

RAVING IRAN

SUSANNE REGINA MEURES (DIR.)

Switzerland: Christian Frei Filmproduktion GmbH/Zürcher Hochschule der Künste ZHdK, 2016
<<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5945286/>>

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Susanne Regina Meures' multi-award-winning 2016 documentary *Raving Iran* shows a year in the lives of Anoosh and Arash, aka Blade & Beard. At the time of filming, from September 2013 to August 2014, Blade & Beard were Tehran-based DJs, producers and dance party organisers, specialising in “dark and melodic techno” (*Blade&Beard*), with Fideles and Mind Against among their influences. *Raving Iran* follows Anoosh and Arash as they appear to navigate Iran's unique bureaucratic system, seeking to release and distribute their album, and as they organise the next dance party and consider their future.

The film opens with Anoosh and Arash being pulled over by police as they drive through Tehran at night. The camera focuses on the city's old murals, showing portraits of Iran-Iraq War heroes and Iran's revolutionary leaders—rather than the many, arguably equally interesting, artistic murals in Tehran (see *The Guardian* 2015), or the city's broad range of street art—before briefly showing Anoosh and Arash DJing at a private party. The first daytime scene features the sound of the call to prayer: a recurrent sound in the film. Anoosh and Arash make several phone calls to organise a dance party in the desert. As with many dance parties around the world, they face financial and legal challenges. While it is not illegal to travel and camp in the desert, there will be illegal activities at the party (again, like most dance parties), so Anoosh and Arash take precautions to avoid disturbing nearby rural residents and to be prepared for unexpected visits from the authorities. Finally, with all preparations made, the DJs and their friends set out on a party bus for the desert.

Until this point of the film, the soundtrack mainly features Ghazal Shakeri (her “Nu-inspired” remix of “*Man o to*” (“Me and you”), with lyrics adapted from Rumi), but as the bus reaches the desert, it shifts to the more pensive “Whisper”, by the neo-mystical Californian fusion group Axiom of Choice, featuring singer *Mamak Khadem*. This choice of song—one with little connection to Blade & Beard's techno world—suggests an atmospheric shift from what Meures presents as a generally threatening governmental sphere to an implied

positive “spirituality” (a word often used in association with Khadem’s work) at the desert party. Like dance-party-goers around the world, Anoosh and Arash talk of the connections and sense of community felt by people at parties in Iran, but the film gives little sense of this with its central focus of the government-created obstacles faced by musicians and DJs.

When Anoosh and Arash return to Tehran after the desert party, they head to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which issues—or denies—permits for musicians to perform in official venues or record and release music within the official government system. This visit is presumably made solely for the purposes of the film, to show viewers what Iran’s “Islamic” regulations are, as it is clear that Anoosh and Arash know that their work does not meet the Ministry’s requirements. Since the advent of the internet, it has become customary for artists to release music outside Iran, and to distribute it primarily in digital form. However, for the purposes of the film’s narrative, Anoosh and Arash ask Ministry staff about permits for their album. Unsurprisingly, they are told that their work is unlikely to be approved, so they proceed to look for someone willing to print their unauthorised CD covers. After several rejections, they eventually find a late-night printer willing to do the job. With the album completed and packed in its cover, the next step is to distribute it: again, Anoosh and Arash go to shops that they would know are unlikely to be interested, so that the film can continue its depiction of the extent of governmental restrictions on music and cultural life in Iran.

Disheartened, Anoosh and Arash discuss emigration, acknowledging that it is not easy to make music outside Iran either, but hoping they could at least “have a future” elsewhere. They consider the possibilities for Iranian musicians to emigrate, one of the most effective being through the acquisition of visas for North America or Europe, obtained by securing an invitation to a festival. While getting advice about seeking asylum, Anoosh and Arash maintain their hope for this festival option, looking at online images of Zurich’s Street Parade as they agree that “this is where we belong”. At the next filmed dance party, police turn up and arrest Anoosh, who spends a night in jail. Things look up, though, when he receives a call from the Rote Fabrik cultural centre in Switzerland with the news that Blade & Beard’s application to Lethargy/Street Parade in Zurich has been successful. Finally things seem to be moving ahead fairly quickly. After one final call to prayer over Tehran, Anoosh and Arash are at the airport.

It is at this point in the film that viewers with their own experience of migration, from Iran or other countries, have reported feeling particularly upset. In a film that is quite slowly paced, the scene at the airport—in which Anoosh and Arash farewell their family and friends, not knowing when or if they will see them again—is presented casually, and less than a minute in length. Electronic musician Rojin Sharafi explains why this brevity is especially upsetting: “I cried, actually, at the scene when they say a very short goodbye to their friends and family, but it wasn’t actually that deep, the whole thing was [skimmed over]—because I know how it feels [that moment of farewell], it was very traumatic for me, but I think for someone who didn’t really experience that, it’s like a very normal scene—so goodbye, bye!”¹

Like many other viewers, Sharafi is critical of the film's unnuanced narrative of Anoosh and Arash's supposed move from a state of constant restriction in Iran to one of "freedom" in Europe. "I had problems with the scenes in Iran, but not that much," she reflects. "My problem began when they get to Europe . . . because I have this feeling it has two parts: one in Iran, where they are very exhausted and everything, and the second part in Europe and they're living their dream . . . I have the feeling they have a lot of problems now. The film stops one or two weeks after they arrive in Europe". Indeed, with its final scenes of a decision to "say yes" to Switzerland, the film's narrative structure is similar to that of a romance. A more balanced documentary might have followed Anoosh and Arash's life for a year in Switzerland, as they lived in shared housing for asylum seekers, hearing cowbells at night, and faced different forms of restriction on their music and other aspects of their lives.

