

# Reviews



## Reviews

**Reggaeton.** Raquel Z. Rivera, Wayne Marshall, and Deborah Pacini Hernandez (eds). Durham and London. Duke University Press, 2009.

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When certain products or practices attain a more secure place in a particular cultural landscape they tend to become naturalized in the minds of those who experience such landscapes; it is almost as if they had always been there, they become “authenticated”. This seems to be the case with reggaeton. As I sit down to write this review I ask myself when I heard about reggaeton for the first time and I cannot find an answer. When pushing myself to remember anything related to what I now believe belongs to the reggaeton performance complex, a number of fragmented images and sounds come to mind. I remember El General in local, low budget shows from the Telemundo or Univisión TV networks in New York City and Boston in the early 1990s; then students asking me about the genre (and actually calling it reggaeton) almost ten years later in Chicago; finally, its explosion into the mainstream media in 2005, and its pervasive presence in clubs in Havana, Cuba, that summer. Although most of these memories are rather vague and patchy, what I do remember clearly is not being able to explain thoroughly what reggaeton was. The sounds and the images seemed to have always been there since the 1990s, but in fact, reggaeton was something relatively new, and as such, also somehow elusive.

Since the mid 2000s reggaeton has arguably become the most danced and talked about Latin music genre. It is omnipresent in Latin American and Latin media in the U.S.; yet, with few exceptions and disregarding its artistic success and its importance as a marker of the transnationality that characterizes contemporary Latino and Latin American experiences of identity, reggaeton had largely remained absent from academic discussion. *Reggaeton*, edited by Raquel Z. Rivera, Wayne Marshall, and Deborah Pacini Hernandez, is an appropriate, timely, and thorough response and reflection on the genre’s popularity. The volume is an impressive collection of academic essays and artistic statements that deals with reggaeton’s cultural significance and stylistic meaning, and the history of transnational migration, oppression, and racial struggle behind its production, consumption, and dissemination. The aesthetic, sociological, anthropological, and political complexity of the reggaeton phenomenon can only be seriously approached from a multidisciplinary perspective. *Reggaeton* offers a multi-logic reading where several disciplines and fields of artistic expression come together to answer questions that no disciplinary field could comprehensively answer alone. The demonstrated expertise in the fields of sociology, ethnomusicology and anthropology of the editorial team, as well as their commitment to the study of music through a transnational lens almost guaranteed the extraordinary depth and variety that this collection of essays, interviews, poetry and visual arts offers.

The book is divided into six sections. In the first section, “Mapping Reggaeton”, Wayne Marshall offers a detailed study of the stylistic development of the genre. By focusing on the transformation of the sounds and rhythms that characterize today’s reggaeton as they traveled historically through a cultural circuit that included Jamaica, Panama, New York and Puerto Rico, Marshall is able to explain the links between genres such as reggae, dancehall, rap, underground, and reggaeton, whilst shedding light on the discourses of “authenticity” behind them. The second part, “The Panamanian Connection”, presents articles by Marshall and Christoph Twickel as well as interviews with singers Renato and El General; the combination of academic and journalistic writings alongside the artists speaking about their experiences gives the reader a rich description of the history of reggae and dancehall in Panama as well as the role of American culture in the slow development of a new style that would only be called reggaeton many years later. Part three, “(Trans)Local Studies and Ethnographies”, is made up of articles that focus on specific issues related to local reggaeton scenes in Puerto Rico (Raquel Z. Rivera), Cuba (Geoff Baker), and Miami (Jose Davila), and a re-evaluation of the role of Dominican musicians and producers in the development of the genre (Deborah Pacini Hernandez). Rivera’s chapter traces the transformation of underground into reggaeton in Puerto Rico in relation to questions of morality and censorship. This essay pays attention to the commercial notoriety of the genre and its transformation into a site for the continued struggles over the representation of racialised stereotypes about class and criminality, and social hierarchies of the island. Baker’s essay on the political tensions between rap and reggaeton in Cuba is a noteworthy contribution that analyzes how both genres play a central role in the current imagination of the national and the global in a socialist country.

The fourth part of the book, “Visualizing Reggaeton”, offers a collection of pictures by Miguel Luciano and Kacho López, and stills from a video project by Carolina Caycedo. This section shows readers the visual aspect of reggaeton culture as well as how artists engage that culture to reflect on issues of neocolonialism, consumerism, gender, sexuality, race, and “authenticity” that concern contemporary Latino youth. Caycedo’s reads the hypersexualized *perreo* dancing style that characterizes reggaeton as an example of a new form of feminism that allows women to reclaim their sexualized bodies and use them to accomplish their own goals. Part five, Gendering Reggaeton, presents chapters by Félix Jiménez, Alfredo Nieves Moreno, and Jan Fairley that explore the role of reggaeton in reproducing gender values as well as contesting gender hierarchies as the genre moves transnationally between New York City, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. Jiménez’s essay compares the figures of Puerto Rican singers Glory and Ivy Queen to illustrate how different individuals might engage the gender stereotypes of reggaeton to solidify or question gender hierarchies in Puerto Rican society; while Nieves Moreno focuses on how the music and performance of Calle 13 challenge the stereotypes of hypermasculinity often associated with reggaeton. Fairley’s contribution centers on the sexualization of the bodies in *perreo* dancing within the particular context of Cuba’s reggaeton scene. One of Fairley’s wise moves is her comparative analysis of the transgressive character of *perreo* in relation to earlier Black genres such as *danzón*, *rumba*, *tango*, or *samba*; thus interpreting reggaeton as part of the transnational cultural flow of African diasporic culture.

