

# The Embodiment of Postmodernism in Ryuichi Sakamoto's Rap Track Undercooled

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**Abstract.** Since the postmodernism has spread around the world and the advent of electronic music, more and more composers based on traditional music concepts are fusing modern technology to explore sound and acoustics, using the combination of acoustic instruments and electronic music. Ryuichi Sakamoto is one of the most representative composers of contemporary electronic music influenced by postmodernism. This article will take Ryuichi Sakamoto's work *Undercooled*, composed in 2004 from album *Chasm*, as an example to analyze the musical structure, melody design, lyrics will be the focus of the analysis. Secondly, through the analysis of the postmodernism concept displayed in this piece, the author tries to clarify the postmodernism concept is reflected in the music piece.

**Keywords:** undercooled; postmodernism music; Ryuichi Sakamoto.

## 1. Introduction

Ryuichi Sakamoto is a famous Japanese composer, music producer and actor. As one of the most influential musicians in Japan, his music works cover a wide range. In 1978 he formed the band YMO (Yellow Magic Orchestra) with Haruomi Hosono and Yukihiro Takahashi and released his first album in the same year, such as *Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence, The Last Emperor, Clouded Sky* and so on. After entering the 21st century, he cared about politics and actively participated in Japanese social activities. After settling in New York, he often wrote about environmental protection and anti-war, and tried to capture the voice of "Nature".

The track *Undercooled* on *Chasm*, released in 2004, is the first song on the album *Chasm* and has a clear stylistic contrast with the rest of the album. The song incorporates rap elements from Jazz hip-hop, as well as pentatonic scales and Erhu music. The author believes that using this work as the first work of the whole album can not only set the music keynote of the whole album fusion, the work also attracted a larger audience because of its more popular form than *Chasm*, the high-frequency electronic percussion of the same title, or *Lamento*, which is based on sound materials, have a wider audience than the rest of the album.

## 2. Ryuichi Sakamoto and The studio album Chasm

### 2.1. Sakamoto's musical style and philosophy

Sakamoto started learning classical music at an early age, and was influenced by different musical styles as he grew up. In high school, he was influenced by Claude Debussy's impressionist music, after entering the music department of the Tokyo University of the arts, he was influenced by electronic music, folk music, pop music such as the Beatles.[1] Under the influence of different music culture, there are many kinds of music elements in his music works. Because of his unique music style and humanistic care in his works, he has become a master among contemporary composers. The integration of various styles and elements in the works is a comprehensive reflection of Ryuichi Sakamoto's music creation career and composing style since his university days. The various humanistic solicitude in the works reflects the composer's understanding and thinking of various social problems encountered in the process of music creation and life process. Under the influence of the postmodernism, he deconstructed his own music in the turbulent times, and show a unique way

of creation: breaking the original rules of music creation, breaking through and seeking changes, forming a “music liberation” mentality, calling for anti-war and peace, and integrating the thinking of man, nature and life into its own works, viewing the works from a postmodern art perspective. In fact, since the Great East Japan earthquake in 2011, Ryuichi Sakamoto has paid more and more attention to the possibility of communication between nature, music and people, coupled with the worldwide popularity of electronic music, so we can see the embodiment of postmodernist concepts in his later works. It can be said that Ryuichi Sakamoto is a composer who blends Japanese musical concepts with Western creative methods, and also collides and embodies popular music and classical elements.

This creative idea coincides with the idea of postmodernism, which emerged in literary studies in the mid-1960s with the aim of building a bridge between elite culture and popular culture.[2] Postmodernism believes that people need to critically re-evaluate the traditional reason of the West, and at the same time free art from the shackles of its categorization. Postmodernist art first questions the subjective expression of the artist, and the common denominator of this artistic direction is the desire and awareness of the need to reposition art. Therefore, in this paper, the author will analyze the creative ideas and concepts in the *Undercooled* works, and explore the creative thinking of electronic music under the influence of postmodernism in multiple dimensions through musical analysis of musical form structure and other methods.

## 2.2. The studio album *Chasm*

At the beginning of the 21st century, the fault lines between different countries in the world were extremely sharp, the isolationism and hegemonism of the United States rose, and in 2001, when the terrorist attacks occurred, the fault lines between people, countries and even religions became more and more visible. The album *Chasm* was inspired by the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, which Sakamoto believes was not purely motivated, but no one doubts it. Driven by anger, he released this album in 2004. *Chasm* refers to the rift, the fault line, which reflects the extreme imbalance and contradictions and estrangement between the world.