"Two DJs negotiate their possibilities in complex and unfair bureaucratic and capitalist systems" is not as catchy as "Two DJs defy the Islamic regime" ([Raving Iran](#)). Meures has defended the approach taken in *Raving Iran*, in part justifying it with the film's commercial success. However, some see that success as a symptom of a widespread problem in the ways Iran and other "non-Western" countries are portrayed in popular media around the world. As Tehran-based Siavash Amini puts it: "Right now people in this region are going through the roughest periods of their history and this is being exploited for journalistic and artistic exoticist quests. People trying to sell it as extra flavor to what they do disgusts me . . . The only reason we mentioned things like that . . . in the past was to raise awareness to how dangerous narrow and often conveniently concise media-friendly narratives or exotic flavors can be to people actually trying to do something they love while living here . . . Both nationalistic pride and exoticism in any form are part of the same idiotic bipolar system" (in Hignell-Tully 2019; see also Breyley 2018). In Europe and elsewhere, filmmakers, journalists and academics who have wanted to present more nuanced narratives that complicate notions of freedom and assumptions about where freedom exists have reported pressure from funding bodies, producers, editors and academic supervisors to simplify their work or fetishise their subjects, in some cases resulting in inaccuracies (Nooshin 2017; Javdani 2019). One musician who objected to the "clichéd" way a German radio station represented her as a female artist from Iran was told it would "sell more tickets".² Meanwhile, in Iran, for musicians and DJs who choose to live and work there (see Haidari 2019; [Deep House Tehran](#); [SET](#); [iDJ's IRANIAN TOP 10](#)), one of the greatest current obstacles is the economic sanctions imposed on the country by the United States ([Temp-Illusion](#)), along with misconceptions spread internationally by various media. Unfortunately, *Raving Iran* contributes more to those misconceptions than it does to an understanding of EDM in Iran.

NOTES

1 Rojin Sharafi, personal communication with the Author (Berlin), 20 September 2019.

2 Personal communication with the author (Berlin), 20 September 2019.

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SWEET HARMONY: RAVE|TODAY

PHILLY ADAMS AND KOBI PREMPEH (CURS.)

London, UK: Saatchi Gallery, 12 July – 14 September 2019.

<https://www.saatchigallery.com/art/sweet_harmony.php>

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Described by the Saatchi Gallery as a “revolutionary survey of rave culture”,¹ *Sweet Harmony: Rave|Today* appears at a bittersweet time for UK underground dance music. Thirty years after the Second Summer of Love, the Conservative Party is the best part of a decade in power, neoliberalism continues to dominate the political discourse and free parties emitting soundtracks characterised by “a succession of repetitive beats”—as described by Section 63 of the 1994 Criminal Justice Act—continue to be outlawed.² An added layer of poignant incongruity comes with the staging of a show about a music-driven countercultural movement at an established cultural institution such as the Saatchi Gallery. The event may appear to celebrate the sounds, imagery and attendant lifestyles of rave culture, but the controlled gallery setting diminishes any sense of its “revolutionary” otherness. *Sweet Harmony* is a prime example of gallerification; the event marks the transition of rave culture from a resistant form of mass participation—arguably the last great youth movement to emerge from outside, or at least the margins of, mainstream culture—to an event whose value is shaped by its status as a curated artefact.

Nevertheless, the attempt of curators Kobi Prempeh and Juan Rincon (Voltage and SCI-Arc) to capture an “authentic” visual commentary resonates in the exhibited work, mainly comprising multimedia room installations and large-scale photography. The images are a mixture of journalistic and personal approaches which articulate key aspects of rave’s diverse musical and social milieu: photographers Derek Ridgers and Matthew Smith’s images of enraptured figures and crowds at key parties like Spiral Tribe and protest marches capture the political spirit of rave culture’s impulse for social resistance; former *Time Out* nightlife editor Dave Swindells and filmmaker-photographer Ewan Spencer illuminate the weekend hedonism of inner city clubland with images of brand-conscious metropolitan dancers in sweaty reverie, while artist-filmmaker Vinca Petersen and author Molly Macindoe’s depictions of transformed warehouses and rave-bound journeys point to the psychogeographic motivation underscoring long voyages to far-flung rural sound-systems, along with rave’s reterritorialisation of abandoned spaces in post-industrial towns and cities.

Anna-Lena Krause’s post-club portraits are the only images to feature posed subjects, but the figures’ individuated self-consciousnesses mark a revealing contrast to the carefree togetherness suggested by photographs that were mostly taken in the pre-Internet age. The relatively limited sense of connectedness offered by online culture has arguably diverted

much of rave's radical communality, which, not so long ago, only seemed to accompany the liminal experience of mass, all-night dancing at a dance event or festival. In this sense, a feeling of melancholy pervades *Sweet Harmony*; whether you were there or not, it is hard to avoid feeling nostalgia for the anarchy and anonymity exemplified by rave culture's pre-Criminal Justice Act era. It is an illuminating irony then, that the Act itself is barely mentioned; unsurprising perhaps, given the Saatchi brothers' involvement in multiple election campaigns for the Tories who introduced the bill that preceded it.

