

RAVING

MCKENZIE WARK

Durham: Duke University Press, 2023.

ISBN: 978-1-4780-1938-1

RRP: \$15.95 (paperback)

<https://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2023.15.01.12>

KIM FESER

FREE UNIVERSITY OF BERLIN (GERMANY)

The cover design is reminiscent of a notebook: handwritten “Practices / Raving / McKenzie Wark” on a monochrome pink background. The small book is published in the *Practices* series alongside the titles *Fly-Fishing*, *Juggling*, and *Running* (*Tomorrowing* has only been announced so far, which somehow seems appropriate). The series’ website states that the volumes shall “reveal the pleasures of losing oneself in doing anything that holds sway over us, no matter how common or minor it might seem” (Duke University Press n.d.). How does *Raving* fit into this randomly appearing list of profane desubjectifying practices?

Raving unfolds in both detailed intimate as well as abstract theoretical passages, whereby these perspectives repeatedly transform into each other. McKenzie Wark writes in the styles of autofiction (“These things did not happen. The person to whom they did not happen is me” [4]) and autotheory (“to gather concepts from situations” [4]). Personal story fragments about raving and its entanglement with other practices—particularly social belonging, gender transition, drug use, sex and writing in bed—merge with political-theoretical thoughts on related aspects of queerness, blackness, gentrification, commodification and club culture. Six chapters, partly based on earlier published texts and lectures/performances, are written in this oscillating style. They are supplemented by a “Glossary of Concepts” (91–94), condensed paragraphs on key terms used throughout the book, including in chapter titles. The concepts are defined as “impersonal characters in the autotheory text” (93) and shall function as “resonant abstractions” (93). In addition to these impersonal characters, the book is populated by many people known by name or anonymised, often by single capital letters. Some of them are also referenced in footnotes, bibliography and notes on a collection of colour photos showing scenes from raves, festivals and clubs. Most of the personal situations described in the book happened recently in Brooklyn, New York. Additionally, there are some memories of the 1990s (including “Edward” [43], who plays a crucial role in Wark’s [2020] previous autofictional/autotheoretical book *Reverse Cowgirl*).

The author mentions that she was asked to write a book for the series, and therefore proposed “raving” (47). That seems to be an obvious choice: She calls herself a raver but also clarifies that her main activity is writing and lecturing. The tension between these practices is addressed in the book. At raves, the author of *Raving* avoids students and is avoided by them (61). She is also aware that her book might be part of “style extraction” (56, 94) if it commodifies gestures and information that emerged from raves. Such phenomena of contemporary capitalism are fundamentally criticised in Wark’s work, from *A Hacker Manifesto* (2004) to *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* (2019). In *Raving*, McKenzie Wark, respectively the autofictional/autotheoretical first person writer, situates herself specifically: “The point of view will be that of this middle-aged, middle-class, white transsexual dance freak” (6). These attributes are addressed at various explicit, implicit and conceptual levels.

She has the urge to dance excessively in order to achieve a state of bodily experience beyond normative gender-specific attributions and thoughts. Consuming drugs, mostly ketamine, seems to help: “Dancing and k make it all go away!” (42) That’s how she wants to reach her goal: “A dissociative time, a transsexual time, a ketamine time” (30). This “k-time”, an immanent and not utopian temporality (no time for “tomorrowing”), is one of the book’s central concepts (92). It refers to the so called “k-hole” (30), a dissociative hallucinatory state after taking ketamine. Also, it’s situated in a critical discussion with Mark Fisher’s (aka “k-punk”) thoughts on “acid communism”. In collective “k-time” the presence of “ketamine femmunism” (30) can be experienced, as Wark writes in the “Ketamine Femmunism” chapter (based on an online lecture on Fisher for the Berlin *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* [House of World Cultures]). “Femmunism” (92) is described as a collective state where dominant masculinity is absent and obsolete. Wark’s cautious remark that femmunism “might mingle” with blackness (94), almost sounds manifesto-like given her general reluctance to embrace hopeful scenarios.

Wark also describes how she prepares herself before going out. How she packs her silver rave bag, how she meets lovers and close friends. How several circles of “rave friends” interact via social media and share information about upcoming events. How she enters the dance floor by herself or with others. But ravers sometimes are annoyed by stereotypical “coworkers” (91) who lack the intense desire for “k-time”, because their participation in the rave is subordinate to their work lives. Worse are the harassing “punishers”, mostly “straight, white, cis men” (92), who only attend raves for spectacle purposes. The mix of the crowd is regulated by door policy which is, along with spatial design and sound, an essential aspect of rave as a “constructed situation” (93). Due to the praxis of “reparative discrimination” (93) people “who need it most” (93) and “whose style is being extracted” (94) are given priority admission. Wark mentions that she and her transsexual friends often receive free entry or head to the locations which they can easily access. Depending on venues this works specifically for black people. Wark emphasises the background of the entire constellation in this regard: “The rave, techno, nightlife, surround: they’re all, among other things, gifts of blackness” (9).