The final section of the book is entitled “Reggaeton Poetics, Politics, and Aesthetics”, and combines poetry by Gallego and reflections on the relationship

between hip hop and reggaeton and black pride by artists Welmo E. Romero Joseph and Tego Calderón with analyses by Alexandra T. Vázquez and Frances Negrón-Muntaner. Noteworthy is Vázquez's provocative essay on racial and gender performativity and Ivy Queen, providing as it does an insight into how to deconstruct contradictory and problematic moments in performance as pedagogical articulations.

*Reggaeton* is a truly important contribution to our understanding of the most pervasive and perhaps most misunderstood Latin musical genre at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The blend of academic and journalistic writings with artistic statements, interviews and visual art offers the reader an extraordinary window into the complex landscape of reggaeton. As I was reading through the book I could not help thinking: "No wonder I thought reggaeton had always been here". The rich discussions presented in this volume allows the reader to have a clearer idea of the continuities that make this genre part of a larger cultural complex while defining its particularities as a rather new type of musical expression. As I put the book down I feel confident I could finally somehow explain what reggaeton is; however, I also understand that the vibrant and shifting cultural flows that make it meaningful will most likely challenge this assumption sooner than later. With *Reggaeton*, however, Raquel Z. Rivera, Wayne Marshall, and Deborah Pacini Hernandez have established the foundation for the rich and productive academic conversation that the genre will still generate.

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**Rave Culture. The Alteration and Decline of a Philadelphia Music Scene.**

Tammy L. Anderson. Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 2009.

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**BEATE PETER**

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In her book on the Philadelphia Electronic Dance Music (EDM) scene, Tammy Anderson uses rave culture to reflect on why and how particular youth cultures decline. Her ethnographic methodology, turning her into a participant-observer, is helpful as it provides invaluable insight into the organisation, production and marketing of electronic dance music. Investigating the rave phenomenon from a cultural perspective, she places a scene primarily defined by its music consumption into a wider social, political and cultural context. This approach allows her not only to analyse the forces within the scene that led to its alteration and decline but also to look at external factors that might have affected the perception and development of the EDM scene in Philadelphia, USA.

Comparing the past raves with contemporary EDM events, Anderson traces the development of such events over time. Her historical narrative of the genre opposes the notion that rave is a musical form of a particular time, commonly situated between

1989 and 1992. She creates a *rave-club culture continuum* that categorises EDM events according to their representation of commercial or rave-like values. By doing so, Anderson successfully shows that the multi-faceted space at EDM events abolishes the idea of authenticity and commercialism as a binary opposition. Applying *cultural markers*, Anderson locates several types of events within this continuum and promotes the idea of a spectrum of values that show how the identity of rave culture has changed.

She also introduces six different types of participants, categorised according to their insider or outsider status. As entertaining as it is to read about the difference between *loyalists*, *clubbers*, *pretenders* or *spillovers* and their personal motivation to participate in an EDM event, this model struggles to explain the interest in or absence of a collective identity. Although the ethnographic data collected from interviewees gives an interesting insight into the upbringing of insiders and offers an explanation for the sense of belonging that some aim for on the dance floor, other participant categories are ignored, making a distinction between the ideal types of clubbers and their attitude towards the creation of a collective identity inappropriate.

Anderson's analysis of the forces of cultural change is one of the most interesting aspects of this book, not just from the perspective of a musicologist but also because the alteration and decline of rave culture is presented as symbolising the general trend of youth cultures and scenes. First, the *general schism* between grassroots music enthusiasts on the one hand and younger fans on the other clearly shows how cultural and social values are embedded in a generation's attitude towards the production, marketing, promotion and consumption of music. Second, Anderson's investigation into the causes and effects of the *commercialisation* of raves relates back to rave-club culture continuum. Furthermore, the empirical evidence from her fieldwork shows that such development appears to be innate to youth culture and music. Thus, the mourning and resistance to change of original grassroots rave culture participants appears inappropriate, especially if it prevents a scene from surviving (new fans are not welcomed). Third, the aspect of *cultural otherness and hedonism* is closely linked to rave culture's prominent drug use. More interesting is the point Anderson raises in her discussion of deviation over the extent to which the notion of otherness can still act as a recruitment factor for a specific culture and the question as to when deviance becomes self-destructive. Again, Anderson formulates her questions in such a way that a broader debate is encouraged. Fourth, the aspect of *formal social control* includes an examination of the politics and policies in both the US and UK to provide a base from which to argue for a completely different attitude towards EDM to that of club owners, promoters and fans. Fifth, *genre fragmentation* is identified by Anderson as a result of commercialisation. With the original rave ethos having all but vanished, special events prevent fans from being exposed to various musical genres or styles. Considering some of the comments in the book, the fragmentation of the genre into a wealth of subgenres could also be interpreted as the escape from commercial exploitation, a move that might have been seen by some stakeholders as liberation from commercial restraints and expectations.