The immersive experience promised by *Sweet Harmony*'s organisers is somewhat reinforced by the Vinyl Hunter shop in the centre of the gallery, where a DJ mixes dance music classics live alongside the opportunity to actually buy vinyl. Another impressive feature of this space is the large wall of flyers, where the iconography of posters featuring DJ line-ups and contemporaneous graphic styles evoke a sense of scale and period as much as any of the more artistically elaborate exhibits. However, the sense of dance culture's mainstream co-option is jarringly illustrated by the Spotify-branded listening stations in the "Play room", featuring contemporary EDM rather than music from the acid house and rave eras. Corporate sponsorship and underground dance music make uneasy bedfellows and the presence of a music-streaming giant like Spotify feels antithetical to the rave ethos that the exhibition purports to commemorate.

There is much for ravers to revel in at *Sweet Harmony*. At specific moments, the event captures the radical alterity and transformative bliss of what was an extraordinary period of British youth culture. Curatorially, its content and spatial organisation articulates a subjective and temporal disorientation that seemed so dangerous to the political and cultural establishment in the late-1980s and early-1990s. Unfortunately though, the event carries the diversionary air of a historical sideshow. These are experiences of ecstatic timelessness that are presented as belonging to the past, despite assertions within the show itself of their enduring legacy (e.g. the subtitle, "Rave|Today"). Arguably, it would have been dishonest for the Saatchi Gallery to recount in a more complete way the political atmosphere of the period, given its owner's role in helping to elect the political party who brought the Criminal Justice Bill into being. But, for all its reverence of the Second Summer of Love, the material presented in *Sweet Harmony* feels inconsistent with the idea of raving as a revolutionary experience, both in practice and in spirit.

NOTES

- 1 Saatchi Gallery. *Sweet Harmony: Rave | Today* [press release]. Available at: <https://www.saatchigallery.com/art/sweet_harmony.php> (accessed 30 July 2019).
- 2 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 c.33 Part V Section 63: Powers to remove persons attending or preparing for a rave. Available at: <<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1994/33/part/V/crossheading/powers-in-relation-to-raves>> (accessed 30 September 2019).

POPULAR VIENNESE ELECTRONIC MUSIC, 1990–2015: A CULTURAL HISTORY

EWA MAZIERSKA

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Ewa Mazierska's book is definitely a niche work, covering a largely unexplored territory of research, both in terms of subject and methodology. When it comes to the extant literature on Vienna as a music city, one can find a broad variety of studies on classical music (particularly the first wave classicism of Beethoven, Haydn, Mozart, et al.; and the second wave modernism of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern), with only a few texts (e.g. Reitsamer 2011) that report on the city as a contemporary centre of electronic (dance) music. These few articles were, of course, milestone sources for Mazierska's book. However, as Mazierska notes, Austrian popular music deserves more scholarly attention in general, and the special characteristics of the Viennese electronic music scene in particular have not been discussed as a whole, less still the relationship between the music, place and culture (1); although, as she notes, doing research on the correlations between music and place/city generates many methodological problems (17–19).

Throughout the book, Mazierska is sophisticated and prudent about the terminology she uses. One can, for example, find a particularly interesting discussion about the problems surrounding the genre name “electronica” as popularised by the US music industry. This is the reason why the author chose the wording of “popular electronic music” in the title of the book, instead of *electronica*. However, Mazierska suggests that the two terms mean the same in her work. In this sense, Viennese popular electronic music refers to “music produced by Viennese artists . . . or also includes record companies which released these records . . . places where this music was presented and appreciated . . . and a web of relations connecting musicians, institutions and individuals working for their success . . . as well as their fans. It can encompass art and artists, as well as scenes” (9). So the scope of the research is broad and also includes themes of music business research, such as the local record industry and the effects of digitisation.

The described period is from 1990–2015; the 1990s were the heydays of Viennese popular electronic music, and the study pays extra attention to this decade. The book is based on several methodological and theoretical strands—which are interweaved and combined throughout the whole work: the history and theory of electronic music and its subgenres with a special focus on dub, ambient, techno and noise; research on the relationship between

music and place, positioning electronic music within the longer history of music in Vienna; research about the “future of music” that considers the digital shift and the transformation of the music industry; and finally the interface between music and gender (summarised 9–10). In addition to these theoretical frameworks, the book is based on more than fifty interviews with people active in the scene, such as musicians, heads of record labels, music promoters, managers of record shops, employees of institutions promoting Austrian music, academics and music fans.

The first chapter positions Vienna on a historical and cultural map where it is celebrated as the world capital of music. The subtitle of the chapter, “From Mozart to Conchita Wurst”, suggests a long cultural history: from Viennese Classicism, through romanticism, to early modern music and music between the World Wars, the author finally gets to the Viennese contemporary popular music (17–45). The chapter also gives an informative insight about the connections between urbanisation, social life and music during these phases. Therefore, Mazierska always reflects on the actual political situation and its effects on the local music scene. For example, readers are informed about the US American (“coloniser”) influences on Austrian popular music in the 1950s which completely changed from ’60s, when the local musicians found their own style of music, “Austropop”.

Following this linear history, the second chapter discusses the Vienna Electronica as scene and industry. The author looks into it from a bird’s-eye perspective to describe Vienna’s musical history and its individual characteristics. To do so, this section begins with a clarification of the concept of “scene” with the help of classic theories and models by Cohen (1999), Kruse (2010), Peterson and Bennett (2004), etc. This is followed by a detailed chronology where readers are informed about the developments of clubs, events, fanzines and the local industry, including labels and record stores. According to Mazierska, “[t]he peak of the scene was between 1995 and 1999” (62), which were—probably not coincidentally—also the golden years of the record industry in general. As mentioned, the most striking findings about the local scene characteristics can be read in this chapter. For example, based on the conducted interviews, the author writes about the scene members’ social background (mostly middle class youngsters), the importance of record stores as centres of knowledge-transfer, and few venues and their strict operating rules which led the Viennese electronic music to a “bourgeois and displaced phenomenon” (58) rather than a rebellious one.