Given the social dynamics, risks, and potentials that McKenzie Wark discusses, raving seems fundamentally different from the more individually defined practices fly-fishing, juggling and running—if that’s not a completely biased perspective of a review for a journal of electronic dance music culture. But what is the book’s contribution to a critical discourse on electronic dance music culture? The one-word title, which is due to the book series *Practices*, can be misleading. The book is neither a basic introduction to the practice of raving, nor a study of participant observation. As indeed the author points out, it combines a very subjective autofictional perspective with an exuberant creation of concepts. This seems inspired particularly by Deleuze/Guattari, Kathy Acker (see Wark [2021]) and Kodwo Eshun (whose praise of *Raving* is quoted on the back cover). The oscillation between fiction around the character “McKenzie Wark” and meaningful conceptualization, strengthened not least by the “big name” the author has made for herself through her previous relevant publications, seems to evoke rather enthusiastic approval or possibly sceptical rejection. A productive-critical reading attitude is possible, however, if the relationship between the formation of concepts and the situations described is investigated immanently. The book itself invites to read between the lines, to be aware of subliminal counterpoints or barely noticeable voices. To name some aspects:

The brief stories and details about raves and club culture are predominantly set in Brooklyn / New York. They are shaped by the specific conditions of gentrification and “style extraction”, the presence of coworkers and, not least, academics. In view of locally different conditions of underground and capitalization, of confining “normal” lifestyles and resistant practices, of possible contrasts between rural and urban lifestyles, the nature and goals of raves might also have to be accentuated differently.

Also, the book is permeated by the theme of age, without this being explicitly reflected in the concepts: “It’s not always easy, being a middle-aged, clockable transsexual raver” (1, see 42, 57). Based on this initial statement, and against the background of a reference to a club event for her 60th birthday (88), Wark’s discomfort and inner struggle with the demands of beauty and youthfulness become apparent.

In general, health issues seem to play a role only at the descriptive level. Physical care and mutual awareness are mentioned, but there are several instances of risky drug use, including a fatal GHB overdose (73). When it comes to inventing expressions for key concepts, however, a euphoric ketamine hype dominates.

REFERENCES

- Duke University Press. n.d. *Practices*. <<https://www.dukeupress.edu/series/Practices>>, (Accessed 17 October 2023).
- Wark, McKenzie. 2004. *A Hacker Manifesto*. Cambridge: Stanford University Press.
- Wark, McKenzie. 2019. *Capital Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?*. New York: Verso Books.
- Wark, McKenzie. 2020. *Reverse Cowgirl*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).
- Wark, McKenzie. 2021. *Philosophy for Spiders: On the Low Theory of Kathy Acker*. Durham: Duke University Press.

SPECTACLE, FASHION AND THE DANCING EXPERIENCE IN BRITAIN, 1960–1990

JON STRATTON

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

ISBN: 978-3-031-09011-0

RRP: €117.69 (hardcover), €93.08 (eBook)

<<https://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2023.15.01.13>>

TARA HILL

UNIVERSITY OF HAMBURG (GERMANY)

Telling the whole history of dance music in a book seems like no mean feat. So even if Jon Stratton's *Spectacle, Fashion and the Dancing Experience in Britain, 1960–1990* limits itself to the usually labelled “crucial years” of the development of postmodern youth culture—or at least its roots after rock'n'roll restarted the 1950s youngsters' life with a mixture of middle class romance and rebelliousness—covering all three decades of the dance movement comes across as an ambitious project.

Yet reading Stratton's succinct account still comes across as curiously pleasing read. As an almost lexical text, ticking the boxes of the whos, the whens, the wheres and the whys, it caters to a college freshman or an introductory youth culture class just as well as to the senior pop culture zine editor or sophomore style blogger. Providing an overview of the subculture styles which—overtly or covertly, overground or underground—formed the face of a generation, or more important: its image. It performs kind of a double stunt: it's not classic subculture research, Stratton claims, which can explain what distinguishes these new movements, but more its relation to a politics of aesthetics and its relation to the “wilder” conceptual brother, a politics of the ecstatic. Therefore, the theoretical framework of the book centres around Guy Debord's (1967) Situationist movement and especially its centrepiece *Society of the Spectacle* (*La société du spectacle*). Herein, the cultural turn after the 1960s, sort of a “technicolour” explosion of creativity after the black and white movie era (you could similarly compare it to the evolution from silent to spoken movies) was performed by the rise of two key factors: fashion and dancing.

In the 1980s, in the increasingly seamless society of the spectacle, a lifeworld was formed which was commodified, mediated by colour television and other media, though not yet by computers; an experiential world where surveillance was becoming normalised and increasingly extensive. Clubs, with their rituals for entry, and their electronic dance music and lighting often linked to the beat, seemed like an alternative world, indeed a Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ). For many, dancing along with others in the apparently safe space of a club appeared to offer escape and existential meaning, ecstasy, in an alienated reality. The DJ became the shamanic guide taking the dancers through this experience.

While the first chapter tells of the rise of the DJ with records starting to replace live music sessions and ballrooms where standard dances in couples became discos and clubs, *Twist* was the first dance introducing heavy pelvic movements from African Americans to the UK. The second chapter sets the scene with the Beatles hysteria, The Dave Clarke Five and introduces the genre of “Stomp”—proving the Brits needed some help with the transition from partner dances to solo and improvisational, as well as more and more ecstatic dancing. As the Rolling Stones introduced African Drumming in their (up to this day) legendary live shows, the phenomenal Gary Glitter turned into the icon of the emerging Glam Rock scene.