The chapter dealing with cultural forces is one of the work's strongest, since it puts rave culture's alteration and decline into a wider perspective. Moreover, Anderson shows how these different forces are interdependent and how they are linked to a particular society's understanding and appreciation of leisure time, music, and deviance: "Simply put, a culture's fate lies in attracting birth cohorts and demographic groups, the destruction in or diffusion of its elements and form, its exploitation via

industry, and its suppression by the state” (112).

Chapter Five is similarly broad in approach, scope and applicability, dealing as it does with the types of cultural work that aim to produce both change and stability for a (musical) youth culture. Anderson’s division of cultural work into restoration, preservation and adaptation makes it clear that the objectives of the various members of this youth culture differ to such a degree that the use of cultural markers on the rave-club culture continuum seems justified. Furthermore, it highlights that this continuum is expandable in all directions and establishes a proof for the diversity within the culture. The comparative study between Philadelphia, London and Ibiza in Chapter Six, however, lacks the depth and critical analysis of previous chapters. It is unclear why those cities were chosen, what they represent or even what the results mean with regard to pan-European research (USA, Spain, Germany), global youth cultures (nomads), the aspect of nationality (Britishness), or regionalism (lots of sunshine in Ibiza, non-organic setting).

Nevertheless, this weakness does not damage my overall evaluation of Anderson’s book as not only a well-written account of the Philadelphia EDM scene and its historical changes but also the importance of its emphasis on scenes in general. In doing so her achievements are threefold. First, Anderson’s use of broad categories and cultural markers that do not over-emphasise the significance of music make her research applicable to other subject areas. Her investigation of Philadelphia’s rave culture is by no means exclusive in its articulation of factors internal and external to a scene. They are proof of the deep rootedness of youth culture in society regardless of levels of deviance. Second, Anderson’s analysis of cultural work shows that youth culture cannot be seen as a fixed and stable entity that vegetates aimlessly. Instead, participants in a particular culture might be motivated for various reasons but they are very active in keeping their youth culture alive. Third, according to Anderson’s participant categorisation I am a loyalist and as such very protective of a scene with great emotional investment. Reading a book about the decline of my favourite youth culture that, for many years, played a big role in my identity formation, meant I read Anderson’s research with some scepticism. But, perhaps most important of all, her convincing arguments are refreshing precisely because they are free from the nostalgic longing for a grassroots rave culture.



**Club Cultures: Boundaries, Identities and Otherness.** Silvia Rief. New York and Abingdon, Routledge, 2009.

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In introducing her book Silvia Rief makes the point that clubbing has become a global phenomenon which takes place in diverse settings such as street parades and music festivals. Whilst clubbing may have “gone global”, the local remains crucial when exploring such diversity. Rief aims to examine club cultures and “particular modes of being and experience” in the shaping of cultural and social identities (8), and in so doing argues that the study of club cultures needs to be placed within broader contexts such as de-industrialisation, urban regeneration and the development of urban night time economies (NTEs). The book reflects on the development of the NTEs and the importance of clubbing in both London and Istanbul. In addition Rief utilises debates about authenticity, aestheticization, virtualization, reflexivity and Otherness to develop her analysis. This is an ambitious project encompassing many diverse topics that reveal fascinating insights into contemporary club cultures.

In Chapter Two Rief compares London and Istanbul and the urban regeneration that took place in both cities which contributed to the development and governance of the NTE and in turn had a significant effect on club cultures. Clubbing was actively encouraged in London’s urban redevelopment and the importance of nightlife in the tourism industry was recognised; in Istanbul this emphasis on nightlife was not as explicit due to the Islamist ruling government. This chapter contains an excellent discussion of the tensions in the development of the NTEs of both cities. The explosion in British urban NTEs and the issues surrounding so-called “binge drinking” have meant that nightlife has become re-problematised. A fascinating examination of the development of clubbing in Istanbul is also put forward; Rief notes for example that social divisions are very much in evidence, with clubbing more often than not associated with “upmarket events for wealthy middle-class and celebrity audiences” (51).

Following this discussion of urban renewal and its impact on the development of London’s and Istanbul’s nightlife, Rief turns to mapping the UK NTE in Chapter Three, arguing that the role of clubbing and dance cultures has received little attention in such exercises. The difficulty in accurately mapping the UK NTE and the cultural production industries involved is highlighted at the beginning of this chapter. These cultural production industries consist of micro-companies which do not appear on “established indicators” (58) and therefore often escape notice. Writers such as Chatterton and Hollands (2003) are pessimistic about the domination of clubbing and nightlife by large companies and the corporatization of clubbing experiences. Rief does not share their pessimism and while she recognises the power of large companies in this competitive sector she argues that even in global markets the local is still important, apparent in the diversity of club cultures within and between various

towns and cities. Chapter Three also charts the history of major UK club corporations such as the Ministry of Sound and discusses the rising costs of producing club spaces. Rief also considers legislation such as the Licensing Act 2003 which affected the way club spaces are or can be produced. She concludes this chapter by stating that “the economic significance of the nightclub sector is considerable but not extraordinary” (76), again highlighting that the sector contains a large number of small independent companies. Although I agree with Rief that it is useful to consider club cultures in their broader social and cultural contexts, I did find myself wondering what these economic policies and issues meant for the *consumers* of club spaces.

