

# FABULATIONS OF THE ANTHROPOCENE IN DARK AMBIENT PLAYLISTS ON YOUTUBE

**Marcelo Bergamin Conter**

Departamento de Comunicação, Faculdade de Biblioteconomia e Comunicação, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, Brazil

Conceptualisation, formal analysis, funding acquisition, investigation, methodology,  
supervision, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing

**Ana Christina Cruz Schittler**

Departamento de Artes Visuais, Instituto de Artes, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, Brazil

Formal analysis, data curation, investigation, writing – original draft

**Paulo Henrique Costa Albani**

Instituto Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Alvorada, Brazil

Formal analysis, data curation, investigation, writing – original draft

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## ABSTRACT

YouTube hosts numerous dark ambient apocalyptic playlists created by amateur musicians. These playlists often feature static images or animated GIFs depicting ruined cities, typically devoid of human presence. The accompanying soundtracks, produced using audio editing software, are characterised by low-pitched drones, minimal dynamic and melodic variation, and an absence of percussive elements. While Murray Schafer (1977/2001) highlighted the problem of noise pollution in contemporary society, we pose a different question: how do the sounds of apocalyptic dark ambient playlists imagine the future? What fabulations of the future emerge from these artistic expressions? We argue that these works do not offer solutions to impending catastrophes; rather, they reflect the complexity of the present and our inability to confront it. We propose to examine the production of signs arising from these material relationships. Our analysis focuses on user comments on these YouTube playlists, which reveal the affective responses of listeners compelled to share their listening experiences. Some describe feelings of loneliness, melancholy, or paradoxical emotions such as simultaneous joy and sadness, while others relate the audiovisual experience to personal memories. We conceptualise the interaction between the comments, visuals, and sounds as expanded listening, that is, a communicative process that generates signs and constructs dystopias of the past, present, and future in relation to the anthropocene.

## KEYWORDS

fabulation, dark ambient, semiotics, YouTube, anthropocene

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## FABULAÇÕES DO ANTROPOCENO EM *PLAYLISTS* DE *DARK AMBIENT* NO YOUTUBE

### RESUMO

Encontram-se no YouTube diversas *playlists* de *dark ambient* apocalíptico, produzidas por músicos amadores. Na trilha visual, imagens estáticas ou *gifs* animados apresentam cidades em ruínas, geralmente sem presença humana. As peças musicais que integram a trilha sonora são compostas por meio de software de edição de áudio, compondo a textura sonora por meio de drones graves, pouca variação dinâmica e melódica e ausência de elementos percussivos. Se Murray Schafer (1977/2001) chamava atenção para a poluição sonora que acometia o tempo presente, aqui provocamos de forma diferente: como os sons das *playlists* de *dark ambient* apocalípticas imaginam o porvir? Que fabulações de futuro emergem dessas expressões artísticas? Partimos da premissa de que nestas expressões não constam respostas para as catástrofes que virão — pelo contrário, elas expressam a complexidade do tempo presente em nossa incapacidade de lidar com elas. Propomos observar a produção sónica que decorre destas relações materiais. O nosso método de análise observa os comentários postados pelos usuários nas *playlists* publicadas no YouTube. Os comentários expressam afetos dos espectadores das *playlists*, que se sentiram impelidos a compartilhar sua experiência particular de escuta. Por vezes, expressam que as músicas lhes geraram sensação de solidão, ou de melancolia, ou até sensações contraditórias como alegria e tristeza ao mesmo tempo; em outras, conectam a experiência audiovisual com momentos passados da própria vida. Compreendemos o agenciamento criado pela soma dos comentários, do vídeo e das sonoridades como escutas expandidas, isto é, produção de comunicação, de signos que fabulam distopias do passado, presente e futuro em conexão com a temática do antropoceno.

### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

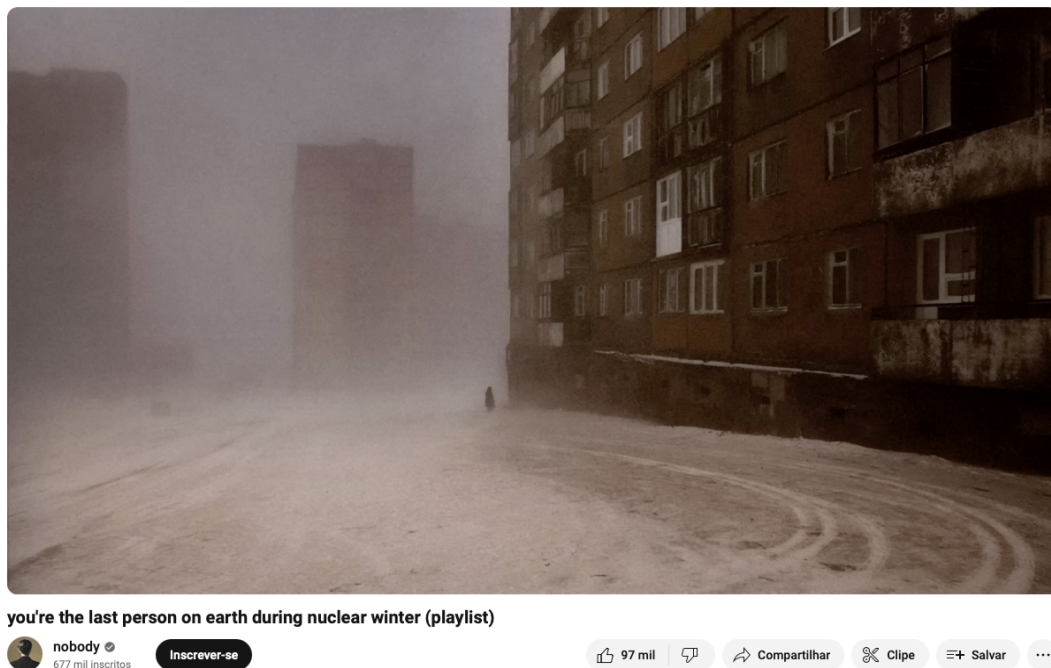
fabulação, *dark ambient*, semiótica, YouTube, antropoceno

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic and the need for seclusion, which forced us to study and work from home for extended hours in front of our computers and mobile phones, have led to various behavioural changes. Of particular relevance to this study is the impact on certain music listening practices. In an effort to make home working and study environments more comfortable, many have turned to playlists published on YouTube by often anonymous users. With this in mind, we conducted a study on long-form YouTube playlists, engaging with the concept of ambient music in a broad sense — beyond its categorisation as a specific genre (Eno, 1978) — to explore the processes of signification occurring in contemporary music listening practices. Our approach is informed in particular by the liner notes of *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* by Brian Eno (1978), in which he states that “ambient music must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting” (para. 5).