While middle class kids learnt how to sit down to listen to Prog Rock—Genesis, Yes and King Crimson—like their parents might have listened to a classic record or chamber music with fully but passively immersing themselves into the quadrophonic and stereophonic sound spectacular of the 1970s, Glam Rock came to life with cult bandleader Marc Bolan, a.k.a. the legendary T-Rex, and took to a crowd that loved extravagant outfits, more over the top than the hippies ever were, and huge showmanship. David Bowie came up next and started his own, very influential Ziggy Stardust cult, a persona well-loved into the early 1980s (Chapter 4 and 5).

The New Romantics, Stratton explains, who flocked into the nightlife at that time weren’t so much a scene of their own, but a remnant of early club culture. Their heavy focus on styling and outfit can be traced back to Saint Martin’s, the London Art School. Androgyny and heavy make-up, theatrics and gender role reversal were established in mainstream culture, through hit projects like Ultravox.

The last chapter deals with the now pretty much established bond between rave culture and the Temporary Autonomous Zone. It starts off tracing the often-overlooked influence New York disco and the early club scene had on the UK warehouse and later acid house movement. Compared to the watering holes of past decades, David Mancuso’s Loft and the Paradise Garage, which spawned the first superstar *technoshaman* DJ, Larry Levan, did not sell alcohol but focused on an impeccable living room and after hour spot with psychedelics and/or designer drugs. This encouraged ecstatic dancing through the night:

It was the quality of immersion that made dancing at The Loft and Paradise Garage so special. UK sound engineers and clubs were developing similar systems. For example, Tony Andrews, the co-founder of the sound system company, specialising in speakers, Funktion-One, and who has been designing speakers since the late 1960s, comments: “When [a sound system] is good, it puts you into a meditative state.” (Rothlein 2014)

Funktion-One systems have been installed in many of the most highly regarded clubs such as Space on Ibiza and Berghain in Berlin. It is immersion that heightens the possibility of the ecstatic experience. Here we have the technological basis for the transformation in clubbing that began in the late 1970s and morphed into rave culture. (28)

The now legendary myth of the four Englishmen who went to Ibiza to come back and revolutionise British society is retold here, too. Though the story of the legendary night

when Nicky Holloway, Johnny Walker and Danny Rampling went to Ibiza's infamous late night powerhouse Amnesia and took the new drug ecstasy for the first time to afterwards bring it back to Great Britain, open the clubs Hacienda, Shoom and Heaven and create the "Second Summer of Love", UK's acid house revolution, Stratton is careful to remind us of the "whitewashing" which is done by excluding Detroit Techno and Chicago House's black and Disco's gay roots.

The history of Dance Music (206–210) then tells another story: The one from the Jazz Ballroom being replaced by cheaper record collection spinning nights everyone could afford. While Stomp and Twist made the Brits move their pelvis, the quality of sound hugely profited by the sound systems built by the religiously inspired dub music collectives in Jamaica, before they moved to Notting Hill Carnival. As the merits of the UK's minorities become clearer, one wonders what the closing with Thatcher's brutal rave ban meant for society. Also, newer discussions like Jimmy Saville's behaviour as a sex offender would have proven interesting for the proposed change in nightlife—from a dirty pick-up place for cheap thrills to a meditative, spiritual cleansing practice or festivities of joy, explained with help of Bey's TAZ—where exactly Big Beat belongs here, which Stratton mentions in the end of this highly entertaining, short read, remains as unclear as the exact role of fashion mentioned in the title. Apart from that, Stratton delivers a good overview of the main movements in 30 years of dance history which have left its mark on humanity.

REFERENCES

- Bey, Hakim. 1991. *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone*. New York: Autonomedia.
- Debord, Guy. 1967. *La société du spectacle*. Paris: Buchet-Chastel.
- Rothlein, Jordan. 2014, March 24. Industry Standards: Funktion-One. *Resident Advisor*. <<https://ra.co/features/1836>>, (Accessed 25 October 2023).

THIS TRACK CONTAINS POLITICS: THE CULTURE OF SAMPLING IN EXPERIMENTAL ELECTRONICA

HANNES LIECHTI

Bern: Norient Books, 2022.

ISBN: 978-3-9525444-2-6 (softcover)

RRP: €29,00 (softcover)

<<https://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2023.15.01.14>>

MOSES ITEN

RMIT (AUSTRALIA)

This Track Contains Politics: The Culture of Sampling in Experimental Electronica investigates why producers of contemporary, digital, experimental electronic music choose to compose using samples. Based on a PhD, this is Hannes Liechti's first book and has been published by the Switzerland-based Norient (n.d.), founded by ethnomusicologist Thomas Burkhalter in 2002 as a network bringing together a global community of thinkers and artists concerned with music, sound and media cultures. Their emphasis is on "the changing geography of multi-layered modernities, far beyond old ideas of North versus South, West versus East" (Beyer, Burkhalter and Liechti 2015). It is therefore not surprising that the producers interviewed for this book cover politics including the genocide of Armenians and the exclusion of Africans in Argentinian history.