After describing the above—and other—characteristics, the third chapter looks into specific case studies of the most well-known and popular musicians whose careers were (and some of them are still) active during almost the entire discussed period. These include, following the chronological order of the subchapters, Sin, Kruder and Dorfmeister, Tosca, Sofa Surfers, Patrick Pulsinger, Peter Rehberg, Christian Fennesz and the label Mego, Electric Indigo and Sweet Susie.

Every subchapter (and case study) starts out with a chronological career description of the musician(s) and follows up with their discography and style of music. These analyses

are mainly based on Mazierska's own impressions and the interviewees' answers, and the descriptions do not follow any specific analytical methodology. Therefore, it excludes paratextual journalistic material and reception, which might have been fruitful as reflection tools. However, the author tried to focus on the connections between the city of Vienna as a place and the music produced by these artists. This can be seen the most in the subchapters about the style of the musicians: Mazierska was interested in the specialty of the so-called "Vienna Sound".

These different artists also demonstrate the wealth of styles and genres of Viennese electronic musicians: they all work with different subgenres. Such detailed historical and socio-cultural analysis of the careers of these different musicians did not exist before, so, also in this sense, the study fills a research gap. Furthermore, the author considers most of these artists' work as a manifestation of postmodern art and also sees them as trendsetters with their local characteristics, and not as "imitators" of Anglo-American artists. This is the other reason why she chose them to be analysed in the book.

Although all of these subchapters and musicians are important in different ways, I would like to highlight only two of them because they differ from the others in terms of their subjects: "Peter Rehberg, Christian Fennesz and the Label Mego: between Glitch and Bés" (chapter 8) and "Women in a mixed world: Electric Indigo and Sweet Susie" (chapter 9). I found it interesting that in the former the author dedicated a whole case study to noise or experimental electronic music. This section might feel a little alien to the others, but Mazierska's main argument was to include as many different genres as possible. In this sense, the subchapter on Electric Indigo and Sweet Susie is also different from the others in terms of its categorisation of music by the musicians' gender. Here the author also gives a longer introduction to the problems of male-dominated EDMC and the research of that phenomenon—see also *Dancecult's* special issue in 2017. In this regard, the subchapter about Electric Indigo and Sweet Susie also creates awareness of female artists who are often neglected in the histories of electronic (dance) music.

Finally, in the conclusions, the author highlights again her main arguments: 1) Austrian electronic (dance) music deserves more scholarly attention that focuses on the "stories" of artists and protagonists rather than their technical properties and 2) Viennese popular electronic musicians have created their own style/sound of music, instead of copying the Anglo-American market. Furthermore, by looking at the careers of the abovementioned musicians, the author found out that Vienna as a city offers "comfortable" life to them, for example, with its affordable housing and proper studios.

Mazierska finishes her work with several open questions for future investigations on other examples: "Were electronic musicians in countries such as Belgium, Poland or Hungary as lucky in this period as their Austrian counterparts? Did they show the same interest in similar genres and develop similar ideas?" (218). With these questions, she also suggests for others to conduct comprehensive research on other European cities, in order that we would have a better picture about the differences between these places. In addition, in my opinion,

with the help of these suggested studies, one could also better describe the different “sounds” of these cities because one would have comparative cases at hand. In this sense, one could also talk about the specific “Viennese sound” with stronger counterexamples at hand.

Mazierska’s self-reflection is appreciable: “No doubt that some readers familiar with the phenomenon described here will be surprised and unhappy with omissions, simplifications and mistakes made in this book. My defence is that no study is ever comprehensive and flawless, and this is particularly the case of works which cover a largely unexplored territory” (12–13). She also encourages others to correct these mistakes and fills these gaps, in their own future work. I think the book is definitely a great beginning for a new comprehensive research body on European cities and their electronic (dance) music scenes. Additionally, this book will be a great basis for further research on the Viennese electronic music scene.

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THE RELENTLESS PURSUIT OF TONE: TIMBRE IN POPULAR MUSIC.

ROBERT FINK, MELINDA LATOUR AND ZACHARY WALLMARK (EDS.)

New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

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As I write, anniversary celebrations of the Apollo 11 lunar mission are in full swing, Brian Eno reissues are flying off the shelves, and it seems that musicology may at long last be experiencing a similar breakthrough with timbre: an object with a comparable pull on the imagination and one which, like the moon, is simultaneously an unavoidable physical reality and a void for the projection of our earthly desires. The last few years have seen a dramatic increase in academic engagement with timbre, with problems of ontology, function, representation, and affective and conceptual signification receiving an airing (e.g. Van Elferen 2017; Wallmark et al. 2018; Lavengood 2019; Dolan and Rehding Forthcoming). The publication of *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone* marks a pivotal point by turning our attention to timbre in popular music, in whose aesthetics it plays a decisive, but until now, under-theorised role.

The book's fifteen chapters put to rest any notion of timbre's ineffability, showcasing—through sections on Genre, Voice, Instrument and Production—a glorious variety of analytical and representational techniques with which to capture its slippery essence. The usual spectrograms are joined by Jocelyn Neal's phonetic descriptions of country guitar “twang” and Griffin Woodworth's echomimetic representation of filter envelopes in funk. Nina Sun Eidsheim's deconstructionist reading of the persistent “disidentification” (153) of Jimmy Scott's voice and Jonathan Howland's topical archaeology of “luxe pop” are joined by material histories of studio technologies from Jan Butler, and embodied ecological theories of timbre cognition by Simon Zagorski-Thomas. It is clear that a dominant methodology has not yet been established, and this emerging field is all the better for it.

