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## OF DRONES AND ANGELS: GAIKA'S SONIC IMAGES OF URBAN RESISTANCE



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“Nothing can stop us, no Theresa, no Boris”. This is how Brixton-born artist GAIKA addressed a small crowd while performing last November at Corsica Studios, an independent music venue in Elephant and Castle, a popular area with migrants and students in South London, currently under a £3 billion gentrification process led by the local council of Southwark. GAIKA’s reference to British PM Theresa May and Boris Johnson, foreign secretary and former mayor of London, was part of an act that – like much of his production – combines music, art and politics. The recent media hype around GAIKA makes sense. He is a new artist bringing creativity and innovation on both sides of the Atlantic into a music scene that is often saturated with many trifles, but not politics.

His mixtapes

[Security](https://www.discogs.com/GAIKA-Security/release/8624100)(<https://www.discogs.com/GAIKA-Security/release/8624100>), released by Mixpak in April 2016, and [Machine](https://www.discogs.com/Gaika-Machine/release/7818478)(<https://www.discogs.com/Gaika-Machine/release/7818478>), a 2015 self-release, are both the expression of an electronic cross-genre that is not afraid of speaking out about racial discrimination, police brutality and urban resistance. The elements that characterise GAIKA’s music have been captured quite extensively in the past two years and his

production is considered to be the “sound of the megacity”<sup>1</sup> Gibb, Rory. “Gaika: Sounds from the Megacity.” *The Wire*, 2016. At the sonic level, gothic images of dystopian London are mixed with Caribbean dancehall traditions, while afropunk masks are combined with melancholic melodies, industrial tones and performance poetry. The power of GAIKA’s aesthetic lies in the translation of the richness and diversity of the city of London into the construction of a multi-layered identity. His grime afropunk aesthetic captures well the harshness of everyday life in austerity Britain. Lyrics and sounds recreate the social environment of South London. For instance, in “Blasphemer”, GAIKA sings: “Can we talk about needing jobs/Can we talk about cleaning blocks/Can we talk about grief and loss/Can we talk about

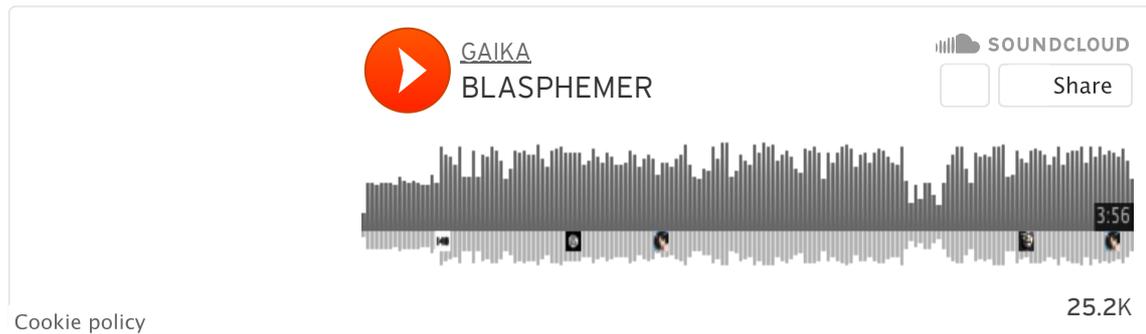
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<sup>1</sup>

young black boys/Walk out in the street and just ah get shot/How you gonna let them killer cops off”.