With this in mind I started Chapter Four with relish; here Rief discusses the (clubbing) body and the organisation of clubbing experiences. She makes the point that clubbers immerse themselves in club cultures for different reasons and that many clubbers are still connected to the “everyday” (83). This challenges the idea that clubbers and clubbing experiences are always hedonistic and escapist. In addition Rief highlights that ‘everyday’ values infuse clubbing spaces, which in a sense are similar to (some) “everyday” contexts. This affects “body and emotion work” (82) through for example controlling bodily appearance and managing impressions. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the nightclub queue and during the rituals of “going out”. Rief provides further discussion of clubbing communities as *contested* communities in which participants struggle for membership, partly through rituals of belonging and gaining access. Chapter Four focuses on the rules and conventions of clubbing where Rief notes that fashion and dancing provide avenues through which bodies are accepted or rejected according to the conventions of the spaces they are in. She notes that even in club spaces that are more transgressive than the workplace or home, there remain social codes to be adhered to.

Chapter Four contains a nuanced theoretical discussion centring on ideas such as aestheticization and prosthetic culture. This work theoretically frames the preceding discussion of the body and goes on to consider how these processes of aestheticization affect constructions of reality in clubbing environments. This is an ambitious project to situate clubbing in a broader theoretical framework. Consequently it is often difficult to see how the experiences of clubbing as articulated by Rief’s respondents “fit” with this abstract discussion. Perhaps better integration and linking of these theoretical points to clubbing would have helped the “fit” be more clearly identifiable. Rief moves on in Chapter Five to a discussion of reality/realities of clubbing experiences and the “dance underworld” (110). The normalisation thesis is considered in the clubbing context in this chapter. Rief puts forward the idea that drug use in clubs is not fully normalised as her interviewees still associated drug-taking with transgression and fear of dependency. Although I am not sure that I agree with Rief’s interpretation here, it is helpful to see a “moving on” of key academic debates. Attitudes towards drug use and the meanings of drug-taking experiences are also presented as profoundly gendered in this chapter. Further consideration is given to clubbers’ meanings and experiences in Chapter Six. “Identity projects” (132) frame clubbing experiences as a form of self development and self-realisation in relation to issues such as love and romance. The meanings of clubbing are classed, raced and gendered. Theoretical and empirical material is more successfully integrated within this chapter. Again, explicit linking of the narratives that run through Chapters Four to Six may have helped the reader clearly identify how the debates being put forward relate specifically to clubbing.

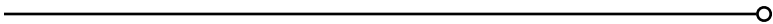
Chapter Seven focuses on images of sexuality or sexual scenarios in two prominent clubbing magazines; *Mixmag* and *Ministry*. Rief points to the crucial role (154) that clubbing and nightlife play in the construction of sexual boundaries and also notes the blurring of sexual boundaries identified by earlier researchers (Pini 2001; Measham et al 2001; Hutton 2006). The dominance of heterosexual identities and heteronormative structures are noted here, even though clubbing environments are often seen as more tolerant of diverse expressions of sexuality. Rief argues that heteronormativity is not affected by the sexual scenarios she identifies in the two magazines under consideration; “naughty girls” and “hot lesbo action” (160-2), with such scenarios or images of transgressive femininities remaining firmly located within heterosexual feminine identities.

Rief extends this discussion of sexualities in Chapter Eight by considering the extent to which sexual boundaries are made or re-made in clubbing contexts. The tensions inherent in the commodification of gay and lesbian spaces are discussed and the idea that clubs are contested spaces is reinforced. Controls on who gains entry through door management and judgements made about consumers within club spaces are filtered through “heteronormative discourses in the reading of (hetero)sexuality” (183) deployed by gay and lesbian clubbers themselves. This dominance of heteronormativity is emphasised in Chapter Nine where Rief concludes that “there is, therefore, no one-dimensional change of gender relations and sexual boundaries in club cultural spaces towards more equality and acceptance of diversity” (192).

Overall this ambitious book locates clubbing experiences within the broader economic, social and cultural contexts in which they are constructed. Rief calls for a refocusing of clubbing research away from a concentration on clubbers’ experiences towards a more comparative, systematic approach. Although at times this way of considering club cultures did not quite “work” for me, the moving forward of debates about club cultures and original insights and suggestions for further research are welcome. This book is suitable for any club researcher wishing to access an informed discussion about the NTE, urban regeneration, bodies, sexuality and club spaces.

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**Run Lola Run.** Dir. Tom Tykwer. Sony Pictures (DVD), 2008 [1998].  
**Berlin Calling.** Dir. Hannes Stöhr. AV Visionen (DVD), 2008.

## SEAN NYE

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The representation of Berlin in music films has an extraordinary history, from the experimental depictions in *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (1927), to Hollywood's homage to Weimar-era Berlin in *Cabaret* (1972), to the queer-punk East Berlin in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001). While soundtracks of Berlin urban life have often relied on classical, cabaret or punk-industrial scores, post-reunification Berlin has seen a new musical genre operate as the city's primary soundtrack – techno. This review examines two key Berlin techno films, *Run Lola Run* (1998) and *Berlin Calling* (2008), and addresses two intimately linked issues regarding these films: first, the nature of the film medium with respect to the now established subgenre of electronic dance music film (short: EDM film), and second, the representation in film of Berlin as a techno city.

