innovation, fostering a reliance on sequels, remakes, and musical revivalism—one tendency contributing to what Reynolds (2011) terms contemporary pop cultural Retromania. This stagnation results in what Fisher (2014), drawing on Franco "Bifo" Berardi, calls the "slow cancellation of the future" (p. 23). The concept describes a condition in which the twenty-first century has culturally failed to begin.

While the twentieth century projected a future of radical novelty and progress, the actual twenty-first century has largely consisted of rearranging the aesthetics of previous decades (Berardi, 2011).The cultural and economic stagnation of capitalist realism has direct implications for the psychological state of the individual. Fisher (2009) describes these effects not as isolated medical conditions, but as systemic outcomes of a broader "cultural logic" (p. 45). This cultural logic produces a state of "reflexive impotence" (Fisher, p. 21), in which individuals are aware of systemic failures but feel incapable of enacting change. This political paralysis is often accompanied by "depressive hedonia" (Fisher, p. 21)—a condition in which the pursuit of short-term, superficial pleasure serves as a reactive distraction from the absence of a meaningful collective future.

Furthermore, the system enforces a "privatization of stress" (Fisher, p. 19) by framing mental distress as a purely individual or biological problem, capitalism masks its own role in producing these conditions. This individualization reflects a broader systemic inability to acknowledge finite resources or the exhaustion of its subjects (Fisher).

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The cultural and economic stagnation of capitalist realism has direct implications for the psychological state of the individual (Fisher). Fisher describes these effects not as isolated medical conditions, but as systemic outcomes of a capitalist realism. The persistence of this atmosphere is reinforced by the system's inherent lack of responsibility (Fisher).

Fisher (2009) draws on Žižek's notion of the "Big Other" to describe how capitalism generates a virtual authority that exists only because individuals act as if it does (Žižek, 1999). This phantom entity, often manifested as public opinion, enforces social discipline and self-censorship despite its lack of a actual presence (Žižek). Structurally, this power is organized as a system without a responsible subject: whereas traditional theology posits a God at its center, capitalism is defined by the absence of such a center (Fisher, 2009).

It functions as an all-encompassing, impersonal force, comparable to the inaccessible bureaucracy in Kafka's The Trial, where the rules are absolute, yet no one can be held accountable for them (Kafka, 1925).

Under these structural conditions, capitalist realism enforces a state of constant cultural revival, as its dynamic prioritizes the commodification of the cultural past to ensure marketability. The following chapter presents my Bachelor's project *8Remix*, a sound installation that acoustically observes the automated, sample-based music production of an endless nostalgic remix.

4 8REMIX

8Remix or *Endless Remix* stems from the observation that much contemporary popular culture, despite operating within a period of major digital transformation, continues to rely strongly on aesthetic nostalgia.

The work has two main objectives. First, it demonstrates the automated, real-time production of an endless remix exclusively from the most financially successful pop songs of the past two decades. Second, it showcases how the task of remixing this emotionally affective dataset can be outsourced to a pipeline of automated processes, providing insight into the standardized and automated nature of digital content itself.

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To maximize the collective nostalgic affectivity of the remix, the dataset consists of all Billboard Hot 100 songs released between 2000 and 2020. The material is harmonically and temporally standardized to C major at 128 BPM and divided into a cappella and instrumental tracks by repurposing key and BPM sync functions, as well as stem-separation features of the DJ software Rekordbox. The final dataset contains 4,000 key- and BPM-synced a cappella and instrumental audio files.

The processed dataset is reassembled into the final remix by a code-based automation workflow that navigates the music software Ableton, whose master output is streamed live to www.8Remix.com, an internet radio station.

8Remix operates in real-time iterations synchronized to a tempo of 128 BPM, so each iteration lasts exactly eight bars (≈15 seconds). In every iteration, the system remixes a randomly selected audio file with an acoustically already present audio file, constructing the remix.

As a speculative amplification of a retromaniac present, *8Remix* shifts the artistic role from music production to dataset curation and automation-workflow design, mirroring the hyper-optimized, automated character of contemporary content generation within our technologically mediated lifeworld.

The dataset is designed to encapsulate the closest possible approximation of a universal Western nostalgia. By utilizing the Billboard Hot 100 as the global village of popular music, the work maximizes nostalgic potential within an American-centric capitalist system.

A central feature of the work is the harmonization of the dataset through the standardization of tempo and pitch for all audio files. As a result, the systematic alteration exposes the manipulation of personal nostalgia by shifting familiar musical sounds. This modification constitutes the primary appeal of the remix—being both familiar and new at the same time.

A full documentation of the work can be found on www.billhartenstein.com

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5 CONCLUSION

As our pop culture evolved into a medium through which we culturally revisit the past, the digital nature of sampling changed our relationship with history (Reynolds, 2011).