Among the various genres that circulated during this period, dark ambient particularly caught our attention. The music within this genre incorporates several sonic elements that align with the three recurring qualities of ambient music identified by

Adkins (2019): fragility, noise, and atmosphere. In summary, Adkins suggests that one of the distinguishing features of ambient music is the presence of residual sounds from the phonographic reproduction of analogue media, such as the noise of worn magnetic tapes and scratched vinyl records. The dark ambient pieces we examined, however, are composed using digital editing software, creating a sound texture through low-pitched drones, minimal dynamic and melodic variation, and an absence of percussive elements. Additionally, they incorporate noises reminiscent of horror or science fiction films, which accounts for the use of the adjective “dark”. The YouTube playlists feature extended instrumental pieces that intensify the atmosphere of desolation. The accompanying visuals often depict Soviet-era cities located in inhospitable regions due to extreme cold or similar imagery that aligns with speculative representations of the anthropocene<sup>1</sup> (Moore, 2016/2022), late capitalism, and labour precarity (Crary, 2013/2016). These playlists, published from 2020 onwards, bear titles such as *You’re the Last Person on Earth During Nuclear Winter (Playlist)* — Figure 1; *Nuclear Winter (Multiple Dark Ambient Hours)* — Figure 2; *Lost in an Empty Place | Dreamcore, Emptycore Playlist* (Figure 3); and *Ground Zero | 2 Hours Post Apocalyptic Lo-Fi Dark Ambient Mix* (Figure 4). The imagery recurrently features abandoned buildings, deserted cities, and extreme weather conditions such as heavy snowfall and storms.



**Figure 1.** *You’re the Last Person on Earth During Nuclear Winter*

Source. Retrieved from *You’re the Last Person on Earth During Nuclear Winter (Playlist)* [Video], by nobody [@nobodyplaylists], 2022, YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9mQ-yXtlo4>)

<sup>1</sup> Biologist Eugene F. Stoermer coined the term “anthropocene”. It has been widely used since chemist Paul Crutzen popularised it, aiming to acknowledge that human interference with the Earth’s surface has been so profound that we have moved beyond the holocene and entered a new geological era — one in which humanity is the primary driver of changes in the Earth’s climate and geology.



**Figure 2.** *Nuclear Winter (Multiple Dark Ambient Hours)*

Source. Retrieved from *Nuclear Winter (Multiple Dark Ambient Hours)* [Video], by Iron Cthulhu Apocalypse [@IronCthulhuApocalypse], 2019, YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRzQuPvLjdU>)



lost in an empty place | dreamcore, emptycore playlist

m3ta  
22,1 mil inscritos

Inscriver-se

68 mil



Compartilhar

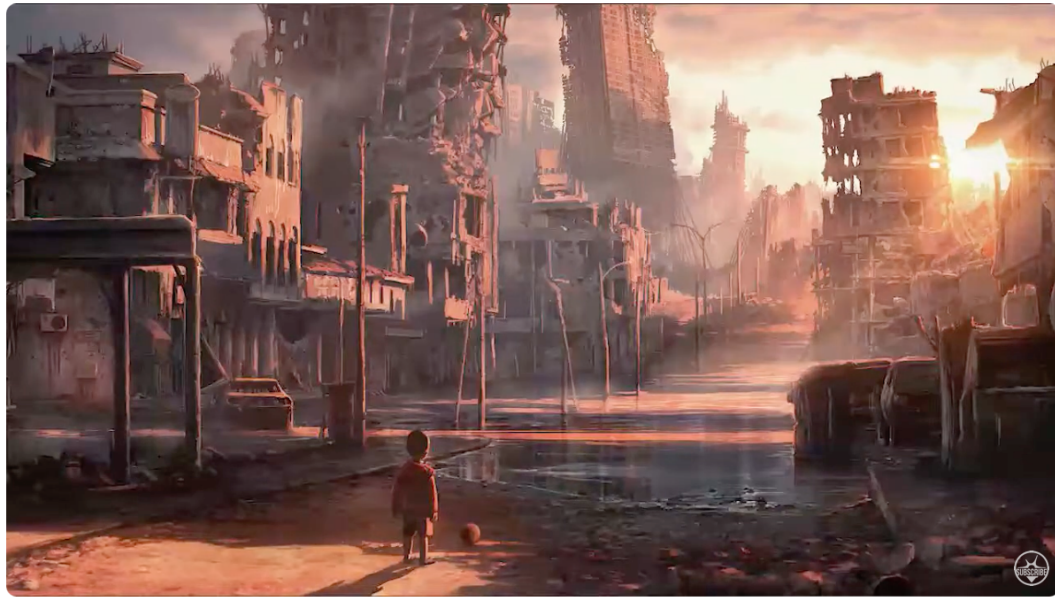
Clípe

Salvar



**Figure 3.** *Lost in an Empty Place | Dreamcore, Emptycore Playlist*

Source. Retrieved from *Lost in an Empty Place | Dreamcore, Emptycore Playlist* [Video], by m3ta [@m3ta\_], 2022, YouTube. ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZYjFfoH\\_gaw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZYjFfoH_gaw))



Ground Zero | 2 Hours Post Apocalyptic Lo-Fi Dark Ambient Mix



**Figure 4.** *Ground Zero | 2 Hours Post Apocalyptic Lo-Fi Dark Ambient Mix*

Source. Retrieved from Ground Zero | 2 Hours Post Apocalyptic Lo-Fi Dark Ambient Mix [Video], by Forgotten Dawn [@ForgottenDawn], 2020, YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luQsVA3E5PE>)

These cases sparked curiosity because, unlike other background music genres popular on YouTube — such as lo-fi hip hop (Landarini, 2021; Winston & Saywood, 2019) — dark ambient does not offer escapism. Instead, it creates a sonic and visual immersion that invites the listener into fabrications of dystopian futures, presents, and pasts, using sounds that heighten these reflections, such as low-frequency drones and noises reminiscent of twisting metal.