Hannes Liechti has been working with Norient these recent years as a journalist, curator and events producer. His role as an applied cultural producer needs to be considered as adding to the potential impact of this book, not just amongst researchers but also practitioners. Norient played an important role in convincing me to build on my creative practice to become a researcher as some years ago I had been commissioned to write an essay based on my own practice as a DJ/producer of cumbia (Iten 2013), as well as contributing with podcasts (Iten 2016), a playlist (Iten 2015) and a mixtape (Iten 2011). This has led me to follow their research outputs with great interest as an example of research and practice intersecting. The tension between artistic practice and theoretical analysis is the biggest challenge Liechti attempts to overcome in this book.

This Track Contains Politics was highly anticipated reading for me for several reasons. I'm both a researcher and DJ/producer, focused on electronic dance music, DJ- and sound system cultures and am therefore interested in how this book stimulates both my research and creative practice, for which sampling has been central.¹ Like Liechti, I am interested in methodologies which reflect the practice being analysed, which in my case I have proposed as the DJ-as-researcher approach (Iten 2022). Although a committed cultural producer, Liechti is external to the field he is examining, which he presents as a potential advantage "as it allows the researcher to ask simple questions and take novel positions" (80). Indeed, reading Liechti's book is making me reflect on my own practice, in which sampling has been

a driving force. His incessant questioning of “why” a particular sample and compositional approach has been chosen, has increased my appreciation of the sometimes hidden political intent behind seemingly aesthetic or conceptual decisions.

Liechti identifies most literature on sampling has mainly been concerned with copyright issues and/or the particular practice of analogue-era sampling in hip-hop.² There is therefore much need for new research on the ongoing relevance of sampling in today’s digital era where the practice has become a ubiquitous and seemingly banal. *This Track Contains Politics* is focused on particular (political) intentions of a specific technique (sampling), in a niche creative field of (experimental electronica) music. Whilst this appears to be a narrow focus, Liechti’s expansive review of the literature on sampling, politics as a cultural concept and electronic dance music—of which the academic understanding can include non-dance oriented experimental electronic music—shows the scope of his research is actually quite broad. In the first few pages of the book, a useful brief history of sampling is provided, concluding with the current state of sampling as an indispensable and ubiquitous practice (11–14). Liechti points out most of the literature on sampling at first largely fixated on its association with hip-hop and the subsequent demise of the technique becoming restricted due to copyright lawsuits (20–22). The ongoing relevance to producers and researchers in this era when sampling appears a banal part of music making, is argued by Liechti as achievable by focusing on the motivations and intent behind the sampling. This he explores as part of “the socio-political potential of sampling”, which is also where the biggest gaps in research on sampling are to be found (15–22).

There are several theoretical advances proposed in this book. Firstly, *trackology* is introduced as a way of allowing the analytical focus to be on tracks—as opposed to songs—“as a tool for uncovering knowledge of the world” (77). The core interest of trackology according to Liechti, is the “search for traces within popular music”, based on Michael Rappe’s method of “music archaeology” (78). Traces could have been explored further as a concept. In my own PhD research for example, I have been applying Edouard Glissant’s creolization theory which includes a conceptualization of traces as cultural memory passed on via music (2020). Instead, the weight of Liechti’s theory is in the methodology. The ethnography is combined with a musical analysis of each of the five tracks. In order to apply a musicological approach to analyse tracks of experimental electronica largely composed by sampling, Liechti created “the fader of visibility (FOV)” model. This addresses the significance of the “visibility” (and invisibility) of the samples in the composition (101–107). Then in order to determine the motivations and intent behind the sampling, Liechti develops another model called the “spider of sampling reasons” model (109–143). This demonstrates in a neat diagram each producer’s particular approach to sampling. Both models are then applied to analyse and compare the case studies which follow.

Each of the five case studies features one track by a different producer, all active in what Liechti discusses broadly as “the field of experimental electronica” (52–53). In the book’s very useful Glossary, experimental electronica is defined as produced on laptops, mostly instrumental and with a sound that is “often abrasive, shaped by cuts, disruptions,

noises, and dissonances” (316). The five tracks selected for analysis engage with a diverse set of political issues: the Russian invasion of Ukraine’s Donbas region; gender issues and the memory of genocide in the Armenian diaspora; recognition of Afro-Argentines in the history contemporary Argentina; and the taboo of zoophilia. Whilst the analysis is narrowed down to just five tracks, this broad range of political issues is also engaged with by Liechti, further illuminating the context of each individual producer’s intent. These extra-musical perspectives have largely come from ethnographic fieldwork, which have produced some of the most illuminating passages in the book.

The methodological challenges and limitations encountered during the research of this book are outlined over several pages, revealing rare insight into not only the value of failure to future researchers but also the precarious conditions under which laptop producers of experimental electronica operate (69–75). Whilst Liechti admits a close look over the shoulders of the producers in the process of sampling was difficult to access, this did happen with one of his research participants. The results of this participant observation are featured in the penultimate chapter of the book, which Liechti calls an “interlude”, serving as a great accompaniment to the conclusion which follows. The observations made of US-based producer Lara Sarkissian at work was facilitated by her being invited to participate in a residency at Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, Germany, curated by Norient. Liechti suggests more funded residencies like this are needed, in order to facilitate more focused observation of the practice of laptop producers (294–295).