The potential for theoretical analysis offered by both these EDM films points to a current lacuna in club culture scholarship – namely, the scarce critical-aesthetic engagement with filmic representations of EDM culture, whether in music videos, documentaries, or in this case, feature films. One exception has been Stan Beeler's *Dance, Drugs and Escape: The Club Scene in Literature, Film and Television since the Late 1980s*,<sup>1</sup> a book which unfortunately tends toward brief, journalistic glosses on its objects of study. However, the book is impressive in its breadth, proving that a rich history of artworks that incorporate club culture already exists. This is exemplified in *Run Lola Run* and *Berlin Calling*, themselves separated by a period of ten years, a gap that points to the importance of the film medium as visual-historical material for study.

*Run Lola Run* has become an iconic film of 1990s Berlin, a status that was secured by its highly innovative plot and unique combination of pop cultural references. The protagonist, Lola, has a task – to collect 100,000 D-Marks and reach her boyfriend, Manni, on the other side of Berlin within 20 minutes. Manni will otherwise likely die in an attempt to rob a supermarket, because he lost the money needed to make a deal with some gangsters. The story is constructed around three alternative universes in a kind of classic Atari arcade game where Lola has three lives.<sup>2</sup> The first two universes end in tragic “game over” scenarios (1. Lola dies, 2. Manni dies), but the final scenario completes the mission with bonus points. Lola succeeds in obtaining the 100,000 D-Marks by placing all her money on two consecutive bets at a roulette table. Manni also solves his debts so that not only is he saved, but together they walk away rich. Lola's constant running through the city in search of Manni and money is the basis for the film's combination of urban life, cyberspace, youth culture and video game narrative. These themes have been the focus of much of the extensive secondary literature on the film.<sup>3</sup> What is of more interest from the point of view of techno researchers, however, is the EDM soundtrack, composed by director Tom Tykwer together with Reinhold Heil and Johnny Klimek and produced in the rather fateful year of 1998 during the height of Berlin's reputation as a techno city and

EDM's popularity in Europe. Yet despite the centrality of music and techno culture to *Run Lola Run*'s success, only one essay amidst the many publications on the film focuses on music: Caryl Flinn's "The Music That Lola Ran To".<sup>4</sup>

Similar to *Run Lola Run*, *Berlin Calling* has become an iconic film of 2000s Berlin, though primarily within the techno scene. It is not of the same artistic quality of *Run Lola Run*, and has had a markedly smaller international reception. However, it offers important insights into changes in Berlin techno since the 1990s. The film concerns the career and artistic creativity of the protagonist DJ Icarus, played by the real-life Berlin DJ/producer Paul Kalkbrenner. The mythical figure, Icarus, concerns the dream of flying. Using the wings that his master-craftsman father, Daedalus, gives him, Icarus flies so close to the sun that his wings melt, and he plunges to his death. DJ Icarus has similar problems of both recklessness and (psychedelic) flight in *Berlin Calling*. While his hedonist excesses are at their height, he nearly destroys his artistic and mental wings through the use of drugs. Suffering a creative block and having conflicts with the label manager, he avoids his problems by partying and ends up taking an "evil pill" that almost kills him. Though DJ Icarus survives, the rest of the film is spent with him passing in and out of a psychiatric ward, wrestling with the symptoms of insanity in a rather unimaginative homage to *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. However, Icarus's creative energies are released, and a new album takes shape in the psychiatric ward. Both an artistic triumph of insanity and a means of psychological therapy, his new tracks are produced through the inspirational media of illegal drugs and prescribed antidepressants. And the resulting album, itself titled *Berlin Calling*, achieves high critical praise and the trappings of genius within the film's narrative. Yet *Berlin Calling* is also the real electro-trance soundtrack to the film by Paul Kalkbrenner. Musical success is thus sealed, both in the film and in real life. Icarus heads off on another, presumably successful, world tour in the closing scene of the film. And at the moment this review is being written, Kalkbrenner is on his "Berlin Calling Tour 2010", performing during March and April at massive concert venues in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

The stark differences of these films at the level of plot highlight the diverse forms that EDM film can take, making it debatable whether EDM film is even a clearly definable genre. These differences elicit two initial questions. Regarding *Run Lola Run*, what can we learn about rave and club culture from a story in which no raves or clubs are present in the diegesis? Regarding *Berlin Calling*, what is the state of discourses of authenticity and realism in a film that combines the success of a fictional character and an actual Berlin DJ/Producer to such an intimate degree?

*Run Lola Run* and *Berlin Calling* arguably represent contrasting approaches to EDM film. The first can be termed a *techno culture film*. It focuses on EDM soundtracks as acoustic settings for narratives that do not directly explore EDM party life in a mimetic-sociological fashion. The legacy of cyberpunk and gamer aesthetics obviously plays a major role in this tradition. Important filmic examples are *Blade Runner* (1982), *Blade* (1998), and *The Matrix* (1999). Since virtual reality and fantasy take precedence, these films are free from anxious debates regarding the authentic representation of club culture. In this respect, *Berlin Calling* represents a contrasting tradition of *techno scene film*, attempting a direct representation of EDM life in terms of club and rave events, as well as musical production. This type thus acts like a sociological study of club scenes in film form. Important works in this tradition are *Human Traffic* (1999), *Groove* (2000), and *It's All Gone Pete Tong* (2004), though *Trainspotting* (1996) stands as a defining influence on the genre.<sup>5</sup> These scene films are

often caught between the limits of the film medium, narrative form and the desire to represent club culture “as it really is”. They further struggle with reaffirming the idealistic self-presentation of club culture and questioning these ideals as ideology. These tensions often result in satire and an experimental play with form in techno scene films themselves.