Dark ambient playlists also stand out by creating a distinct point of view for the listener (i.e., “you are the last person on Earth during a nuclear winter”). This suggests the emergence of a new mode of listening to ambient music, one that bears similarities to Brian Eno’s (2013) approach: “immersion was really the point: we were making music to swim in, to float in, to get lost inside” (p. 95). In the case of *Music for Airports*, Eno wanted to make

a kind of music that prepares you for dying—that doesn’t get all bright and cheerful and pretend you’re not a little apprehensive, but which makes you say to yourself, “Actually, it’s not that big a deal if I die”. (p. 96)

Aware of the semiotic power of the works mapped, we propose to investigate how users interpret dark ambient playlists, articulating their experiences through comments posted on the YouTube pages where these materials are made available. Our objective is to understand the affective semiosis of the contemporary dark ambient sounds through



the concept of expanded listening (Lucas, 2022) and to identify signs of dystopian fabrications that emerge in such listening translated into comments, drawing on Santaella's (2019) language matrices as a reference. We begin with the premise that the expanded listening of dark ambient, as expressed in YouTube comments, does not offer solutions to climate catastrophes. Rather, it reflects the complexities of the present and our inability to confront these crises, potentially serving as a means of affective engagement with the challenges posed by the anthropocene. In the following sections, we outline our methodological approach and theoretical framework before presenting the analysis of our *corpus*.

## 2. EXPANDED LISTENING, SEMIOTIC MATRICES, AND DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHY

We propose to examine the sign production that emerges from the material relationships between dark ambient playlists, the YouTube interface, and the expressions of listeners/users in the comments section. This will be approached through two methodological stages: the first, based on digital ethnography, involves the selection and mapping of comments; the second, grounded in semiotics, combines Lucas' (2022) concept of "expanded listening" with Santaella's (2019) semiotic matrices.

Digital ethnography is understood as the study of individuals, groups, or cultures within their environment over an extended period (Skågeby, 2010). Drawing inspiration from Taís Severo's (2020) dissertation on the clashes between trans audiences on Reddit, we adopted a digital ethnographic approach as lurkers, observing interactions in the comments of the selected playlists. Following Hine (2000), Severo (2020) argues that in digital ethnography, "the researcher should neither accept texts as direct truth nor dismiss them as distorted accounts. On the contrary, they need to use their competence to interpret texts as cultural artefacts belonging to a context" (p. 125). We also acknowledge that algorithms, platform rules, and YouTube channel owners influence which comments gain prominence. Filters can be applied to exclude obscene language, political statements, specific keywords, and other content, causing certain comments to be held for approval before publication (YouTube Help, n.d.). However, these decisions are not solely at the discretion of the "sender" — the channel owner or YouTube programmers — since their choices about what passes through the filters are shaped by prevailing assumptions about public reaction, which influences the approach and intensity of the filter settings. Finally, from a digital ethnographic perspective, these comments are validated as expressions of a virtual community composed of anonymous users from diverse nationalities and perspectives. Users engage by approving or disapproving of each other's comments through "like" and "dislike" buttons and by replying to one another.

With this in mind, we proceeded to the second stage: developing a method for analysing the selected comments, guided by Lucas' (2022) concept of "expanded listening". In his thesis, the author argues that individual listening experiences remain inaccessible unless they are translated into other signs — whether verbal, visual, or otherwise. Thus, our perception of these experiences is shaped by the signs that arise within the broader

context of the work and the meaning-making processes of interpreting minds that generate interpretants. As he states, “if listening becomes communicable, it is because we can also investigate the production of this communicability” (Lucas, 2022, p. 15).

Therefore, it is through the comments posted by YouTube users that we investigate the interpretants produced by listening to these sounds. We aim to understand the singularities that emerge from these experiences, acknowledging that each dark ambient listening is immersed in a specific territory, exploring subjectivities in sound construction while also recognising that listening and its meanings are produced collectively. Although the comments are published under pseudonyms to preserve user anonymity, we have blurred their names in the images extracted from YouTube.

Also, as Lucas (2022) suggests, it is crucial to recognise that user comments are *translations of listening*, not *transmissions of listening*. In other words, the author argues that we cannot access someone else’s listening directly, only the signs that emerge from that listening.

Finally, to interpret these comments both as the result and link in a chain of translation and to understand the qualities, forms, or laws that regulate their existence, we draw on Santaella’s (2019) schematisation of the three matrices of language and thought to comprehend how the comments are organised. Santaella divides these matrices into sound, visual, and verbal, recognising the predominance of signs in firstness, secondness, and thirdness, respectively. In this context, we recognise that the instrumental music tracks within the playlists, due to their sonic nature, can surprise, sensitise, and develop qualisigns. The visual elements, on the other hand, present sinsigns that directly evoke the imagery of dystopian futures, science fiction, and speculative fiction, owing to their visual nature. Finally, the verbal matrix enables us to understand the signs that emerge from the comments. As we have noted, these comments are expressions of expanded listening, resulting from the relationship between interpreting minds and audiovisual material, where we recognise the predominance of legisigns, arguments, narratives, and dystopian fabrications. They are, therefore, translations of listening into written text.

Just as in Peirce’s (2017) work, Santaella’s (2019) matrices form secondary triads from each element within the primary triad, and this process continues further. The verbal matrix, in turn, unfolds into description, narration, and dissertation.

