

Dean Blunt



Dan Barrow on the aesthetic of resistance shaping the electronic dreams of Dean Blunt, Inga Copeland and Actress

Actress



ESCAPE

Actress's *Ghettoville* was the soundtrack of London in 2014, a drive through *Blade Runner*'s rainswept Los Angeles stripped of its neon excitements, a dream city turned to a nightmare labyrinth. Critics puzzled over that ghetto in the title: what was it doing with music so abstract, so closed off in its own obsessive rhythms? The symmetry with Darren Cunningham's 2008 debut *Hazyville* is suggestive: from the doped out comforts of techno inflected by wonky to another kind of unreality, that intoxicants can only blunt and transform.

Following on from the repression of student activism and Occupy, the dismantling of the welfare state, worsening conditions for those in and out of work, the rise of the populist right across Europe and a compliant mainstream media, 2014 has been notable for the grim and frantic air of business as usual that has hung about both the charts and middlebrow culture. Much music has retreated inward under the pressure of "precarious work and digital communications", as Mark Fisher has it, reproducing "a minimal variation on an already familiar satisfaction" – witness the ongoing traffic in rote electropop, and the increasing focus on classic house and rave. But *Ghettoville*, among other releases, represents a different sort of inward turn: to the alchemical laboratory of the studio.

Ghettoville takes the forms in which neoliberal ideology and its emotional collateral is most naked – Rihanna, Drake, trap etc – and spins particles from them into puzzle boxes of cryptic loops suffused with longing. The titles mark out the limits of a known world turned into a prison: "Rims", "Towers", "Image", "Skyline", "Time". "Don't" loops an anonymous female vocal's imprecation "Don't stop the music" over a paralysed keyboard figure and fizz of static, as if in a trance-pop breakdown impossible to escape.

"Street Corp" turns black, grating static and what sounds like needle-skip into a series of irresolvable loops, at once visceral and mysterious, the .gif turned corporeal and longing for escape from its own digital rhythms. In a year when dance music got ever more fixated on texture as a guarantor of authenticity – the fetishised roughness of hardware jams set against digital audio – *Ghettoville* used it for something much more complex. Its rich aesthetic transformation of the grim atmosphere of austerity Britain harks back to gangsta's weed-haze of sampled vinyl crackle and *There's A Riot Goin' On*, jammed in the shadow of addiction, terror and urban poverty.

The former Hype Williams duo of Dean Blunt and Inga Copeland have long worked with such strategies. What looked in 2010 like a blank agglomeration of art world in-jokes had become, by 2012's *Black Is Beautiful*, a ghostly rehearsal of trauma through the detritus of late capitalist culture. The pair's respective solo releases, *Black Metal* and *Because I'm Worth It*, become ever more hermetic, burrowing further into a universe of blurred samples and sensual regret. *Black Metal* constructs elliptical sprechstimme songs of codependence, betrayal and chemical numbness from sampled indie pop, a music that slides between resignation and turbulent helplessness, forged originally in the experience of defeat (to use a phrase from Christopher Hill) of the mid-1980s. *Because I'm Worth It*, released under the name Copeland, forms a kind of companion to another of this year's most compelling inner journeys, Grouper's *Ruins*. Where Grouper aka Liz Harris's album turns the sound of a single room, a handful of instruments and the vocal wraiths summoned by multitracking and tape hiss into an escape route to a dream of sound floating as free as mythic nature, Copeland uses

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DIY techno and grime to summon an oneiric image of the public space of club music as an odyssey to the end of the room. "Advice To Young Girls", featuring production work by Actress, imagines young women slipping out of parental homes to "Face the night/The city is yours". "Inga", coming just after the Wu-Tang quotation "Cash rules everything around me" of "Diligence", sounds seduced by its own liquescent dub effects, love "in a city of sorrow" framed by hovering turquoise pads slashed by cheap hi-hats.

The intermittent critical plaint since the 2011 UK riots – where's all the protest music? – misses the point. In a climate where progressive politics is on the back foot, lacking the historical capability to produce radical aesthetic articulations, the demand for lyric content at the expense of form – the forcing of dully programmatic sentiments into existing song structures – is a call for additions to the garbage heap of culture. The work of Actress, Blunt and Copeland represents by default an act of political resistance, but more importantly they dwell in what Theodor Adorno calls the antisocial moment of the artwork. In the black mirror of the record, a society that offers nothing but domination finds its Other.

In his "Mellow Soul" essay, published when the political antagonism of 2011 was reaching its height, David Toop wrote that in contemporary music's archive fever, "fullness of expression is restricted, contained or masked by a sinkage back into the blurred morass whose lack of specificity is both symptom of ecstatic nostalgia and search for new language" (*The Wire* 327). We can say the same of politics in 2014: at a moment when radical social change is both necessary and impossible, perhaps the only way of engaging with the toxic material of late capital is to disappear into music's dream of itself. □

Roger Deckler (Actress); Nick Waplington (Blunt)