In fact, this is not the first time Sakamoto has turned his attention to social issues, and since the end of the Gulf War in 1991, Sakamoto has been disgusted with the "new world order" that then-President George H.W. Bush wanted to establish. In 1999 Ryuichi Sakamoto's opera *LIFE* attempted to portray a grand idea and encapsulate the entire 20th century in it. Sakamoto believes that the 20th century was a “tragic century” in which countless people lost their lives to wars and revolutions, but Sakamoto remains optimistic about the 21st century: “These poisons should be swept away in the 21st century.”[1] Ryuichi Sakamoto accommodates this vision into a large-scale opera composed of nine parts. It can be said that the work *LIFE*, which was born at the end of the century, is a major turning point in Ryuichi Sakamoto's music creation history of more than 20 years after his debut.

The album *Chasm* consists of 14 tracks, including *Undercooled* with South Korean rapper MC. Sniper, and *World Citizen - I won't be disappointed* with British singer David Sylvian. And *War & Peace*, which invites twenty ordinary people from different countries and regions to interpret it at different speeds and tones. The entire album works are mainly electronic music and English pronunciation, At the same time, the album is more experimental due to the collaboration with many young artists such as Carsten Nicolai and Christian Fennesz. In the live performance, pieces are played on Sakamoto's acoustic piano while other artists process and fill in the audio with electronic synthesizers or filters. Under the influence of many young artists, Sakamoto no longer believed that creating pop music had to hide some elements of avant-garde music, so *Chasm's* album has elements of experimental and modern music, as well as popular music elements, such as jazz rap, blending old school rap and today's mainstream music styles to form *Chasm's* first piece, *Undercooled*.

### 3. An analysis of Undercooled

In the short period of more than half a century since the development of electronic music in the 20th century, composers have already broken through traditional composing techniques and expanded and extended the range of sound sources and timbre: from the unconventional performance of traditional instruments to the synthetic electronic timbre that needs to be modulated in the later period. Composers continue to break through and subvert the traditional mode of composition, and carry out diversified exploration. The work *Undercooled* combines traditional composition techniques with electronic music instrumentation, presenting a logically clear and structurally complete electronic music work. Therefore, this work has a strong fusion gene. This kind of integration is embodied in the fact that the works are based on traditional composition techniques, while analog equipment and computer hardware and software are used to produce music. Some electronic timbre in the works replaces the concept of traditional musical instruments. Meanwhile, production methods such as the integration of traditional musical instruments and electronic instruments, the integration of eastern and western musical instruments, and the integration of musical sounds and noise also appear. Because of its unique cross-border, innovation and functional diversity, it has become one of the most influential works.

The work combines the typical oriental melodies played by Erhu with Korean rap. Electronic percussions and distorted timbre of electric guitar are matched with the mid=frequencies of the voice to achieve a special auditory effect for the audience.

The total length of the work is 4'32". The waveform of the work is shown in Figure 1.