Ultimately, I admired Liechti’s tenacity in theorizing the playful and often random approaches of the producers he observed and interviewed. His theoretical rigour is balanced by his sensitive and nuanced voice, which is strongest when it becomes active, especially in the self-reflexive passages which reveal themselves when he addresses some of the problems encountered in trying to do fieldwork in the intimate work environments of “laptop producers”, which Liechti prefers over the term of the “derogatory” term of “bedroom producer” (316). Liechti cites fellow musicologist-ethnographer Mark Butler (2006) several times, who also applied musicology theory to analyse the electronic dance music producers. I largely agreed with the critique that Butler’s theorizing seemed more about “adding EDM to the music theorist’s repertory” than “bringing music theory into EDM’s varied and vibrant discourse” (Marshall 2009: 199). This tension is also present in Liechti’s research. However, Butler went on to continue to further advance the study of EDM (2014) and I can imagine Liechti’s commitment to both practice and research is putting him on a similarly inspired path.

NOTES

- 1 I have been a professional DJ/producer for twenty years and have toured the world with the project Cumbia Cosmonauts. I am currently completing a PhD at RMIT University, Melbourne, on digital cumbia and sound system culture, as well as working as a researcher with the Sonic Street Technologies research project, for University of Sydney and Goldsmiths University, London.

- 2 In terms of sampling in hip-hop, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (2004) by Joseph Schloss is a particularly useful work based on ethnographic research.

REFERENCES

- Beyer, Theresa, Thomas Burkhalter and Hannes Liechti, eds. 2015. *Seismographic Sounds: Visions of a New World*. Berne: Norient. <<https://doi.org/10.56513/zmhg1392>>.
- Beyer, Theresa and Thomas Burkhalter, eds. 2012. *Out of the Absurdity of Life: Globale Musik*. Berne: Traversion/Norient. <<https://doi.org/10.56513/vlgz1905>>.
- Butler, Mark J. 2014. *Playing with Something That Runs: Technology, Improvisation, and Composition in DJ and Laptop Performance*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Butler, Mark. 2006. *Unlocking the Groove: Rhythm, Meter, and Musical Design in Electronic Dance Music*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Glissant, Edouard. 2020. *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*. Translated by Celia Britton. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Iten, Moses. 2011. "Arab Awakening". *Norient*. <<https://norient.com/podcasts/arabawakeningmixtape>>, (Accessed 18 October 2023).
- Iten, Moses. 2012. "Insider's Perspectives on New Wave Cumbia" in Beyer, Theresa and Thomas Burkhalter (edited by). *Out Of The Absurdity Of Life: Globale Musik*. Berne: Traversion/Norient. 264-77. <<https://doi.org/10.56513/vlgz1905>>.
- Iten, Moses. 2013. "Perspectives on New Wave Cumbia". *Norient*. <<https://norient.com/stories/new-wave-cumbia>>, (Accessed 18 October 2023).
- Iten, Moses. 2015. "Five Video Clips from Mexico". *Norient*. <<https://norient.com/video/five-video-clips-from-mexico>>, (Accessed 18 October 2023).
- Iten, Moses. 2016. "The Sound of Cumbia". *Norient*. <<https://norient.com/podcasts/the-sound-of-cumbia>>, (Accessed 18 October 2023).
- Iten, Moses. 2022. "The DJ-as-researcher Approach: Methods Emerging Through Digital Cumbia Fieldwork". Paper presented at "Performing, Engaging, Knowing" symposium, 2020. Hosted by The ICTM Study Group on Applied Ethnomusicology, the Lucerne School of Music, the Department of Composition, Electroacoustics, University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna and the Swiss Society for Ethnomusicology. <<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7274023>>.
- Marshall, Wayne. 2009. "Reviewed Work: Unlocking the Groove: Rhythm, Meter, and Musical Design in Electronic Dance Music by Mark J. Butler". *Music Theory Spectrum* 31(1): 192–99. <<https://doi.org/10.1525/mts.2009.31.1.192>>.
- Norient. n.d. "About". <<https://norient.com/>>, (Accessed 18 October 2023)
- Schloss, Joseph Glenn. 2004. *Making beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University.

BERGHAIN, TECHNO UND DIE KÖRPERFABRIK: ETHNOGRAPHIE EINES STAMMPUBLIKUMS

GUILLAUME ROBIN

Marburg: Büchner-Verlag, 2021.