It is fitting that the first chapter is given to Cornelia Fales, whose identification of the paradox of timbre in a landmark article (2002) continues to animate both her contribution and the collection as a whole. The paradox is multifaceted, stemming from the incommensurability of the acoustic world, where sound is produced according to rational and quantifiable laws, and the phenomenal world, where timbre is (not as rationally or measurably) “perceptualized”, a perception which “differs most radically” from the acoustic features that provoke it (24). This same tension—between material reality and its mental representation—is at the heart of the timbre versus tone debate outlined in the editors'

introduction, where tone is defined as a “complex quasi-object shaped by cultural networks” and timbre as the “dispassionate” scientific object providing the real “physical and perceptual correlates” to tone (9-10).

The book’s explicit aim is to bridge this gap by “illuminating how the materiality of sound can structure cultural practice” (12), but a latent distrust of the cultural pole is evident throughout, compensated for by detailed descriptions of sound production and psychoacoustic processes, coupled with genuine surprise and delight when a homology between acoustic and phenomenal worlds is identified. These descriptions—ranging from Melinda Latour’s dissection of Carlos Santana’s transcendental sustain to Woodworth’s unpacking of the transistorised oscillators that powered funk musicians’ subversive use of synthesisers—are hugely valuable, and it is heartening to see such thorough engagement with the technicalities of popular music’s sonic construction. However, as Jonathan Sterne has observed, “*technologies* of listening . . . emerge out of *techniques* of listening” (2003, 92; original emphases), suggesting that we should not abandon trust in our ears and minds entirely, but instead use them to probe how cultural practices in turn structure the materiality of sound. Simon Frith makes a similar point in his afterword (368), and in the end, the timbre/tone (and its attendant real/cultural) dualism boils down to the ultimate philosophical chicken-and-egg of where “reality” really resides—a debate too expansive both for this review and the text it is reviewing.

Whilst every chapter in this rich volume warrants detailed discussion, two essays from Fales and Robert Fink, which deal with timbre in electronic dance music and bass cultures respectively, are of particular interest to *Dancecult’s* readership. In “Hearing Timbre: Perceptual Learning Among Early Bay Area Ravers”, Fales analyses the scene-specific discursive attempts by users of the SFRaves listserv to understand timbre, citing EDM’s timbral “nonspecificity” or sourcelessness as enabling rare feats of “perceptual learning” (25, 24). She argues that it is EDM’s disconnect from the acoustic sources of the natural world, coupled with the dissociative effects of MDMA (a frequent topic of conversation on SFRaves), which allows listeners to learn to hear timbre not implicitly, as a monitor and proxy for the sound source, but explicitly and in itself, attending only to its immanent qualities. Furthermore, Fales suggests that this nonspecificity also operates at the conceptual level, because whilst many of the posts she analyses share a narrative arc of “*before* . . . perceptual inadequacy and . . . *after*” (35), the affordances of timbre, even when tacitly grasped by listeners, remain largely affective and sub-linguistic.

In “Below 100Hz. Toward A Musicology of Bass Culture”, Fink critiques the acoustically “unsound” (112) theorisations of the affective power of sub-bass and bass culture, as formulated by Steve Goodman (2010) and Julian Henriques (2011), which he argues have idealised bass sounds into occupying “fetish object” status (89). In order to put bass in its place, Fink details subwoofer design, the transduction of low frequency waves through space, and the aural and haptic sensation of those waves by human perceivers, systematically debunking any notion of the exceptional power, force and physicality of bass. He concludes

that the “power” of deep bass is “our intuitive perception of how difficult it is to hear these frequencies at all”, and so bass culture can only be understood “*as* culture” because the “sound” around which it is centred “is a timbre of no timbre” (112).

I fundamentally agree with Fink that it is the liminality of bass that gives it its symbolic power, but, as an avid bass-head myself, I have spent enough nights having my bones rattled by sound systems ranging from Aba Shanti-I to Digital Mystikz to know that there is a *matereal* basis to bass culture beyond subwoofers, and beyond the idealising projections of listeners. As Fales observes in her conclusion, despite the difficulties of hearing timbre at all, human propensity for perceptual learning, and the “astronomical decibel levels” of a rave context “where the parameters of timbre and rhythm predominate” mean that there is “very little that is truly cognitively impenetrable” (39). Producers and DJs help us along in that respect, by isolating and EQing bass solos and drops so that our attention is turned more fully to the bass, making the almost-inaudible engulf the sensorium.¹ Fink’s main gripe appears to be with Goodman’s florid, CCRU-inspired discursive formulation of bass as malevolent weapon or force, and this chapter is a useful antidote to that narrative. At times, however, in his dismissal of the audible and sensible reality of bass, it seems Fink falls prey to the inverse of the same “acoustic fundamentalism” (112) of which he accuses his adversaries.