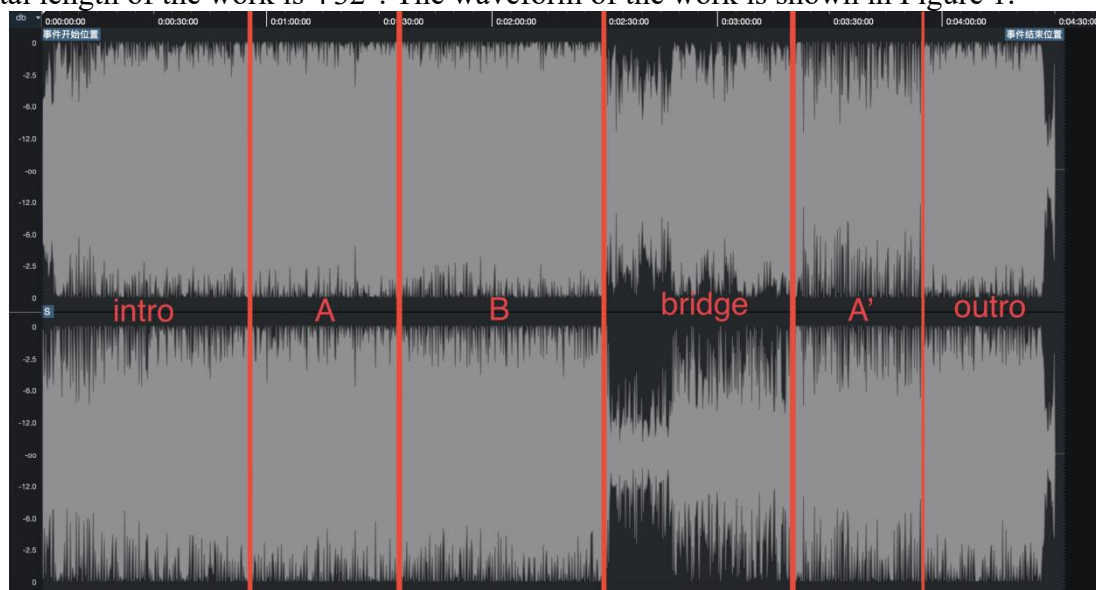


Figure 1: *Undercooled* audio waveform

In terms of musical structure, the work can be divided into six parts, namely: intro, A, B, bridge, A 'and outro. Besides the introduction and outro, the overall musical structure has similarities with the musical structure of "outro". In the structural principle of "outro", "outro" is the initial presentation of musical materials, and "outro" is the development and extension based on the repetition of "outro". "Turn" is the addition of new material in the music to contrast with the previous part, and "combine" is the collection of all musical elements of the music, which has the sense of ending in function. In this work, the electric band and the Erhu play the chorus and introduce the vocal improvisation as the introduction part, and the verse and the chorus form A huge paragraph. There is no great change in the arrangement of paragraph B, but the main change is in the lyrics, forming A more compact and expansive paragraph with paragraph A; As a contrast, the Bridge section is first connected by the distorted electric guitar timbre Solo, and then the electric chorus melody is introduced to match with the voice, and the chorus is finished after two times. A 'is introduced into the main song again with a reversed timbre, which acts as a summary of various musical elements. All the musical elements that

have appeared in the earlier part of the song are concentrated, such as distorted guitar, Bass strumming and erhu timbre throughout the song, and these musical materials are used to push the work to a climax. It corresponds to the form structure of "initiating and converging".

In terms of melody motivation design, the work uses the combination of popular electro-acoustic band orchestration thinking and electronic music creation thinking to perform, and the melody motivation throughout the work uses the traditional Chinese pentatonic mode F-Yuchanggong six-litre mode. This theme motivation has undergone three developments in the work, consisting of changing musical instruments, vocal ranges and electronic processing. In the process of creation, music needs to be organized according to the development law of "point-line-plane", [3] starting from the simplest "sound" to collage, and extending to lines in the process of development, that is, the concept of horizontal time. At the same time, it is also necessary to expand and expand the vertical development such as frequency band. The work *Undercooled* is also composed of simple motivation, phrase design and organization. The melody motivation of the work is shown in Figure 2.



**Figure 2:** *Undercooled* melodic motive

The melody shown in Figure 2 appears several times in the work, but the location and orchestration are different each time. While adopting the rigorous creative techniques in traditional composition, the phrase breaks the concept of traditional music creation and the limitation of music sound, so as to show the diversity and richness of music, contrast the linear thinking characteristic of traditional composition with the blocky thinking required in electronic music production, and show the musical form under the influence of postmodernism. In terms of musical instruments, there are passages played with Erhu, there are also parts played with electronic timbre, and there are parts where the two instruments are combined. Phrases played with different instruments do not appear in a fixed position. In addition, in the connecting section of the work, the guitar distorted wah effect is used to break and reorganize the musical form, which can be seen that the composer pursues the sound effect of the instrument itself, deconstructs the fragmented melody, and tries his best to explore the possibility of the timbre effect contained in the instrument and the effect device. Unstable chords and strong noises also reflect the disorder in the music creation techniques under the influence of postmodernism.

Percussion undoubtedly plays a key role in the music. A variety of percussion timbre with or without fixed pitch is used in the work *Undercooled*, which runs through the whole song and plays a role of transition and decoration. For example, the fixed-pitch percussion instrument in the indispensable Roland Tr-808 drum machine is located in the high frequency band of the music, which plays a variety of roles such as embellishing, transiting and enriching the frequency band while expanding the high frequency of the work, greatly adding the color and melody of the music. Drum machine refers to a machine that can produce percussion and drum sounds, which has a programmable mode for popular music styles, and the composer can edit the timbre and rhythm patterns to play pre-recorded sounds or simulated synthetic sounds. Real drum covers are limited by the physical size of the drum body and therefore lack plasticity, while electronic percussion has no limitations in terms of pitch. In the work, the audience can hear the sharp electronic percussion sound that has undergone frequency band processing, but also can hear the human voice effect that has been processed and changed through the filter, which is clearly different from the real timbre in reality, and the combination with the real instrument forms a strong frequency band contrast and timbre characteristics.