*Berlin Calling* takes these challenges seriously – in fact, it answers with seriousness and not satire. Kalkbrenner’s performance and that of the other main actors are admirable. Hannes Stöhr’s directing is likewise a quite subtle and impressive study in social interaction. However, Stöhr’s script is only partially successful.<sup>6</sup> The result is a bad mix between documentary realism, mythical references and a crisis-comeback narrative that occasionally approximates a VH1 “Behind the Music” biography. The clinical story, supposedly deadly serious, turns into comical pop-psychology that ends with an absurd visit of prostitutes to the ward during Ickarus’s farewell party. As a result, the film lacks an appropriate exploration of techno music production or Berlin and becomes primarily a production of Kalkbrenner as a Berlin star. *Human Traffic* and *It’s All Gone Pete Tong* offer in this respect more thought-provoking, satirical examples of the techno scene film and star power. Similarly, Tom Tykwer produces a more interesting film by exploiting the freedoms offered by the techno culture film to the fullest. The playful plot is reflected in a kaleidoscope of film techniques and media from time-lapse photography to cartoons. In short, *Berlin Calling*’s goal is art, and what comes out is kitsch; *Run Lola Run*’s goal is pop, and what comes out is pop. And great pop: so successful was Tom Tykwer’s EDM film, like Danny Boyle’s *Trainspotting*, it was a springboard for launching a successful career as a Hollywood film director.

Nevertheless, *Berlin Calling* offers some interesting points for reflection on the state of EDM film. As the story of an artist, the film explores the relation of techno culture to the legacy of German Romantic associations of genius and melancholy. DJ Ickarus’s tension with but also rootedness in German high art plays out in scenes with his conservative pastor father, who performs works by Johann Sebastian Bach. The high art themes are coupled with claims to authenticity in the merging of protagonist and DJ-star, soundtrack and album. The relation of film/album/star has echoes in rock opera films like Ken Russell’s *Tommy* (1975) and Alan Parker’s *Pink Floyd The Wall* (1982), though the possibilities of narrative form certainly differ for rock-vocal versus EDM-instrumental soundtracks. As a techno opera, *Berlin Calling* represents the full shift from the anonymous rave-DJ culture to the DJ-producer as artist. Yet it also explores economic problems in a far more direct way than *Run Lola Run*. The film highlights the pressures and suffering of a young East German DJ in capitalist, reunited Berlin, which still has the highest poverty rate in Germany. Only through the successful album is he able to overcome his economic plight and make his comeback as artistic hero.

*Run Lola Run* is also concerned with the relation between heroes, myth production and economic pressure. Just as DJ Ickarus is the stuff of myth, Lola is an iconic name in German cultural life, recalling Marlene Dietrich’s character Lola Lola in *The Blue Angel* (1930) and Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s *Lola* (1982). If DJ Ickarus is the hero as artist, Lola is the hero as raver. As Annegret Mahler-Bungers puts it rather humorously: Lola is “a postmodern – or rather a post-postmodern – Walkyrie” (2003: 91). The supermachine drive of Lola, her inhuman ability to run, reflects the endurance of techno clubbers during their 48-hour pill-popping party weekends. Yet Lola does not take drugs. Her strength seems to derive purely from her heart and will.

We imagine, however, that the vitality represented by her fiery red hair has its basis in the amphetamines of generation chemical. But economic realism interrupts the fun of this hero world in the following form: she is not *dancing at night* but *running in midday*. Lola and Manni are twenty-something party-kids caught in adolescent pop dreams, and they are now confronted with the hard consequences of prosaic, everyday life. Presumably having been able to brush off deadlines and appointments before, Lola is suddenly confronted with a deadline she can't ignore. Literally, the time of her run is between 11:40am and noon; the terror that approaches should she fail in her mission is the terror of the ultimately prosaic *afternoon*. In this respect, when Flinn remarks that Berlin's "streets are curiously depopulated" (2004: 208), I would argue the reason lies in that the rest of Berlin is presumably *at work*, slaving away to save money legally. Indeed, as a cyberpunk film, *Run Lola Run's* is realistic in a unique way – there are no flashy city lights or fancy pieces of technology. That techno music functions like a sonic walkman to her run invites the question whether the endurance, fitness, and discipline ravers have achieved in partying at night can also overcome the reality principle of the day. But what type of techno music is this exactly?