GAIKA's sounds evoke the social context and everyday life of the blocks and streets of South London's neighbourhoods of Brixton, Stockwell and Vauxhall. A life which is under different degrees of pressure. Housing policies across the globe first confine multi-ethnic communities, such as in the case of the popular areas of South West London. Decades later, the same families face evictions under the forces of urban regeneration plans carried out by speculative financial capitals that entered the estate market after the 2008 crisis (Lees, Loretta, Hyun Bang Shin, and Ernesto López Morales. *Planetary Gentrification*. Urban Futures. (Cambridge, UK: Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016). In the meantime, public services face huge cuts, with many local councils in London losing fifty per cent of their budgets. Libraries turn into gyms, colleges into flats, local cafes into higher-end fast food chains. These interventions provoke “grief and loss”, not only because communities get fragmented, but also because the conflict spread into the streets, where the confrontations with the police become real. On top of this, opportunities for young people are increasingly limited, as in the case of higher education, which in 2010 saw the introduction of the £9,000 fee cap by the coalition government. The perception is that class divides are reinforced and an increasing number of young people end up in low-skilled and precarious zero-hour contract jobs. Under these circumstances and adding to these an uncertain post-Brexit scenario, it is not surprising that in the last elections 72% of young people aged 18-25 went to vote and that the Labour campaign saw an unprecedented alliance between grime artists, party supporters and young people under the name and hashtag [#grime4corbyn](https://www.grime4corbyn.com/). The campaign – which “encourages young people to take part in the electoral process by registering to vote” – saw dozens of music artists and celebrities endorsing the Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn on social media, through memes, music videos, remixes, concerts, tweets and merchandise. It is under this new wave of engaged music that GAIKA's music should be interpreted. None the less, GAIKA offers a surplus compared to other artists. He creates a sophisticated image of the “controlled city”.

A second element of GAIKA's sonic aesthetics is, in fact, the urban environment. For instance, in the commercial video *Untaggable*:

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**GAIKA plays with the concept of the urban beyond one city and he does so by interweaving London, New Orleans, Tokyo, and La Paz into an urban tale of the metropolitan experience.**

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[#city\(https://www.nowness.com/series/untaggable/city-gaika-factory-fifteen?](https://www.nowness.com/series/untaggable/city-gaika-factory-fifteen?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=desktop&utm_campaign=share)

[utm\\_source=facebook&utm\\_medium=desktop&utm\\_campaign=share](https://www.nowness.com/series/untaggable/city-gaika-factory-fifteen?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=desktop&utm_campaign=share)), GAIKA plays with the concept of the urban beyond one city and he does so by interweaving London, New Orleans, Tokyo, and La Paz into an urban tale of the metropolitan experience. The influence of different cities on GAIKA's visuals is highlighted in a conversation with Natalie Davies<sup>3</sup> Davies, Natalie. "GAIKA's EasyJet Guide to 'Machine,'" *Dummy*, November 19, 2015. <http://www.dummymag.com/features/gaikas-easyjet-guide-to-machine>(<http://www.dummymag.com/features/gaikas-easyjet-guide-to-machine>), where the artist recounts events of his recent past giving a snippet of how the many places that generated the mixtape *Machine*. "London is the origin. It is the *ETERNAL HOOD* with a fortress of solitude found south of the river". When talking about "Grey" - one of the tracks included in the self-released album but also the name of the Manchester collective formed by Bipolar Sunshine, Jazz Purple and August+Us - GAIKA continues saying that "so much of this work was made in Manchester's makeshift art factories, and so much of it is made from reliving a million paranoid nights under the Northern strobe." Then there is a parenthesis in the continent. "[Amsterdam] and its citizens informed this project in abstract by being the cast to some imaginary Dutch film of which this is the score. *Machine* is the soundtrack to chase scenes through labyrinthine streets and neon haze in slow motion". Lastly, the German capital. "Berlin is somewhere I've both lived or very regularly visited for the last six years. Somebody on a video shoot said that he could only describe *Machine* as 'hallucinogenic Panorama bar trap'. Genres are pointless to me though. Berlin is a place that very quickly teaches you there are no boundaries outside of our own head." The eternal hood. Million paranoid nights. Neon haze. No boundaries.

Many of these elements - the experience of producing music within and against a network of neoliberal cities - are exposed in a breath-taking self-directed short film called *Security*([http://https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzzdsb\\_SX8c](http://https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzzdsb_SX8c)), which starts with London's electric pink and spooky blue skyline. The aerial shot is taken at night, from south to north, with the Shard looking like a glossy version of Anselm Kiefer's towers: spectral and earthly, but not unwelcoming. A synthesised voice

adds to the nightlife shot a tone of solemnity. A drone is capturing the city...but who is looking from above? Is it a drone? Is it an angel?