Nevertheless, “Below 100Hz” is exemplary in its attention to the material conditions and technical specificities of tone production, and this represents one of the great strengths of *The Relentless Pursuit* as a whole: in addition to its thorough explorations of the cultural and perceptual dimensions of timbre, the book contains a treasure trove of sophisticated discussions of sound technology whilst managing to avoid the lacklustre didacticism of much other gear literature. In “The Sound of Evil”, Zachary Wallmark considers in fine-grained detail the detuning, overdriving and distortion of guitar and vocal timbres in death metal, whose noisiness and difficulty he links to sacrificial violence and its overcoming by fans and producers. Steve Waksman looks at the ill-fated guitar synthesiser, which resolved initial stumbling blocks of translating guitarists’ idiosyncratic pitch control and attack types into information analogue circuitry and, later, MIDI could process. Its failure, he argues, resulted from the “Faustian bargain” (271) struck by its adopters, who traded the kudos of virtuosic guitar rock and jazz for an enhanced but for all purposes “sourceless” sonic palette.

Jan Butler and Paul Théberge consider studio technologies aside from specific instruments, the former looking at the changing status of liveness as a site of rock authenticity in the age of the studio album, and the latter at reverb’s trajectory from a consolidator of space to special effect, where the once-stable relationship between acoustic, musical and listening spaces has become contingent and separable. Touching on similar themes, Albin Zak sketches a cultural history of the recording industry in mid-century America, then undergoing waves of democratisation as emerging youth markets overtook DJs and studio professionals as arbiters of musical value. Zak’s chapter also highlights another thread running through *The Relentless Pursuit*; namely, popular music’s irrepressible zeal for turning one group’s

sonic off-cuts—in Zak’s case lo-fi production values and untrained vocal and instrumental technique—into another group’s aesthetic ideal. This transformation undergirds Catherine Provenzano’s investigation into Auto-Tune’s redistribution of musical labour and its rationalisation along racial and class lines. It also serves as the backbone for Mark Samples’ chapter on the voice of Tom Waits, whose “damaged” and imperfect timbre cemented Waits’ artistic authenticity, and was eventually granted a legally protected status of its own.

Zagorski-Thomas’ “The Spectromorphology of Recorded Music” serves as an appropriate closing chapter for this expertly curated collection, outlining a robust methodology that takes on both timbre and tone, and their interrelation. He borrows from James Gibson’s ecological theory of perception, and neuroscientific theories of embodied cognition and cross-domain mapping, relating these to Denis Smalley’s work on gestural surrogacy to explore how ostensibly sourceless recorded sounds generate schematic “sonic cartoons” that suggest a sourced, embodied provenance. The sources these cartoons specify in the perceiving mind, however, are not concrete, real-world objects but instead take the form of “experiential affective structures” (348). Zagorski-Thomas applies these theories to analyse perceptions of fullness, fidelity and moving through space in “acoustic pop” and electronica, arguing that timbre perception is “based on our embodied experience and the metaphorical connections we can make between that primary ‘lived-in’ experience and our secondary experience of the world around us” (359). As such, while the distance between actual and perceived source can remain vast, they share a core structural affinity which gives perceptions a coherence and consistency with the external world which, in turn, enables listeners to act on, react to, and make sense of, their physical environment.

This brings us back to—and perhaps offers a way out of—Fales’ paradox and the dialectic between the real and the perceptual which drives *The Relentless Pursuit*. As the first of its kind, the book leaves plenty of openings for emerging timbre researchers to sink their teeth into and develop. For EDM scholars, the ideas presented this book offer a potential way out of the music-analytical stalemate that has dogged our subfield since its inception, by showcasing approaches that enable us to engage more directly with the “matter” (i.e. the sounds and technologies) of electronic dance music. At the same time, each chapter is incredibly well structured and easy to navigate which, along with the book’s companion website and the sheer depth and diversity of the topics covered, makes it an indispensable pedagogical tool for advanced undergraduates and above. In short, *The Relentless Pursuit* it is a timely collection that deserves to be read widely, and in full, by popular music scholars and tone-chasers of all stripes alike.

NOTES

- 1 Clubs like London’s fabric, for example, have bespoke “bodysonic” wooden dancefloors with bass transducers placed underneath, so that clubbers “feel” the low-end frequencies through their feet.

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FYRE FRAUD

JENNER FURST AND JULIA WILLOUGHBY NASON (DIRS.)

USA: Hulu and The Cinemart, 2019.

<<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7843600/>>

RRP: US\$99 (hardcover), US\$35 (paperback)

FYRE: THE GREATEST PARTY THAT NEVER HAPPENED

CHRIS SMITH (DIR.)

USA: Library Films, Vice Studios and Jerry Media, 2019.

<<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt9412098/>>

<<http://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2019.11.01.10>>

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The following is a review of two films: *Fyre Fraud* (hosted by Hulu) and *Fyre: The Greatest Party that Never Happened* (hosted by Netflix). Both films document Fyre Festival, a 2017 music festival that continues to be the focus of controversy, particularly with respect to its promotional methods. Both films give accounts of the leadup, occurrence and fallout of the festival, were released within a week of each other and share some interlocutors. Some of these individuals are named in million-dollar court cases, some were deceived and manipulated by people in positions of authority, and many have competing interests in the landscape of industrial taste-making. The films are already in deep conversation with each other.

The narrative recounted in both films bears repeating: entrepreneur Billy McFarland and musician Ja Rule join forces to produce a luxury festival in the Bahamas. They enlist a team of powerful media companies, raise millions from private investors, and promise extravagant experiences to a client base of Instagram elites that they do not deliver. The media companies lose money and look dishonest, investors lose money and look disconnected from reality, and popular lifestyle influencers lose money and look naïve. Hundreds of Bahamians work hundreds of unpaid hours, but this remains in the background of the public shaming of so many venerable contemporary American institutions.