For both films, electronic music is the soundtrack to the myth of Berlin as a techno city. However, neither film chooses to musically represent rave culture through a compilation of rave hits as *Human Traffic* does. Rather, both soundtracks are studies in different types of auteur, respectively featuring music by only one man or group: as previously noted, by Tom Tykwer as director, writer, vocalist, and composer with his team of Heil and Klimek (*Run Lola Run*) and by Paul Kalkbrenner as the quintessential Berlin techno star on the BPitch Control label (*Berlin Calling*). Despite the gap in ten years, both soundtracks bear resemblances in the use of trance music.<sup>7</sup> The compositions from *Run Lola Run* are techno-trance pieces. Johnny Klimek worked as producer on a number of projects by Berlin trance star Paul Van Dyk, and the soundtrack bears resemblances in its timbres and sleek production quality. The music is also schooled in the speech-rap of Underworld's "Born Slippy", *Trainspotting's* most memorable track – this is especially clear in Tom Tykwer's rapping in "Running Two".<sup>8</sup> Likewise, Paul Kalkbrenner's soundtrack has echoes of trance, perhaps surprisingly so, given Berlin's reputation today as a city that has banished trance and rave music for the sleek club culture of minimal techno and microhouse. Yet, the tracks in *Berlin Calling* are best described as a kind of electro-trance, much slower and more melancholic than Lola's "run" music and reflecting the general trend in the 2000s away from the speed of the 1990s.

Trance anchors the various religious and romantic themes of the films. Both are structured around heterosexual narratives and the possibility of heroic triumph through magic and inspiration. Flinn insightfully remarks that *Run Lola Run* positions music "as a form of emotional and economic Esperanto or universal language, a romantic, heterosexual affair stamped with the imprint of humanism. That this is achieved through techno, usually considered an antihumanist form of music, makes the accomplishment all the more intriguing" (2004: 197). Both soundtracks do sonic battle in the name of romanticism against economic exploitation and suffering – acknowledging the problem only in the end to deny its ultimate influence. DJ Ickarus triumphs through creativity and artistic discipline. Recalling his father's performance of Bach, the slow and reserved themes in Ickarus's music are Lutheran techno-hymns to help him persevere in his struggle. Lola beats the modern world by relying on shamanic powers to win at the roulette table, reflected in her primal scream and the tribal-primitivist techno of the track "Casino".

These economic crises represent a threat to Berlin as a techno club city and a place of youth and freedom. Adam Krims' *Music and Urban Geography*<sup>9</sup> has highlighted the key role that both music and music films play in representing cities, from realistic depictions to the "abstract city of fantasy" (2007: 18). Berlin also presents a variety of musical representations in film, though it is important here to recognize some commonalities within the larger history of the Berlin music film, particularly in representing Berlin as a city of dynamic change. Indeed, change forms the basis for associated themes of youthful transgression, pop culture, and sexual liberation. Berlin has long advertised itself as the "city always in change", so much that it can become a self-fulfilling cliché. In musical terms, precisely by maintaining techno as a stable soundtrack of the city over the last twenty years, Berlin has continually reinvented itself as the city of youth and pop transgression. Both films offer interesting perspectives regarding this tradition, and urban geography plays an important element in this tradition.

Located primarily within the confines of the clinic, the melancholic slowness of *Berlin Calling* surprisingly challenges this reputation of change. In the film's closing, DJ Ickarus returns to Berlin's airport for a world tour, but he does not look exactly joyful. One wonders whether he wishes to return to the sanctuary of the psychiatric clinic. However, the speed of techno city Berlin is reinforced with shots of the TV Tower at *Alexanderplatz*, techno's preferred counter-monument of modern Berlin against the Brandenburg Gate. Club scenes are shot at real locations on Berlin's new club mile – Club Maria, Bar 25, and others – although Berlin as advertisement and fantasy retains priority. During one party, youthful transgression is reinforced to utter cliché when Mathilde, Ickarus's manager and bisexual girlfriend (what other sexuality could a Berlin girlfriend possibly be?), while searching for Ickarus, opens up a number of club doors – in the first she finds two circuit boys having anal sex and in the second a group of clubbers snorting some lines. Alternative lifestyles remain spectacles to be seen rather than lives that are lived.

More interesting is the presentation of Berlin as a place dominated by women in business roles, which is alternatively threatening and nurturing for DJ Ickarus. After all, he comes from patriarchal, Lutheran Germany, and lacks a mother. Mathilde leaves Ickarus when he fails as a boyfriend and artist, returning to her ex-girlfriend Corinna, a club bouncer who is problematically the token "ethnic" character in the film. Corinna threatens Ickarus's masculinity to the point of throwing him out of her apartment when he tries to speak with Mathilde, though they resolve their conflict in the end. Mathilde never stops caring for Ickarus and finally returns as his manager, though apparently not as his girlfriend. Ickarus must also negotiate conflicts with the label owner, Alice (an analogous figure to Ellen Allien, the head of Kalkbrenner's BPitch Control Label), and the head of the psychiatric ward, Dr. Petra Paul.