Two minutes and twenty-nine seconds into the film, the screen is dissected by a warning message: "YOUR CITY NEEDS YOU". GAIKA is now seen lying on a warehouse floor and appears with a katana. The change in the point of view – from the sky to the ground – indicates that he was flying over the city and has now crashed down. He resembles a celestial guardian disguised as a gothic warrior. It is not clear whether he embeds a hi-tech angel or a human-like machine. The scene is accompanied by a drum sequence. It is only at this point that the rhythm sounds like a march. Another message appears: "YOUR COUNTRY NEEDS FEAR". GAIKA masters the conundrums of the megacity. The city is seen as the space where the "country" imposes its control. Security is another word for technocratic power. At the same time, the viewer is encouraged to defend the city from oppressive forces. Need is a synonym of resistance.

In GAIKA's megacity there is no break between urban life and state control. It forces to build the struggle from within, to sabotage its devices against the machine, to break free from repression through creative resistance. The aerial shot can therefore be confusing. What is

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GAIKA telling us about the city? Is he turning the neoliberal drones into angels? Or were angels once conceived as a form of drones? The evocative parallel between drones or Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) and angels has been made by Pasi Väliaho while describing the cover of Guilielmus Gumpfenberg's book *Atlas marianus*.<sup>4</sup> Väliaho, Pasi. "The light of God: Notes on the visual economy of drones." *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies* 3, no. 2 (2014): 99-111. In this article, Väliaho suggests that warrior angels and UAVs share a similar visual economy of war. Drones are employed in wars to target enemies. The cover, instead, shows four angels airlifting the Virgin Mary's house from Nazareth to the Italian village of Loreto, in a mission to secure safety from the infidels. This analogy suggests that angels were seen as soldiers and that today's drones can be equally terrifying. Rainer Maria Rilke, the Bohemian-Austrian poet, evoked a similar anxiety towards angels. In the *Duino Elegies*, they were seen as terrifying, hierarchical and deaf to humans' prayers. According to the Islamic tradition – which Rilke knew well – the angels of the *Elegies* are figures of transition, from the world of love and life, to the world of death and fire.

Looking at GAIKA's film *Security*, the gaze offered by the aerial imagery offers yet another perspective to this allegory. GAIKA does not simply oppose drones and angels. It is neither a matter of distinguishing between opposite types of angels nor a way to identify himself with a military fashion. GAIKA invokes a leap of imagination – a transition of perspectives. *Security* is about the need for a

transition to a creative resistance, in opposition to urban control. London, one of the cities with the highest numbers of security cameras, is a natural experimental field for new policing techniques. UAVs are a key instrument in today's civil security and the London Metropolitan Police has not denied that will deploy those to combat terrorism and chase thieves. Drones are also used to ship substances and phones in prisons and it is not unlikely that in the future, the skies of London will see proper aerial battles between "controllers" and "controlled". In this context, GAIKA's operation can be seen as part of what Holly Willis calls "a continuous, networked unfolding of city and technologies characteristic of a culture of computation" Willis, Holly. "Sense and the City: Liam Young's Speculative Cinema." *Mediapolis* 2 (2), June 7, 2017.

<http://www.mediapolisjournal.com/2017/06/sense-city-liam-youngs-speculative-cinema>(<http://www.mediapolisjournal.com/2017/06/sense-city-liam-youngs-speculative-cinema>)/. The artist offers not only an image of controlled cities, but a possible response, an aesthetics of sonic affects that can challenge the militarisation of a technological imagery. To these images of control, there is another layer – the sound of urban resistance – which GAIKA adds to the complexity of the metropolitan media-sphere.

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The music video continues with angel-looking dancers in an underground club. GAIKA's angel-warrior starts to recite a Ku-ji, a nine-syllable mantra linked to Taoist magic, introduced by Ge Hong, an esoteric writer during the Jin Dynasty. "To enter a famous mountain, choose an opening day, which can be determined by its cyclical binary. Hang silk of the five colours, each piece five inches wide, from a large rock, so that you may be sure to succeed in your goal. Further, while entering the mountains you must know the Six-Chia secret prayer". GAIKA is seen to walk