The documentaries are in general agreement about who the villain is here: Billy McFarland is accused of being a “compulsive liar”, “scammer”, “hustler” and “Dr. Evil”. In *Fraud*, McFarland appears as an interviewee of the filmmakers. *Fyre*, on the other hand, uses footage of McFarland that was originally collected by the teams hired to promote the festival during the leadup to the festival. Both films are ruthless in their condemnation of his character.

FYRE FRAUD

Released on 14 January 2019 and directed by the team of Jenner Furst and Julia Willoughby Nason, *Fyre Fraud* hit streaming platform Hulu four days before the release of Netflix's counterpart. An array of interviewees—lawyers, journalists, cultural critics and culture industry bureaucrats—contemplate topics including FOMO (Fear of Missing Out), the distribution of culpability in networked authority structures, the vulnerable psychology of millennials, the ethos of tumult that is Wall Street and the susceptibility of developing regions to first-world frauds all in relation to the Fyre Festival.

Fraud is strong in its detailing of McFarland's earlier business ventures—for example a credit card or an app for booking celebrities—setting the stage for his more ambitious project. It does so with the assistance of some of his former employees and McFarland himself, who narrates his lifelong entrepreneurial development. McFarland is adamant that he had the best intentions to put on an event that was “going to change the landscape [of the festival industry], and deliver an experience that people would talk about for years” (*Fraud* 9:00).

Other key individuals are featured. The brightly lit, smiley Calvin Wells, a principal investor for a New York City firm, appears prominently in *Fraud*. Concerned by the amount of money people in his networks were investing in Fyre Festival and distrustful of McFarland, Wells attempted, unsuccessfully, to delegitimize the festival by critiquing its questionable promotions. He blames this failure on the impotence of the facts in this social-media dominated, “post-truth” world, but seems at times more impressed than incensed by the persuasive campaign assembled by the Fyre Festival team and the companies they contracted for media production and marketing. Oren Aks, the former Jerry Media employee assigned to their contract with Fyre Festival, is also interviewed. Seated behind a laptop, as if reenacting the tricks and techniques he used to promote the festival, he shares his two cents regarding the manipulation of social media and the recipe for a viral trend and his dismay at realizing he had been deceived about the product he had advertised.

Bahamians in the film call out the unjust treatment they suffered at the hands of the Fyre Festival. Delroy Jackson recounts warning McFarland and Ja Rule that organizational and construction resources were inadequate given the short timeline. Ava Turnquest, a reporter for local news outlet *The Tribune*, accuses Fyre Festival of unoriginality in scamming the Bahamas; a place “so ripe for fraud” (*Fraud* 26:30). She portrays the festival as a predictable result of deplorable economic relations between the US and Bahamas, as proof of the persistence of colonial attitudes so coherent with the conditions of contemporary pop culture.

Jia Tolentino, a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, joins Turnquest in her diagnosis. Interviewed in front of floor-to-ceiling high-rise windows, Tolentino discusses Fyre Festival in relation to its conditions of possibility, in relation to the forces which dominate contemporary culture. Tolentino illustrates the intricate and fragile relation between subject and society, suggesting: “Billy [McFarland] is baked in the oven of millennial reality construction that asserts itself in response to the precarity of the times” (*Fraud* 10:10).

These analyses, albeit blithe in tone, contribute nuance to questions of legal and ethical responsibility central to the film.

In addition, *Fraud* introduces three Instagram influencers, the festival's target clientele, who recount arriving at the festival, struggling for orientation, and departing. Tolentino provides us with a succinct definition of an influencer. "An influencer is someone who has effectively monetized their identity. That is their work: the performance of an attractive life" (*Fraud* 32:05). They also contribute personal action-style footage of the crisis (empty stages, beach drinking, wandering in the dark, hoarding toilet paper). But *Fraud* does not introduce any attendees who suffered more severe physical injury than surprise, boredom or dehydration.

Fraud finally interviews Anastasia Eremenko, McFarland's girlfriend. She reads aloud letters he sends her from prison and is shown after one of his court dates weeping alone in the street. Eremenko is adamant about the swirling misrepresentations of McFarland's character, steadfast in her support of him. And mixed into shots that suggest her continued backing of this irredeemable villain, the film concludes that "it's a great time to be a conman in America" (*Fraud* 1:33:45).

Building from conversations with the above and other interlocutors, *Fyre Fraud* uses Fyre Festival to frame "the nexus of social media influence, late-stage capitalism, and morality in the post-truth era" (publicity material; see "*Fyre Fraud: Details*"). The festival serves as a ready-made material specificity through which the film's experts weave abstract threads of contemporary popular culture. But despite these strengths, the production feels heavy-handed; the film relies on bland-yet-antsy collages of stock visuals and cheap-looking b-roll from generic festival scenes of attractive women dancing or crowds walking. Long awkward pauses after McFarland speaks in interviews imply volumes about his trustworthiness, but do so pedantically. Viewers might therefore understand the film to enact some of the very culture it critiques, namely one that values the speed and spectacular quality of visual electronic media over the story or material reality it represents.

FYRE: THE GREATEST PARTY THAT NEVER HAPPENED

Hot on the heels of *Fraud* came *Fyre: The Greatest Party That Never Happened*, released by Netflix on January 18th, 2019 and directed by Chris Smith (also *American Movie*, *The Pool*). The production is sleek, the pacing confident, and in contrast to *Fraud*'s stock visuals much of the footage is original. *Fyre* attends to moments leading up to the festival to offer viewers a prime view of the planning process and blooming drama.