ISBN: 978-3-96317-274-8 (paperback), ISBN 978-3-96317-812-2 (eBook)

RRP: €22,00 (paperback), €18,00 (eBook)

<<https://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2023.15.01.15>>

ANJA SCHWANHÄUSSER

UNIVERSITY OF GÖTTINGEN (GERMANY)

Bars and nightclubs count among the mythological places of the city, as Rolf Lindner (2022) writes in his *In einer Welt von Fremden: Eine Anthropologie der Stadt*. As part of his recent role as guest researcher at the Centre Marc Bloch at the Humboldt University, Guillaume Robin has tracked one such place, in his study of the world's most famous Berlin club, Berghain. In the introduction he cites the two most well-known, but rarely spelled-out, concepts in cultural studies in reference to club culture: *heterotopia* (Michel Foucault) and the *non-lieu* (Marc Augé). Although Augé did not mean industrial wastelands with the term *non-lieu*, rather airports, train stations and motorway rest stops, the term nevertheless testifies to the transitional character of the nocturnal locations, converted ruins of post-industrial society. For Robin, Berghain is a transgressive, social, sensual and reflexive place, where “the exploration of self and community meet, where the utopia of the body takes shape” (10) (this and the following quotes are all translations by the reviewer).

Robin has the genuinely ethnological goal of writing about club culture not from the point of view of its musical actors (DJs, club operators, party organisers), but from the perspective of its audience. For this purpose, he conducted a study among regulars, and especially the global, urban nomads of the “EasyJet Generation”, as the journalist Tobias Rapp (2009) calls them. In terms of methodology, he bases the study on twelve interviews and around 30 online questionnaires, supplemented by the manageable number of twelve “observational sittings” (15) at the club. In doing so, he faces the challenge of describing a quasi-sacred place, without himself succumbing to mythologization: The analysis aims “to go beyond the blind reverence of the initiated and to scrutinize these clichés under the magnifying glass” (15).

There's an attempt at a balancing act between empathy and distance in the text, which is not always successful, for instance when Robin presents a Berghain party as being akin to an ancient ritual and asks: “To what extent can Berghain be seen as a revival of Bacchanalia?” (13). This flowery formulation irritates at first. There are more recent Berlin-specific traditions which would lend themselves better as a comparison. For example, the tradition of the Berlin secret societies or the queer scene surrounding the German physician and sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld. On the other hand, the sensual anthropology in the school of David Howes (2005) doesn't shy away from a certain pathos either. Thus, the reference

to bacchanalia is not to be understood analytically but as a metaphor to capture the genuine Berghain atmosphere, as experienced by a cosmopolitan, queer scene.

The first chapter, “Bodies in Space”, is about the significance of the club for its regulars and the transition from the “profane” world beyond the club into the “sacred” (40) halls of Berghain. With the term *rite of passage* (Arnold van Gennep) and *Communitas* (Victor Turner), Robin describes the character of the space, the shifting bodily perceptions, the temporary sense of community, as well as the internal control mechanisms which grant a harmonious night of celebrating. He sees the special feature of Berghain, in addition to its symbolical situation in the Berlin party-metropolis, as being the aura of secrecy that surrounds it. This is created through the strict door policy, the photography ban, the seemingly sacred architecture, the complex system of rules of conduct and the so-called “*Hainweb*” (47)—a portmanteau word made up of *hain* from Berghain and *web* meaning to ache, a play on the German word *Heimweh* that means to be homesick—with which fans express their passionate attachment to the place. The recourse to an online questionnaire, which is often quoted in the text, might initially surprise the empirical cultural studies readership. In place of the personal experiences of the researcher are instead short and concise reports from the actual participants, reminiscent of blogger style. Unfortunately, Robin does not explain this method and its implementation in more detail, but he uses it extremely creatively. The subjective descriptions by the guests of their self-image and their personal opinions about club politics are astonishingly involved and in parts even poetically formulated. One extremely interesting question which has unfortunately also not been elaborated on and brought to any conclusion is:

Does the example of Berghain perhaps reveal a change in Techno culture in general, away from a subculture which is open to all, where social differences are blurred by cheap drugs, and towards a more homogenous, exclusive subculture, whose members are recruited largely from more privileged segments of society? (89)

A court decision in recent years equating clubs with high-culture events for tax purposes would seem to point in this direction. The second chapter, “Utopian Bodies”, is about stylisations as a way of separating oneself from the everyday identity and from each other, while at the same time being a way of creating community. In reference to Foucault’s concept of *utopian bodies* as well as in reference to Piotr Nathan’s mural, “Rituals of Disappearance”, in Berghain, Robin defines the stylistic transformations as the individual’s longing to dissolve. This dissolution takes place in various forms and media, through the equalising procedure at the Berghain entrance, the adaptation of dominant dress and dance codes, anonymisation (e.g., by wearing fetish masks) as well as through the consuming of drugs. A central finding is that subjective feelings of freedom and liberation are closely linked to a communal and institutional set of rules, with self-discipline and self-constraint: “It’s not so much a matter of total liberation, but much more about a strongly controlled disinhibition, which goes hand in hand with the ethics of consent and the respect of others’ bodies” (94). In Robin’s description, a party night seems to run like an almost perfect machine where almost nothing goes wrong. Robin writes that he has left out sequences which are too

voyeuristic. This is understandable, yet it gives rise to an argumentative gap. What happens when shame boundaries are crossed, not because one wants to, but because one is driven to it by obsession? Nevertheless, he offers an extremely interesting insight into this “body factory” and its culture. The “crows”, as the audience is also called, voluntarily adapt to the institutional constraints, regulations and codifications thereby giving the club its individual character.