Description in the verbal matrix refers to the “pure and simple indication of what appears of a thing, of the notes that in themselves reveal something” (Mora, 1969, as cited in Santaella, 2019, p. 292). There is here a treatment of the qualities, a deepening into the object itself. Narration, in contrast, is characterised in verbal discourse as the linguistic recording of events or situations.

However, action only occurs where there is conflict — effort and resistance between two things. Action generates reaction, and interaction produces the event, the fact, and the experience. (Santaella, 2019, p. 322)

Narration can be understood as events unfolding in a sequence, connected either in the present or the future. The dissertation, in contrast, presents a field of formulations that are anchored by law in the verbal; they require a creative becoming and the ability to link ideas, descriptions, and narratives. It involves a constant semiosis with *reasoning*, a blending with description and narration; here, the *concepts* of fact are standardised as *universal*. In Santaella's (2019) verbal matrix, the dissertative grouping stands as the most fitting for categorising and subcategorising thirdness signs, pushing reasoning and their treatment to the extreme.

It is through these categories of the verbal matrix that we analyse the translations of listening expressed in the comments. However, before doing so, we must situate the political, cultural, historical, and intellectual contexts that underpin the fabulatory processes in these comments, as we will explore below.

### 3. THE ANTHROPOCENE AND DYSTOPIAN FABULATIONS

The anthropocene represents a potential new era in which humanity is seen as a geological agent. While there is disagreement on the exact timeline<sup>2</sup>, we will approach the anthropocene as an overarching concept that encompasses the changes related to climate change. These alterations are frequently highlighted in the media, documentaries, and science fiction films. However, the dominant perspective tends to be rooted in corporatist and conservative ideologies. Stengers and Pignarre (2005) argue that capitalism functions as a form of cosmopolitics, one that captures the power to think and act autonomously. On television, in international agreements (such as the 2015 Paris Agreement — COP 21, and the reports by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change; gov.br, n.d.), catastrophe is always projected into a future that never quite arrives. When it does unfold in the present, it is framed as a mere preview of what is to come, despite the undeniable reality that we are already living through the tragedies foreseen — as evidenced by the intensifying floods, wildfires, desertification, epidemics, and other calamities.

Donna Haraway (2016/2023) critiques the term “anthropocene” for attributing responsibility for the global environmental crisis to all humans. She argues it should instead focus on specific social groups, particularly the privileged and powerful. Haraway also challenges the human-centred view of the term, which positions humans as the main agents of change. She contends that transformation is a result of complex interactions between humans, non-humans, ecosystems, and other species.

The author also highlights the importance of fabulations in this context, as they allow us to perceive the world differently, one that is more sensitive to non-human and more-than-human agents cohabiting the planet (Haraway, 2016/2023). The way stories are told shapes the world, a process the author links to the concept of “sympoiesis” — the continuous production of the world through alliances and compositions, becoming “with” in the presence of others, together with others, never alone.

<sup>2</sup> There are debates in academia about the time frame of this era, ranging from sedentarism (the start of plantations) to the first nuclear tests. There are also disputes over its name, with terms like capitalocene, chthulucene, and manthropocene (highlighting the role of patriarchy) being proposed (cf. Moore, 2016/2022).



In light of this, Haraway (2016/2023) introduces the concept of “chthulucene” as a resistance to the cynicism and defeatism that characterise the anthropocene and capitalocene. Since we know who has been responsible (anthropos/capitalism), we can also understand what can be done. The chthulucene invokes non-modern peoples, indigenous groups, fictional beings (particularly tentacled creatures and underworld dwellers, mycorrhizal organisms), the persistence of life in inhospitable places, interdependent relationships, science fiction, scientific facts, and alternative possibilities for composition.

From the outset, we argue that the dark ambient playlists we have mapped in this text operate on the basis of proposals similar to those of Haraway (2016/2023). More specifically, the playlists’ fabrications evoke her concept of *SF*, which includes science fiction, string figures, speculative fabulation, and others. These concepts question the boundaries between reality and fantasy, the relationships between humans and non-humans, and the constructions that shape these relationships with technology. They also develop a critical perspective on the issues and challenges posed by the pragmatism surrounding dark ambient, as well as the already “established” norms in our listening practices. This offers a space for critical reflection on power relations and the possibilities for social transformation. We shall explore what narratives of the anthropocene emerge in the users’ comments below.

#### 4. DYSTOPIAN FABULATIONS IN DARK AMBIENT EXPANDED LISTENINGS

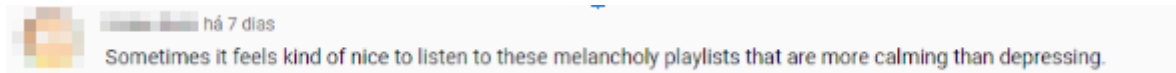
The analysis centres on the comments gathered during our digital ethnography, conducted on the playlists of the videos *Nuclear Winter (Multiple Dark Ambient Hours)*, *Songs for an Empty World*<sup>3</sup>, and *You’re the Last Person on Earth During Nuclear Winter (Playlist)*. Drawing inspiration from the semiotic matrix in Santaella’s (2019) framework, with a particular focus on the verbal matrix, we developed a similar structure to analyse the fabulation processes that unfold in the comments published on dark ambient videos.

As we will demonstrate, some fabulations are structured through iconicity, which we term “fabulatory descriptions”; others through indexicality, or “fabulatory narratives”; and, finally, through symbolism, which we refer to as “fabulatory dissertations”. It is important to note that no comment we analyse will be exclusively descriptive, narrative, or dissertative. This is because these categories are cumulative: a dissertation includes description and narration, while narration comprises description. Furthermore, the comments, as we will observe, shift between these categories.