In terms of lyrics, anti-war, life and nature have always been a constant consideration in the process of Sakamoto's music creation. With the rise of terrorism in the early 21st century, the sound music of citizens around the world calling for non-war has grown louder: the sound of bombs exploding, children crying, and the sound trend of the world shaking. Sakamoto has continuously honed and woven his work. Ryuichi Sakamoto said, "I fell into this crack in the earth's crust, into this crack in history in 2003. Compared to the global spread of bullshit, the truth of the word is not a step forward.[4]" In terms of vocals, the song uses Korean male rap throughout the whole song, and the phrases are mainly backbeat. Meanwhile, the singer's emotions in the verse are relatively extroverted and strong, which are reflected in the lyrics of "pioneers fighting for the dignity and freedom of human rights" and "bloody tragedy". The call of ravaged life and death "and" the upward gun aimed at each other's heads "have a greater sense of impact; The chorus is more restrained and has a sense of telling, echoing the lyrics "human dignity and human rights are being trampled" and "empty hearts only echo the gunfire" and constantly asking "Where is our freedom" and "where is our future".

#### **4. The embodiment of postmodernism in Undercooled**

Postmodernism is a trend of thought that has emerged in the West since the 1960s and has resisted the western modern philosophy system. It is a rebellion, criticism, deconstruction and reconstruction of modernism. Its deconstruction is embodied in the negation and disintegration of the conventional or "ordered" model, which is embodied in the characteristics of contingency and decentralization. Reconfiguration is manifested in the forms of irony, confounding and fusion. The "post" in the concept of postmodernism is not only a definition of time range, but also the meaning of "review", "transcendence and return".[5] Just like the German philosopher Herder believes: "history is permeated, culture runs through the past, present and future, and each of us simultaneously integrates the temperament of each period."[6]

As an artistic concept and form, postmodernism carries distinctive aesthetic features such as anti-aesthetics, decentralization, and diversification.[7] These traits also extend their influence to the realm of music creation. From the establishment of the major and minor key system in the 18th century to the treatment of tonality by Wagner in the 19th century, music has produced a completely different form of expression from the previous era in terms of humanistic thought and technical creation, with composers placing more emphasis on self-emotional presentation and strong appeals. In the 20th century, the use of Bartok's free tonality and the wide spread of Schoenberg's twelve-tone system marked the collapse of the Western major and minor key system. The modernist music advocated by Schoenberg and others overemphasized the relationship between reason, logic and mathematics, which also led more and more composers to think about whether they should abstract use notes to show the meaning of works by ignoring expression and hearing. Therefore, from the perspective of post-modernism music, an all-inclusive music style supported by new technical concepts, integrating ancient and modern China and foreign countries, has emerged. These works challenge the barriers of high art and popular art, question the mutual exclusion between elitist values and populist values, and question the binary opposition, with strong postmodern music creation characteristics.[8] It can be said that it uses the electro-acoustic band and computer production techniques popular in the field of music creation in the 20th century, in order to show the traditional, natural and random musical expression, and processes the existing traditional artistic styles into the "pluralistic and inclusive" post-modern music system. The art works with cutting-edge value produced are exactly the "transcendence and return" of postmodern music to the creation of traditional music. The influence of postmodernism music is also reflected in pop music and folk music. In the case of pop music, there are many songs that have changed styles in Korean pop music, which can be connected from hip-pop style to completely different electric style, and at the same time, many sound elements are used to splice songs. All these reflect the influence of postmodernism on pop music; In the field of folk music, after entering the 21st century, China has also emerged ancient songs that combine ancient poetry and classical images with popular songs. The lyrics and songs of ancient music come from the

quotation, adaptation and imitation of ancient poems, and the creation of traditional Chinese pentatonic mode combined with the production techniques of pop bands or electronic music to express the hazy aesthetic conception. At the same time, it quickly became popular in some parts of China, affecting listeners of different ages and becoming a popular expression of the public.