Fyre includes abundant footage of McFarland and Ja Rule leading organizational efforts, making definitive and questionable decisions in meetings, talking social media strategy and selling their brand. Multiple times we hear them reiterate their pitch: "We're selling a pipe dream to your average American loser!" (*Fyre* 12:05). The film's interlocutors affirm that McFarland once fell asleep with a beer in his hand on the beach, that he would ride a jetski in time-sensitive moments, even that he resembled Dr. Evil (*Fyre* 1:09:40). But most of this individual critique is reserved specifically for McFarland; despite the damning documentation that *Fyre* publishes, Ja Rule sustains little direct individual critique.

Much of the juicy visual content was collected on site in the Bahamas by MATTE Projects, a video production company contracted by Fyre Festival. Brett Kincaid, director of MATTE, testifies unapologetically to the quality of the work. He says of Fyre, “they were hiring the best of the best in each category: best talent, best distribution, best social media company” (*Fyre* 6:45). He makes sure viewers appreciate how his team produced and launched a video that trended globally from an island without internet, offering an interesting take on the accusations of false advertising and fraudulent promotion levelled against Fyre Festival and its teams. According to Kincaid, the real Fyre Festival was the smaller-scale event that occurred during “the shoot [for the viral video]. The shoots were parties . . . the commercial was what everybody wanted” (*Fyre* 1:30:12).

Jerry Media is a company that generates online attention and social influence for clients; it is that “best social media company” named by Kincaid and hired by Fyre, and also the executive producer who partnered with Vice in the creation of this documentary. CEO Mick Purzycki represents Jerry Media for the film. His script—just like the film—is sleek, persistent, and confident in explaining to the viewer the victimization his company suffered at the hands of Fyre Festival. But he too claims that there was substance and value in the work they did, asserting that his employers were “trying to tap into a culture and a zeitgeist that they believed in” (*Fyre* 14:00). For Purzycki as for Kincaid, the inspiration was far from bunk, and if there was never a problem with the original inspiration, how can anyone fault those who had a contract to promote that inspiration using social media? Purzycki does admit, however, that in the days prior to the festival Jerry Media deleted “the negative comments that were degrading the brand” from Fyre Festival’s social media presence (*Fyre* 44:45). In other words, Jerry Media hid complaints and questions about festival details to prevent attendees from discovering that the festival infrastructure looked quite different from the promotional material.

Marc Weinstein, a music festival consultant and Fyre Festival contractor, describes his failed attempts at convincing the leadership to be honest about their insufficient preparation time, about the fact that it was not going to be a luxury experience and about attendees becoming trapped on the island with no available return flights. But Weinstein admits that each time he was rebuked, he put his head down and attempted to complete his assignments, to maintain the chain of command, to play his role in this peculiar machine. Andy King, an event producer who styles himself “Billy [McFarland]’s whisperer,” also wonders about his responsibility for continuously vetting McFarland’s personal character to the festival team for the good of the event (*Fyre* 1:12:20).

Maryann Rolle, a Bahamian restaurateur, might have appreciated more critical thought from Jerry Media, Weinstein and company. Feeding staff, influencers and attendees with little preparation time, Rolle tells viewers she lost \$50,000 of savings trying to host the big American money hinting at long-term investment. J.R., a Bahamian who organized local laborers for Fyre Festival, recounts fleeing for safety after the festival because those laborers had turned to him seeking payment. Fyre Festival leadership had vanished in the wind.

Following the festival, McFarland was charged with tampering with wire transfers. But after posting bail he continued to sell tickets for haute events in New York City; tickets which often did not exist. At that point Gabrielle Bluestone, a Vice reporter who also contributes to the film, published an article linking McFarland to sustained fraudulent activities while still on bail (Bluestone 2018). McFarland was arrested again, this time without possibility of posting bail.

The effect of interspersing contributions from critics like Bluestone with interlocutors like Purzycki—especially when they align in *tutti* condemnation of McFarland the Naughty—is the same as the effect of Jerry Media co-producing this film with Vice whilst repurposing their own video footage. Jerry Media’s self-promotion is not completely unabashed, but it is thorough. *Fyre* submits that the promotion was the most real—maybe even the only real thing—about Fyre Festival. *Fyre* is a statement, in form as in content, about the power of social media technologies. Kincaid sums up this morass of deferred accountability with another quippy analogy: “If you shoot a commercial for BMW, how are you supposed to know if that car has a faulty engine?” (*Fyre* 1:16:50). Accordingly, perhaps we can consider *Fyre* as much promotion as it is documentary.

The two films reviewed differ in several ways. *Fyre Fraud* is preoccupied with the question of assigning responsibility for social media influence. *Fyre Fraud*’s viewer feels ethically superior to the clear villains and awestruck by the naivete of those swept up in their schemes, because all of this apparent chaos fits into a clean, almost algorithmic state-of-the-world. Meanwhile, *Fyre: The Greatest Party That Never Happened* demonstrates the capabilities of social media technologies. It is a crisis take to *Fraud*’s algorithm, an illustration of real power fallen into the wrong hands.

But both play blame games about who is responsible for the millions of dollars demanded by workers, investors, contractors, lawyers and others. Both document the professional turn of social media identity and the attendant rise in the influence of models with popular social media identities. And both make us feel like we all need a good read of Baudrillard’s *Simulacrum and Simulation*. Viewed side-by-side, the two films provide us with spectacular material for reflecting not just on right and wrong in contemporary social media culture, but also real and fake. We are left puzzled: Were the original intentions valid? Who is responsible for viral momentum? And might the festival have happened after all?

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