We will proceed by organising the comments, beginning with those in which descriptions play the most significant role in translating listening, followed by those dominated by narration, and finally, those that focus on the dissertation. Fabulatory descriptions align with Santaella’s (2019) understanding of the qualisign across all semiotic modalities and submodalities, particularly the iconic and the rhematic, while remaining within the verbal matrix, meaning they are translated and expressed textually. The

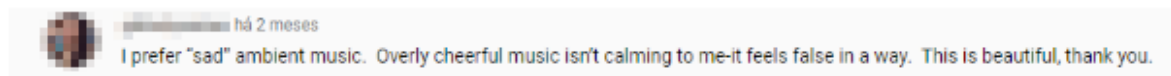
<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fitYe3TkhTc>.

emphasis on descriptions aims to capture the sensations, emotions, and surprises that arise in the listener's interaction with dark ambient playlists. As demonstrated in the comments (Figure 5 and Figure 6), the mood of sadness or melancholy evoked by the sound pieces in the playlists has a positive impact on many listeners.



**Figure 5.** Sometimes it feels kind of nice to listen to...

Source. Retrieved from *You're the Last Person on Earth During Nuclear Winter (Playlist)* [Video], by nobody [@nobodyplaylists], 2022, YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9mQ-yXtlo4>)

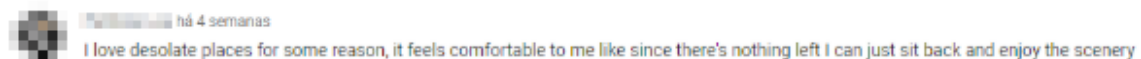


**Figure 6.** I prefer "sad" ambient music

Source. Retrieved from *You're the Last Person on Earth During Nuclear Winter (Playlist)* [Video], by nobody [@nobodyplaylists], 2022, YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9mQ-yXtlo4>)

Several comments, such as these, translate users' emotional reactions without explicitly linking these emotions to the apocalyptic themes of the playlists. This suggests a need for further research on the topic, as it may reflect broader challenges of the present time. For this study, however, we focus on comments where references to the anthropocene are more explicitly articulated. Our initial expectation was to find discussions about the sound properties of the musical pieces. Instead, what we encountered in abundance were comments expressing users' emotional responses to listening or fabulating dystopian scenarios, as we will explore below.

Another intriguing finding was the prominence of the visual score, which captured significant attention from many users. A considerable number of comments focus solely on the images (Figure 7). Given that these playlists are often used as background sound for other activities, one might expect a general disregard for the visuals.



**Figure 7.** I love desolate places...

Source. Retrieved from *Nuclear Winter (Multiple Dark Ambient Hours)* [Video], by Iron Cthulhu Apocalypse [@IronCthulhuApocalypse], 2019, YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRzQuPvLjdU>)

Once again, we observe the contradiction of finding pleasure in images of desolation. Beyond the three brief comments mentioned, there are also longer ones (Figure 8) in which users attempt to articulate more complex observations.

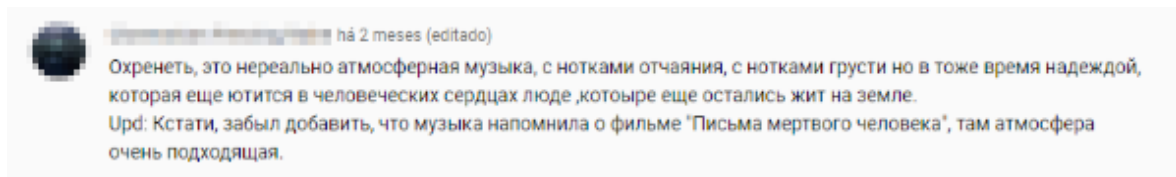


Figure 8. This is atmospheric music...

Source. Retrieved from *You're the Last Person on Earth During Nuclear Winter (Playlist)* [Video], by nobody [@nobodyplaylists], 2022, YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RgmQ-yXtlo4>)

Note. Translation: "This is an otherworldly atmospheric piece, carrying notes of despair and sadness, yet also a glimmer of hope that lingers in the hearts of those still alive on Earth. Update: by the way, I forgot to add that the music reminded me of the film 'Dead Man's Letters' — its atmosphere fits perfectly".

The author of the comment begins by expressing conflicting emotions — at times despair and sadness, at others a sense of hope for humanity — and concludes by drawing a parallel between the playlist's atmosphere and that of *Dead Man's Letters* (Konstantin Lopushansky, 1986). This Soviet film envisions a dystopian future in the aftermath of nuclear conflict, making its themes closely aligned with those explored in the analysed work.

In the comments in Figure 9, we once again observe a contradictory expression of emotions. The author describes feelings of melancholy and despair yet also perceives a strange beauty in desolation — an outlook reminiscent of Spinoza's (1677/2017) perspective, which acknowledges fear as a form of joyful passion.

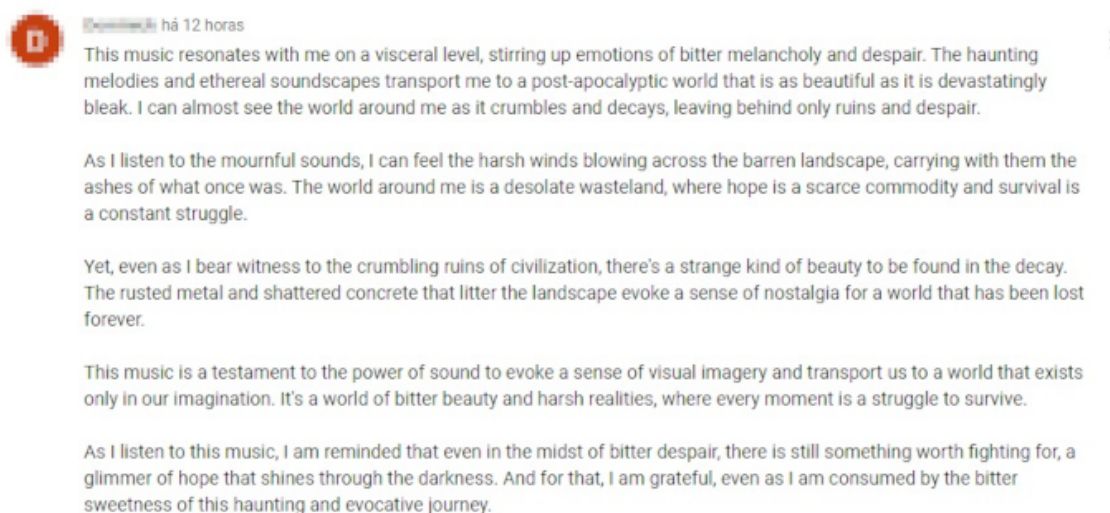


Figure 9. This music resonates with me...