From the perspective of music form, music is a way of expression of the composer's thinking, which manifests itself and produces meaning. Therefore, in traditional music creation, composers usually show the meaning they want to convey through different ways through the development logic of motivation and theme. Although there are certain differences in the orchestration, auditory experience and even the creation logic of the musical surface, But from the creative logic point of view, this is exactly a "sequence" musical form.[9] In post-modernist music, listeners can feel the characteristics of deconstruction of music. By breaking the traditional creation methods, for example, the irregular elevation of the mid-frequency band of vocals repeatedly occurs in *Undercooled* music and the processing of guitar distortion effects, As well as in the live performance, it can be seen that Ryuichi Sakamoto controls the effects of the vocal band and handles the vocal effects in time during the performance, which reflects the musical state of "disorder". The disordered sound itself is the deconstruction of music, and the promotion from "order" to "disorder" is the process of replacing linear "music" by blocky "sound". Therefore, deconstruction music has become one of the important characteristics of postmodern music.

From the perspective of music style, music functions as a "cultural carrier," enabling composers to manifest and generate their intended meanings through their creative endeavors. If deconstruction is different from traditional music in the creation concept, then collage of different styles of music in vertical or horizontal dimensions forms a "composite" music style.[10] In the process of creation, composers artificially select and weave musical materials, and constantly pursue "innovation" are also closely related to historical reasons and social background. In the later process of creation, Ryuichi Sakamoto believed that the real existence of all things in the world (Physis "nature itself") and the characteristics of human brain (namely, rationality, the relation between Logos "universal law of the world") is one of "transcendence and return". How can human beings coexist harmoniously with nature on the basis of understanding the world? How can we combine the Oriental philosophy of the unity of heaven and man and the unity of all things with the Western philosophy of the division of subject and object and the spirit of independent self to achieve the true "communion of all things"?[4] This point of view has become the main issue of Ryuichi Sakamoto's later works. In the work *Undercooled*, the pop band integrates Erhu, a traditional Chinese folk instrument, and Korean rap, forming a strong color between wild and delicate. This decentralized embodiment makes music truly become an art form of "integration". This seemingly fragmented musical element splicing is also another important feature of postmodern music in composition technology.

## 5. Conclusion

Through the analysis of *Undercooled* and postmodern music, this part tries to draw the following conclusions:

First of all, music creation under the influence of postmodernism shows strong characteristics, and the creation concept of postmodernism is reflected in the subversion of traditional creative techniques and the diversification of musical expression forms. This disordered creation characteristic is the expression of emotion in Ryuichi Sakamoto's works. In the beginning of the work, the synthesizer, Erhu and free rap are introduced, and the voice has no fixed rhythm and lyrics. This kind of music no longer regards music as pure sound art, but changes the sound and music from the sound itself, showing the disorder in postmodern music. In addition, the use of sound effects such as reverb, delay and inversion of the effect of modulation, or the combination of different musical instruments in order to produce a new tone. These are all ways of showing the disorder of music creation under the influence of postmodernism.

Secondly, the strong characteristics of music creation under the influence of postmodernism are also reflected in the "composite" creation technique of using different musical materials together, integrating different musical elements such as pitch and timbre into a unified "style" and developing it. This "pluralism" reflected in the creative conception forms a contrast through different musical materials. Therefore, in the work *Undercooled*, there are broken and scattered vocal or guitar "sound" effects, and there are also forms of expression that integrate various musical language styles, which has become an important part of postmodernist music creation.

To sum up, music under the influence of postmodernism, as a kind of music that integrates traditional composing thinking and electronic music technology, is undoubtedly a very complicated art form with strong logic and vivid expression. While noting the difference and "separation" phenomenon between postmodernism and tradition and modernism, we also need to see its internal "continuity" from the perspective of connection and development. Similarly, the postmodernist trend is still expanding. The *Chasm* and *Undercooled* are not Sakamoto's most deeply influenced works by the trend of postmodernism. The trend of postmodernism makes the creation of music tend to be diversified. The collision and fusion of various musical elements directly lead to the gradual blurring of the boundaries between them. After eliminating the insurmountable gap between the inherent musical forms, the music under the influence of postmodernism is making the fusion of various forms of music possible.

In addition to the album *Chasm*, Ryuichi Sakamoto was also influenced by the relationship between man and nature, and in 2017 released the album *Async*, which contains the concept of synchronization and asynchrony between man and nature, respect for natural life, and thinking about human behavior. There is still a gap in the discussion of this album, and I hope that more research will focus on Ryuichi Sakamoto's natural thoughts and works in the future.

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