One of the resulting effects was that the 20-year rule of pop culture revivals, which was quite accurate for the 20th century, lost its rhythm since the 2000s (Reynolds). This development has produced a state of absolute ubiquity in which the distinction between the present and the retro dissolves. In this environment, even the immediate past is immediately evaluated for its commodification potential, resulting in what Fisher (2014) characterises as a cultural stasis, or the "slow cancellation of the future" (p. 17).

In *Ghosts of My Life* (Fisher, 2014) the author reflects on the cultural presence of the past while listening to Burial's album *Untrue* (2007). In the sound of *Untrue* Fisher hears a future for the twenty-first-century that was promised by the spirit of 1990s rave culture but never arrived. Influenced by UK garage and jungle, Burial manually places drum samples in his tracks using the editing software Soundforge, layering them with processed RnB vocals and the crackle of old vinyl records. Fisher argues that the quality of this emulation creates a new musical form with a reflective potential, allowing the dynamics of the present to be observed from a new perspective.

This observation connects to Boym's (2001) concept of reflective nostalgia, which the author characterises as a potential of loss that acknowledges that the past cannot be restored yet engages with it constructively, thereby generating a new place of memory. Memory therefore always produces a new place, since it always fails to recreate anything exactly as it was and nostalgia itself is like a language. Ballam-Cross (2021) describes a form of constructed nostalgia in chill-wave, synth-wave, and vapor-wave, genres that lack concrete historic reference points and instead collage fictional aesthetic and temporal markers to evoke "a nostalgia for times and places that have perhaps existed only in the listener's imagination" (p. 70).

Since the 2000s, capitalism has transformed our relationship with the cultural past. As a result, the relation between popular and underground music has changed significantly. There has been a gradual rise in noise and distortion in popular

music, previously associated primarily with underground genres such as noise music (Hartenstein, 2024).

A prime example of this intensification of timbre qualities and distortion is the emergence of the "loudness war", which describes competition for loudness as a measure of affect within digital audio distribution services such as Spotify and Apple Music (Katz, 2015). Waveform analyses reveal extensive digital clipping, resulting in a persistently compressed and high-density sound (Katz, 2015; Michaels, 2008). Metallica's *Death Magnetic* (2008), produced by Rick Rubin, sparked major controversy over this trend because of its extreme compression and audible digital clipping (Michaels, 2008).

Contemporary examples of extreme sound practices can be found in the works of musicians such as 2hollis (*Star*, 2025), Nettspend (*Early Life Crisis*, 2026), and EsDekidd (*Rebel*, 2025). These albums utilize distortion, clipping, and saturation to achieve intense acoustic timbre qualities,

functioning as markers of authenticity and signaling a raw, unpolished aesthetic. Despite their subcultural framing, these aesthetic revivals remain highly commodifiable, mirroring the commercial absorption of icons such as Kurt Cobain.

The prevalence of noise in popular music indicates shifting boundaries of what society classifies as music. As Hegarty (2007) observes, noise is not merely an acoustic phenomenon but a judgment, consisting of sound qualified as excessive, unwanted, or disturbing (p. 4). Since the identification of noise depends on cultural perception and context rather than on inherent sonic properties, its prominence in contemporary music reflects a lowered societal threshold and a transformation in the definition of the social field of popular culture.

This erosion of the boundary between underground and popular music directly impacts Bourdieu's (1984) concept of musical taste as a form of social distinction. Musical taste functions as symbolic capital; preferences such as favoring underground over mainstream music serve as markers of class identification.

As Bourdieu states, "taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier" (p. 6). Through the commodification of authenticity and the underground, popular music has resolved one of its primary internal commercial challenges: the distinction between pop as a marketable mass product and the underground as an ostensibly un-marketable cultural asset. My bachelor's project serves as a practical exploration of this convergence.

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8Remix is the soundtrack of a generation that has been socialised entirely within digital spaces. Depressive hedonists (Fisher, 2009, p.21), always attached to the infinite entertainment matrix of capitalism. A critical distinction remains: while the workflow can statistically calculate and trigger nostalgic affect, only the human listener possesses the capacity for emotional resonance.

In conclusion, the question arises as to the prospects of a cultural future in a present structurally dependent on the recycling of its own past. Contemporary culture exists within a space of ahistorical time due to its extensive engagement with the cultural past.

In my view, the simultaneous communication of multiple temporalities offers significant cultural potential. Digital streaming platforms such as SoundCloud have long facilitated the exploration of genre intersections. One example is genre-bending, where the appeal lies in the unexpected encounter between two genres that, at first, seem worlds apart. This dynamic characterises a shift from traditional genre conventions towards an occasionally esoteric interplay of cultural references, establishing a new form of musical symbolism. This process remains ongoing and is far from reaching its conclusion. The 21st century may represent a period of musical orientation, of learning to navigate the infinite archive of musical possibilities (Reynolds, 2011). This cultural transformation encompasses both contemporary retromania and the underlying spirit of innovation of our time. I coin this cultural process a *Culture of Remix*. As musician and philosopher Elysia Crampton stated in an interview in 2018, "that's what's great about music–it can generate and house multiple narratives" (Patzschke).

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