London's Chinatown, famous for its unlicensed shebeens. He then takes revenge on mafia-like gang members, alluding to the presence of the numerous underground threats emerging in the nightlife. Finally, the film ends with two goth-warriors dancing, adorned by wings of neon lights, forming an environment in which earth-bound creatures look ready to liberate their bodies. The esoteric lyrics, the drone-gaze visuals and the romantic music are far from being dreamlike. Dance and music are acting here as a spiritual re-energiser Rietveld, Hillegonda. "Ephemeral spirit: Sacrificial cyborg and communal soul." *Rave culture and religion* (2004): 46-61. This is what we might call "romantic hardcore", a renaissance of romanticism in the age of security, a mixture between a futuristic and what Reynolds called London's electronic hardcore continuum Reynolds, Simon. "The Hardcore Continuum: Introduction." *The Wire* 300 (2009). GAIKA's musical

aesthetic is political to the extent that he seeks to develop a representation of hi-tech subjectivity that counter-attacks the oppression of a drone-controlled city. Van Veen has described afrofuturism in music as a “fictive operation” that has the ability to transform the present conditions of capitalist violence Van Veen, Tobias C. “Vessels of Transfer: Allegories of Afrofuturism in Jeff Mills and Janelle Monáe.” *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5, no. 2 (2013). Becoming a machine serves as a narrative to challenge identities confined by a securitarian discourse of how to monitor people’s lives. A transition from control to autonomy.

GAIKA’s fictional narrative does not end into a pure transcendental image of the city, escaping its materiality. He manipulates man-made drones, revealing that the re-appropriation of the same technology that controls the city can potentially enhance new urban subjects. What is becoming clear is that security and control operate on different levels. One way is by monitoring cities with drones. Another is through processes of gentrification, which hits housing but also creativity. Despite being considered as a cultural value-makers, independent music venues are closing down throughout London due to a lack of concrete institutional interventions to sustain creative spaces and in what Garcia calls “a feedback loop of hype and speculation” Garcia, Luis-Manuel. “Perspective: What Happened to the ‘24-Hour City?’” *Crack Magazine*, October 4, 2016.

<http://crackmagazine.net/opinion/opinion/perspective-happened-24-hour-city/>(<http://crackmagazine.net/opinion/opinion/perspective-happened-24-hour-city/>). Music resistance is therefore a response to these loops and could be a political project too, as the #grime4corbyn campaign demonstrated. GAIKA’s aesthetics imagines new ways in which technology and cities are intertwined and how technocratic powers suffocate people’s lives. His sonic images are a sign that the urban grid can be re-appropriated to create alternative and resisting narratives to policies of securitisation.

## Notes

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1. ↑ Gibb, Rory. “Gaika: Sounds from the Megacity.” *The Wire*, 2016
2. ↑ Lees, Loretta, Hyun Bang Shin, and Ernesto López Morales. *Planetary Gentrification*. Urban Futures. (Cambridge, UK: Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016).
3. ↑ Davies, Natalie. “GAIKA’s EasyJet Guide to ‘Machine,’” *Dummy*, November 19, 2015. <http://www.dummymag.com/features/gaikas-easyjet-guide-to-machine>(<http://www.dummymag.com/features/gaikas-easyjet-guide-to-machine>)
4. ↑ Väliaho, Pasi. “The light of God: Notes on the visual economy of drones.” *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies* 3, no. 2 (2014): 99-111.

5. ↑ Willis, Holly. "Sense and the City: Liam Young's Speculative Cinema." *Mediapolis* 2 (2), June 7, 2017.  
<http://www.mediapolisjournal.com/2017/06/sense-city-liam-youngs-speculative-cinema>(<http://www.mediapolisjournal.com/2017/06/sense-city-liam-youngs-speculative-cinema>)/.
6. ↑ Rietveld, Hillegonda. "Ephemeral spirit: Sacrificial cyborg and communal soul." *Rave culture and religion* (2004): 46-61.
7. ↑ Reynolds, Simon. "The Hardcore Continuum: Introduction." *The Wire* 300 (2009).
8. ↑ Van Veen, Tobias C. "Vessels of Transfer: Allegories of Afrofuturism in Jeff Mills and Janelle Monáe." *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5, no. 2 (2013).
9. ↑ Garcia, Luis-Manuel. "Perspective: What Happened to the '24-Hour City'?" *Crack Magazine*, October 4, 2016.  
<http://crackmagazine.net/opinion/opinion/perspective-happened-24-hour-city/>(<http://crackmagazine.net/opinion/opinion/perspective-happened-24-hour-city/>).