Source. Retrieved from *Nuclear Winter (Multiple Dark Ambient Hours)* [Video], by Iron Cthulhu Apocalypse [@IronCthulhuApocalypse], 2019, YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRzQuPvLjdU>)

There is still no construction of a sequential narrative with cause and effect, only a composition of qualitative elements, as one would expect from descriptions. The grouping of these symbolic elements allows the reader to establish relationships and,

in doing so, to fabulate. We find many similar cases in which users make this act their focal point, dissecting scenarios they have fabulated themselves, imagining themselves moving through fictional spaces and temporalities. These descriptions emerge from such qualities.

The author of the comment in Figure 9 reflects on the sensations evoked by sound in a way that resonates with the concept of “spasm” (Guattari, n.d., as cited in Berardi, 2020). He describes what would be the end of the world, emphasising sensations of collapse, which he attributes to capitalism, associating it with destruction and hopelessness while simultaneously proposing resistance. For Berardi (2020), “[in] spasm, sound collapses into noise, into a tangle of inaudible voices. And music is the vibrational quest for a potential conspiracy that transcends the limits of order” (p. 143). We can thus relate the notion of spasm to the comment in Figure 9, where the contradiction between chaos and equilibrium persists — hope is salvaged amid disorder, reinforced by positive affirmations that link past, present, and future.

When commentators start to weave narratives based on their listening experience, the descriptions will operate as a *sequentiality* to enhance or ground the *progression* of the “shots”, “frames”, and “moments” within the narrative. It is interesting to observe how listeners possess the capacity to craft narratives that are, in a sense, translations of their engagement with playlists, sometimes even alluding to narrative forms from other media, such as fictional cinema. The comment in Figure 10 serves as a good illustration of this.

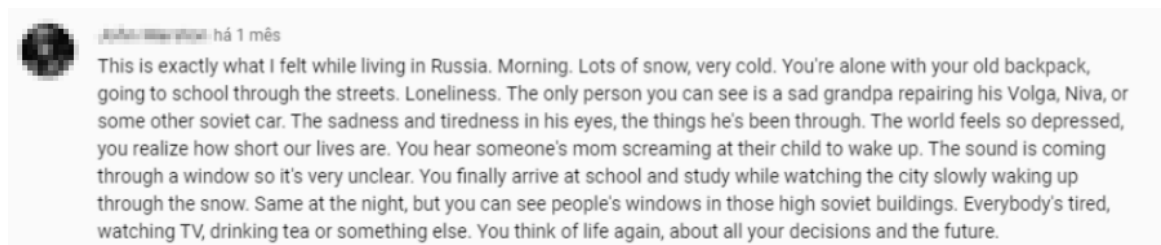


Figure 10. *This is exactly what...*

Source. Retrieved from *You're the Last Person on Earth During Nuclear Winter (Playlist)* [Video], by nobody [@nobodyplaylists], 2022, YouTube.  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9mQ-yXtlo4>)

This narrative has a certain degree of cinematism (Eisenstein, 2002): the passage that observes “sadness and tiredness” in the eyes, for example, insinuates a close-up. There is a cumulative descriptive dimension, as there is in all semiotic phenomena, but here, narrative is predominant over descriptive elements.

We were also struck by the fact that the narrative proposes the description of a past personal experience. In the comment in Figure 10, a “sad” Soviet gentleman is imagined repairing his old car. The author of the comment feels the need to fabulate an ordinary event that took place in the past.

More common than fabulations derived from images of the past are narratives that imagine dystopian and apocalyptic times, usually projecting bleak futures (Figure 11).

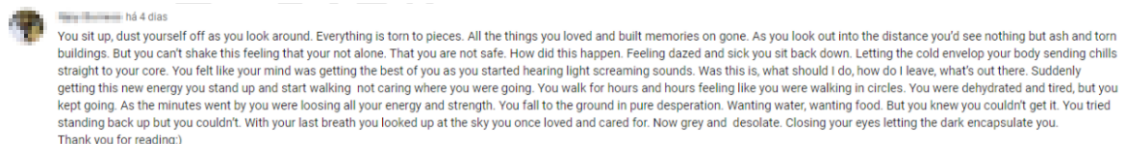


Figure 11. *You sit up...*

Source. Retrieved from *Nuclear Winter (Multiple Dark Ambient Hours)* [Video], by Iron Cthulhu Apocalypse [@IronCthulhuApocalypse], 2019, YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRzQuPvLjdU>)

The fabled future is described in detail by referring to “ash and torn buildings”, but it is important first to highlight a building that is seen, or perhaps even a path to follow without much purpose in a *destroyed, grey, empty world*. In another similar comment (Figure 12), the author of the comment addresses the reader as if they shared in the dystopian fable, again with a certain degree of cinematism.