In the third chapter, “Degendering the Dancefloor”, the focus is on gender-specific stylisations and the play with gender identities. With reference to Judith Butler, Robin defines gender as performance. Especially for guests from less liberal countries, Berlin and Berghain offer a “safe space” (105). Here also new subcultural trends come on stage, such as the “sex-positive” movement, which promotes an openness to diverse gender identities, sexual practices and to nudity. Robin rightly notes that the nocturnal rulebook can lead to a “homonormativity”, where certain homosexual codes dominate and thus exclude other forms of expression.

In the fourth chapter, “Underground resist-dance”, Robin opens up the perspective to the broader Berlin club scene and, in particular, to the period of the pandemic. Due to the enforced closures, considerable financial and cultural damage was done, and the cultural diversity of the metropolis has suffered. The perseverance with which the Techno culture actors have defended their “right to dance” and “right to the city” (150), Robin presents as being proof that clubs are more than just spaces for commercial events. As already demonstrated by Birmingham Cultural Studies, in a study to which Robin, however, does not refer, partying is shown to be more than hedonistic consumption. The charge of hedonism was famously invoked by politicians during the pandemic in order to devalue outdoor dancing at night. As Robin shows though, it is, on the contrary, a way of life and culture which is pushed through even in times of crisis, and against prevailing opinion. The author also recalls earlier protests, with which clubs resisted displacement and gentrification. Without questioning the pandemic-related regulative measures, he interprets these activities as a positive expression of a political consciousness in nightlife: “the proliferation of these wild raves, which were often interrupted by the police . . . thus emphasises the active role of the techno audience and its desire to assert itself as a driving force in the scene” (148).

The fifth chapter is called “Closing”, similar to the last act at a dance night at Berghain. Here, Robin comes to the unsurprising conclusion that a Berghain club night is not a bacchanalia. Extremely interesting, however, is his reasoning, in which he returns to the central thesis of the first chapter: “Berghain is undoubtedly a space of freedom like no other, but it is above all an extremely codified space in which the liberation of the body is linked to self-discipline and strong control mechanisms” (160). The transgression of boundaries and ecstatic forms of dissolution in the community are thus only possible because of the strict set of rules. As in the process of civilization (Norbert Elias), to which Robin refers, the increasing loosening of control over emotions comes at the price of an increase in the suppression of inner drives, so that ecstatic celebration is also only possible through a sophisticated system of control. This is expressed on several levels: The rejection of sexist

and objectifying heteronormative practices as well as of “body shaming”; the maintaining of a respectful distance, and a strong internalisation of respect for the body of others. Robin points here to a possibly generalizable connection between discipline and ecstasy which, also for other subcultural contexts, is worthwhile examining. It is a perspective of our current time, which is “woke” and “aware”. It turns out that within order and its compliance (also) lies a longing for “pleasure” and the dissolution of boundaries.

Robin’s study provides a particularly successful and exhaustingly complex description of the sensuality of the club experience. The central insight, that liberation can only be achieved through self-discipline, is extremely illuminating. The bacchanal thus becomes a code for a subcultural practice that is characterised by the inner contradiction of control and the dissolution of boundaries. The book is an innovative contribution to the “sensual turn” in urban scene-, pop- and subcultural research. In the past decades this field has mostly been concerned with the economic aspects of partying (*creative industries, subcultural capital* and such). In Robin’s work, on the other hand, questions of cultural order and creativity and of social change (again) come to the fore in an exemplary way. By taking into account the social origins and the phenomenon of the global EasyJet Generation in his analysis, Robin also makes a contribution to the question as to the extent to which popular culture and popular means of pleasure have nowadays become the guiding culture of the middle-class. The study shows that for the queer global elite, going to visit a cultural site such as Berghain is just as important as a visit to the opera in New York or Sydney. Last but not least, he provides a very good, in part poetically formulated portrait of the “loaners”, typical figures of the big city as described by Rolf Lindner (2022), accompanied by beautiful photographs by Mike D’hondt. Thus, the study can also be connected to the analysis of figures and figuration of urban anthropology.

REFERENCES

- Howes, David, ed. 2005. *Empire of the Senses. The Sensual Culture Reader*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- Lindner, Rolf. 2022. *In einer Welt von Fremden: Eine Anthropologie der Stadt*. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz Berlin.
- Rapp, Tobias. 2009. *Lost and Sound: Berlin, Techno, und der Easyjetset*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

EARS AS PORTALS: ALTERNATIVE REALITIES OF MUSICAL INFRASTRUCTURES. A CTM FESTIVAL 2023 REVIEW

CTM FESTIVAL: "PORTALS", 2023. <[HTTPS://WWW.CTM-FESTIVAL.DE/FESTIVAL-2023/WELCOME](https://www.ctm-festival.de/festival-2023/welcome)>

<<https://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2023.15.01.16>>

LUIGI MONTEANNI

SOAS, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON (UK)

What is a portal? Whether you base your definition on fantasy and sci-fi tropes of self-generating megadungeons (Berti forthcoming) and interdimensional gateways (Yalcinkaya 2022) or on informational technologies such as the internet (Magauda 2020), the portal conveys the idea of a device and threshold offering an access to some other space, a passage towards somewhere radically different. Of course, a portal can be secret or hidden, dangerous, or difficult to activate. By connecting multiple points in space and time the portal is a two-way medium offering exceptional insight and mobility to who actively chooses to exploit its powers (Hanson 2021).