Regarding *Run Lola Run*, the secondary literature has pointed out repeatedly that the scenery of both East and West Berlin is non-descript. Manni's and Lola's adventure represents the dream that a reunited Germany will reflect neither the failed socialist state of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) nor the prosaic *Wirtschaftswunder* of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). Lola's fantastic run reflects the hopes of Generations X and Y for the harmonious combination of East and West at the end of history (will there be a Generation Z, and if so, what would follow?). The histories and cultural differences of Berlin thus remain veiled. However, many of the shots of the city – especially the intersection where Manni waits – look much more like dull suburban Germany than Berlin's impressive monuments and

nightlife. Caryl Flinn emphasizes this geographic dialectic: “Berlin becomes a somewhat nonessential, generic urban place, a reading Tykwer encouraged from foreign audiences. Is this Berlin, or is this Anywhere?” (2004: 208). Tykwer refuses to allow Lola to run by any Berlin icons such as the Reichstag, the Brandenburg Gate, and even the techno TV Tower. What is recognizable in all the runs is the U-Bahn, reinforcing Berlin’s reputation as a city of change and movement. With the Berlin Wall having fallen in 1989, travel is a key marker of freedom in a Berlin film of the 1990s. Lola’s running through the open and past the U-Bahn is a distinct display of this new freedom. In a way distinct from *Berlin Calling*, her run marks Berlin as a feminized space – the image of the free Western woman whose freedom is defined as a freedom of movement and public display.<sup>10</sup> Finally and crucially, what is also recognizable are the sites of construction. Lola charges across a causeway in both the first and second run, surrounded by a vast construction site near the German Reichstag. No such sites are present in *Berlin Calling*, and for viewers who experienced the reconstruction of Berlin in the 1990s, these sites might suddenly call up an odd nostalgic recognition that some forms of change are not permanent.

Such a complex relation to the past returns me to the importance of film as a visual-historic, and indeed acoustic, medium of study. As works of art, these films demonstrate their important role as the explosive crossroads of ideological, aesthetic, political, social, and personal currents. *Berlin Calling* and *Run Lola Run* are not just EDM films and not just Berlin films – they are both of these and more. The rich material they offer demonstrates that a continued study of feature films, both within and without the EDM film genre, will be of great importance for grasping the challenges of representing EDM scenes from both the past and the future.

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- Groove*. Dir. Greg Harrison. 2000. DVD. Sony Pictures, 2000.
- It’s All Gone Pete Tong*. Dir. Michael Dowse. 2004. DVD. Sony Pictures, 2005.
- The Matrix*. Dir. Andy Wachowski and Larry Wachowski. 1999. Warner Home Video, 2009.
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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Stan Beeler, *Dance, Drugs and Escape: The Club Scene in Literature, Film and Television since the Late 1980s* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co Inc, 2007).
- <sup>2</sup> The pop-existentialist announcement at the beginning, by the security guard, clearly presents the game structure of the film. In fact, he combines the supposed antipodal game cultures of football and video games: "The ball is round. The game lasts 90 minutes. So much is clear. Everything else is just theory. And we're off!"
- <sup>3</sup> Claudia Mesch, for example, describes Berlin as "a cyberspace obstacle course or environment usually associated with video and computer games". Claudia Mesch, "Racing Berlin: The Games of Run Lola Run", *M/C: A Journal of Media and Culture* 3, no. 3 (2000), <[www.api-network.com/mc/0006/speed.php](http://www.api-network.com/mc/0006/speed.php)> (accessed January 23, 2010).
- <sup>4</sup> This essay offers an impressive analysis of the film's soundtrack. I strongly recommend it to club culture researchers. Caryl Flinn, "The Music that Lola Ran To", in *Sound Matters: Essays on the Acoustics of Modern German Culture*, ed. Nora M. Alter and Lutz Koepnick (Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, 2004), 197-213.
- <sup>5</sup> While *Trainspotting* is certainly a pioneering film, it surprisingly cannot be defined as a proper techno scene film. Aside from Renton's short visit to a techno club, *Trainspotting* deals almost entirely with an earlier generation of the Scottish working class, crime, pub life, and heroine junkies. The film's reputation as an EDM film derives primarily from its electronic music selections, from Brian Eno to Underworld. The hybrid nature of such films and the complexity of the soundtracks would obviously require more exploration and nuances regarding the various sub-branches of EDM film than I have space to present here. *Trainspotting* points to the need for a third element of *techno music* itself in the structures of my genre divisions. To explain, the analysis of any EDM film could explore the tensions between *techno culture*, *techno scene* and *techno music*, or in other words, between cyber-aesthetics, club culture, and EDM (or non-EDM) soundtrack.
- <sup>6</sup> This is unfortunate since Stöhr's earlier film *Berlin Is In Germany* (2001) offered an interesting examination of Berlin life and the challenges of integration for an East German member of the working class.
- <sup>7</sup> It is important to keep in mind that there is other music present in both films besides the official soundtracks. In *Run Lola Run*, the techno tracks are complemented by the use of Dinah Washington's "What a Difference a Day Makes" and Charles Ives' *The Unanswered Question*; similarly, *Berlin Calling* includes pieces for organ by Johann Sebastian Bach. These musics allow for the dialogic relationship between techno and music from other historical periods.
- <sup>8</sup> Lola's "I Wish" and "I believe" monologues also deserve mention. The rhythms and repetition of the first two words in both monologues are comparable to Mark Renton's "Choose Life" monologue in *Trainspotting*.
- <sup>9</sup> Adam Krims, *Music and Urban Geography* (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2007).
- <sup>10</sup> There are limits to this freedom though. Expectations regarding the place of women and men in the city still differ strongly. Lola's run seems odd to passers-by in a way that would not be equivalent were a man running. For a critical study on the "Lolas" who came before her, specifically on modern women and the limits of urban public display and movement, see Anjum 1997.