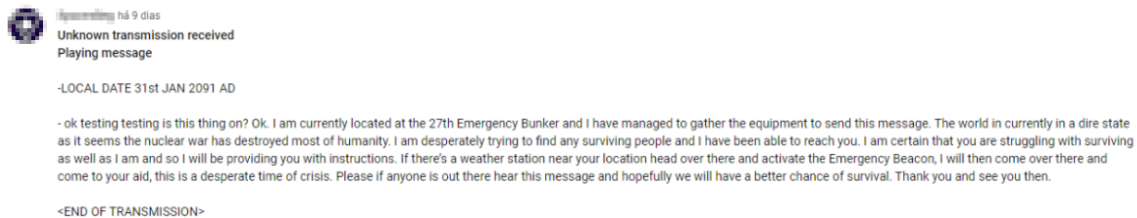
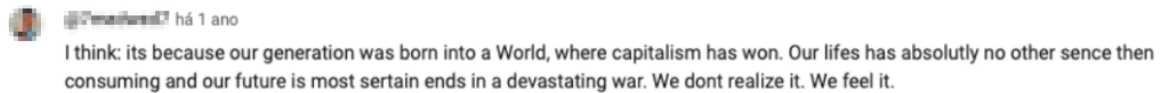


Figure 12. *Unknown transmission received...*

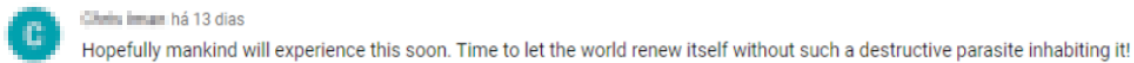
Source. Retrieved from *Nuclear Winter (Multiple Dark Ambient Hours)* [Video], by Iron Cthulhu Apocalypse [@IronCthulhuApocalypse], 2019, YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRzQuPvLjdU>)

The following comments (Figure 13, Figure 14, Figure 15, Figure 16, Figure 17, and Figure 18) are predominantly fabulatory essays. These include analyses, critiques, and arguments about the catastrophes but begin to move away from simple descriptions or narratives inspired by the playlists. In other words, as listeners shift towards symbolism in their comments, they distance themselves from the sensations evoked by the listening experience itself, moving instead towards a discussion about humanity's role on Earth.



**Figure 13.** *Its because our generation...*

Source. Retrieved from *You're the Last Person on Earth During Nuclear Winter (Playlist)* [Video], by nobody [@nobodyplaylists], 2022, YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R9mQ-yXtlo4>)



**Figure 14.** *Hopefully mankind...*

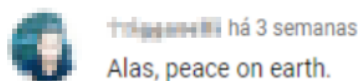
Source. Retrieved from *Nuclear Winter (Multiple Dark Ambient Hours)* [Video], by Iron Cthulhu Apocalypse [@IronCthulhuApocalypse], 2019, YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRzQuPvLjdU>)



**Figure 15.** *I believe there is little...*

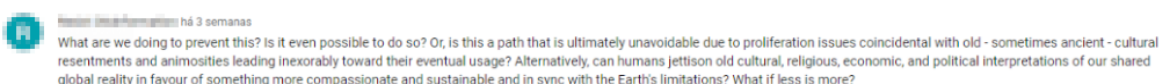
Source. Retrieved from *Nuclear Winter (Multiple Dark Ambient Hours)* [Video], by Iron Cthulhu Apocalypse [@IronCthulhuApocalypse], 2019, YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRzQuPvLjdU>)

Note. Translation: "I believe that there is little time left for our society to change in a radical and unknown way".



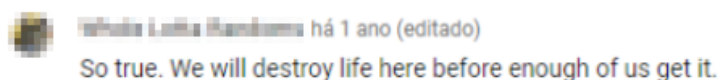
**Figure 16.** *Alas...*

Source. Retrieved from *Nuclear Winter (Multiple Dark Ambient Hours)* [Video], by Iron Cthulhu Apocalypse [@IronCthulhuApocalypse], 2019, YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRzQuPvLjdU>)



**Figure 17.** *What are we doing...*

Source. Retrieved from *Nuclear Winter (Multiple Dark Ambient Hours)* [Video], by Iron Cthulhu Apocalypse [@IronCthulhuApocalypse], 2019, YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRzQuPvLjdU>)



**Figure 18.** *So true...*

Source. Retrieved from *Songs for an Empty World* [Video], by Cryo Chamber [@cryochamberlabel], 2020, YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ftYe3TkhTc>)



There seems to be a tone of self-deprecation in several of these comments, with our species being viewed as a great parasite on Earth whose annihilation would restore peace to the planet, as seen in the comment in Figure 19.

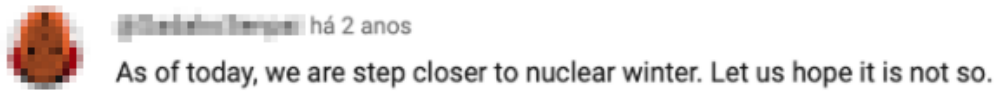


Figure 19. As of today...

Source. Retrieved from *Nuclear Winter (Multiple Dark Ambient Hours)* [Video], by Iron Cthulhu Apocalypse [@IronCthulhuApocalypse], 2019, YouTube. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cRzQuPvLjdU>)

In these comments, we highlight associations made through listening that link the idea of the end of the world to humanity as the main agent, suggesting that the apocalypse will be the result of either capitalism or our parasitism (uncontrolled extraction of natural resources). However, although these arguments emerge from listening, they express little or no direct connection with the music on the playlists' soundtrack, especially when compared to the descriptions of the videos and images in the visual track.

Nonetheless, these provocations, which point towards a hypothetical context, allow us to understand that the concerns raised by the listeners converge on common themes. These are the translations of a semiosis of collective listening, which overlaps with other expressions of expanded listening we explored earlier (description and fabulatory narrative), linking sensations to processes of meaning-making.

## 5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Analysing the comments above, it is evident that there are different ways of engaging with the themes suggested by dark ambient playlists or even apocalyptic issues such as world wars and climate crises. One noteworthy observation is that the comments analysed reveal at least two distinct reactions to potential dystopian futures: the “defeatist” reaction, which views possible disasters as inevitable outcomes, and the “reactive” one, which attempts to formulate escape routes or solutions to these problems. It is interesting to highlight that these lines of thought are contradictory. Still, both stem from listening to the same material, thus demonstrating the production of affective semiosis in contemporary ambient music.

When we set out to analyse the comments through an adaptation of Santaella's (2019) matrices of language and thought, we expected that they would progressively offer more complex interpretations of the sounds. However, the findings revealed a different situation: comments that offer analytical observations about the musical tracks at the dissertative level are rare. In contrast, when the comments do address the sounds, they rarely engage with apocalyptic themes. It's important to note once again that these

categories are not rigid or mutually exclusive: a single comment can encompass all of these categories simultaneously. Our focus was on identifying which category predominates in each commentator's translation of the listening experience. As the analysis demonstrated, the fabulatory descriptions conveyed the sensations, emotions, and affections that the sounds evoked in listeners; the narratives constructed imaginary urban scenarios, spaces, and structures through the sequential arrangement of fabulatory descriptions; and the dissertations offered symbolic reflections on the future of the Earth and humanity in the face of catastrophes, through the accumulation of narratives and descriptions rearranged into general laws. In cases where the interpretation of phenomena is predominantly in firstness and secondness (description and narration), we found more comments addressing planetary crises reactively. Meanwhile, in the symbolic category, the comments tended to reflect a more fatalistic position, suggesting that nothing can be done to prevent the impending catastrophes.

Many of the comments, which primarily included fabulatory narratives, evoked elements common to science fiction cinema. The possibility of the end of the world, whether in the distant or near future, for a variety of reasons — whether entirely fictional or based on verifiable events in nature not caused or provoked by humanity, is a common theme in films such as *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979), *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998), *The Day After Tomorrow* (Roland Emmerich, 2004), *2012* (Roland Emmerich, 2009), *The War of the Worlds* (Byron Haskin, 1953), and series such as *The Walking Dead* (Frank Darabont, 2010) and *The Last of Us* (Bruce Straley and Neil Druckmann, 2013). This recurring theme likely influences users' perceptions when listening to these playlists, as it offers a simulation of the extra-diegetic cinematic soundtrack for these dystopian events, bringing them into the playlist viewer's everyday life. Additionally, the way the context is structured in the comments appears to resemble a film sequence, almost as if describing a series of shots. The various effects commonly used in the dark ambient genre, such as drones, samples, and others, create a sound texture that evokes suspense and tension — elements frequently found in science fiction films and series. Given that these representative sounds of suspense and terror are already embedded in cinema, we can consider the agencies arising from the connection between horror cinema, suspense, and dark ambient. Musicians and users likely encountered these cinematic experiences before being introduced to the musical genre, leading to the natural association between the two.

It is not possible to ascertain definitively through our research method. However, we believe that this phenomenon may stem from a functionalist music-listening culture that has developed on YouTube. Playlists often come with titles that suggest how the music should be consumed (music for work, to relax, to sleep, to work out, to study, etc.), a trend notably seen in lo-fi hip hop playlists. Titles like *You're the Last Person on Earth During Nuclear Winter* or *Songs for an Empty World*, paired with images like those

presented earlier in this article (Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3, and Figure 4), already prime the listener to associate the music with specific meanings.

In this way, the comments analysed seem rooted in pre-existing listening habits, reflecting how listening is never a solitary or individual experience. Rather, it is always shaped by cultural practices that influence interpreting minds. Consequently, the act of listening occurs through signs and results in signs. As Lucas (2022) conceptualises it, all the comments we studied represent expanded listening.

Finally, it is important to highlight the intrinsic association between contemporary music, the anthropocene, the fabulations developed by science fiction, and the multiple forms of affect perceived through listening to the playlists and the accounts in the comments analysed. We recognise that many of the comments' authors are likely unaware of the concept of the "anthropocene" and the onto-epistemological paradigm shifts it implies. However, the result of the agency — promoted by the relationship between the playlists and the translation of listening into text — reflects the symptoms denounced by the anthropocene as a theoretical-speculative tool for understanding the world we inhabit and the way we live and express ourselves within it.

Fabulating, as we saw with Haraway (2016/2023), is also fabricating the world. In this way, dark ambient proves to be a powerful form of communication and cultural expression, as it captures and conveys the concerns of modern society, triggering reflections on the current context and stimulating debates on the potential consequences of an uncertain future. The relationship we have established between semiotics, affections, expanded listening, and the anthropocene reinforces the need to break with the objectification of non-human agents and to understand the agency of semiosis in an increasing sense of concrete reasonableness, in the ability of signs in firstness to surprise, captivate, and create meaning (Grupo de Pesquisa em Semiótica e Culturas da Comunicação, 2020). Therefore, it is crucial to consider that listening to these sounds plays a fundamental role in shaping the sounds of the future, leading us to rethink the implications and challenges of the end times.

**Translation: Anabela Delgado**

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Marcelo Bergamin Conter is a professor of Communication Theories at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul. He holds a PhD in Communication from the Postgraduate Programme in Communication at the same institution.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1413-8903>

Email: [marcelo.conter@ufrgs.br](mailto:marcelo.conter@ufrgs.br)

Address: Av. Paulo Gama, 110 - Bairro Farroupilha - Porto Alegre - Rio Grande do Sul - Brasil. CEP: 90040-060

Ana Christina Cruz Schittler is a recipient of a scholarship from the Institutional Scholarship Programme for Scientific Initiation (National Council for Scientific and Technological Development, Federal Institute of Rio Grande do Sul Notice 12/2023). She holds a degree in Business Administration/Systems Analysis from Faculdades Rio-Grandenses. She is also a Visual Arts undergraduate student at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3674-5061>

Email: [anacshtlr@gmail.com](mailto:anacshtlr@gmail.com)

Address: Paulo Gama, 110 - Bairro Farroupilha - Porto Alegre - Rio Grande do Sul - Brasil. CEP: 90040-060

Paulo Henrique Costa Albani is a recipient of a scholarship from the Institutional Scholarship Programme for Scientific Initiation - High School (Brazilian National Council for Scientific and Technological Development, Federal Institute of Rio Grande do Sul Notice 12/2023). He is currently in his 4th year of the Audio and Video Production Technical Course at the Federal Institute of Rio Grande do Sul - Alvorada Campus.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-6850-2727>

Email: paulo.albani@aluno.alvorada.ifrs.edu.br

Address: Rua Prof. Darcy Ribeiro, 121 - Campos Verdes, Alvorada - RS - Brasil. CEP: 94834-413

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