"Portals" is also the theme chosen by CTM festival for its 24th edition, which took place in Berlin between 27th January and 5th February 2023. CTM probed the possibility of a curatorial approach that makes "contact with specific modes of experience, histories, communities, and speculative futures" reflecting on "the preconditions, thresholds, regulation, and fundamental function of sound and music as gateways to other realities" (CTM 2023). In this sense, the festival's portal(s) used different venues and art spaces around the city—15 in total including Kunstquartier Bethanien, silent green, Adk, FabLab Neukölln, Festsaal, MONOM, KQB, RSO, HAU1, HAU2, KW, Panke, radialsystem, Morphine Raum and, obviously, Berghain—to allow trespassers to behold and overhear geographically and subculturally heterodox musical contexts.

Of course, as I have mentioned, portals are not just there: they deform and disrupt the concepts of reality, space, and time to generate something, to make something happen by creating new threads, pathways, and experiences. This is an idea that is expressed through aural means by CTM Radio Lab winner Isuru Kumarasinghe, who describes his installation "Gilunu" (submerged, in Sinhala) as follows:

When we step into a space or a place, where the resonance is changed or enhanced, we naturally feel like engaging with that resonance ... to see how the space transforms the sound and how in return it transforms us. It becomes like a portal into a different world, as part of this world, just for this moment. (CTM 2023)

Accordingly, the festival embraced multidisciplinary, structuring this week of activities around club nights and music performances as much as around exhibitions, installations,

screenings, workshops, labs and talks which, besides never resulting as secondary activities, helped inform the awareness of currently forming processes of musicmaking around the world. Part of these experiments were the Afropollination project, in which Piranha Arts (Berlin) and Boutique Foundation/Nyege Nyege Collective (Kampala) established a transnational laboratory for sonic research to bring together artists from six African nations and Germany, the exhibition “We Found Our Own Reality” curated by artist Paul Purgas, in which installations, archive materials, artworks, a series of live performances and commissioned texts were gathered to account for the under-explored histories of the sound studio at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, the first electronic music studio in India (Purgas 2023), the Radio Lab open call showcasing an always different array of audio-installative endeavors within the medium of radio, presenting works by Anna Kravets and, of course, Kumarasinghe and discussions that surveyed a number of themes, including the impending generational change in club culture and issues of cultural production during the ongoing invasion of Ukraine. From this perspective, CTM has shown how it is possible to use programming as a tool to produce new forms of sensory and intellectual knowledge, forging connections between music circuits and performers accentuating the elements of uniqueness that the selected musical acts bear from their context.

From the audiences’ and organization’s point of view, after years of pandemic fatigue and a life-affirming 2022 edition based on bringing back the joys of the dancing body, “Portals” seems again to give more space to contemplative and introspective listening experiences, betting on a courageous line-up presenting comparatively fewer resounding names than many previous editions. This is an attention that both staff and attendees seemed to be more than willing to offer given the almost total sold outs and the constant, remarkable presence of the organizers and curators.

Of course, even for a militant practitioner of sleep deprivation techniques such as myself, it would be impossible to map the festival extensively; an endeavor that goes also beyond the scope of the present text. Therefore, the following selection of highlights is not only extremely personal but should give a glimpse in an impressionistic fashion of what I tried to convey above. Among the performances, personal favorites include the improvisation between Afropollination’s sound artist Jessica Ekomane and the Ugandan DIY synth builder Afrorack establishing new canons of non-eurocentric sound synthesis, the heavily poetic minimalism and metal-infused tribute to mourning songs and traditional lamentations by Sara Parkman and Maria W. Horn of Funeral Folk, the extreme, pedagogic interactivity of Poulomi Desai, slowly inviting the audience to take control of her unorthodox, non-musical instrumentation challenging the idea of authenticity in regional music and the objectification of the “South Asian female body” in popular culture, the queering post-rave romanticism of the Neapolitan neo-melodic performance by 2023 SHAPE+ alumni NZIRIA and light artist Bianca Peruzzi with the collaboration of choreographer Franka Marlene Foth and dancer Janan Laubscher, the screamo meme music for TikTok doomscrollers of Lil Mariko supported by the raw, physical spoken word grime of Iceboy Violet, the A/V cyberpunk of Japanese gabber and black-metal crossover ensemble VMO, Tzusig’s anxiety-inducing and

betrayal-themed dance provocations, the ambiguously brutal and theatrical genre-juggling of Vieze Meisje and the Kampala singeli dance-fest conjured by Queen Asher's productions, galvanized by the singing of her mother Rehema Tajiri and by dancers Nana and Zai. But above all, a special mention goes to Asep Nayak, a Papuan producer and pioneer of the electronic wisisi: a genre that from the rituals of harvesting ceremonies in Wamena was recreated and innovated through FL Studio beats and mp3 technologies. I had previously binged on wisisi on YouTube for a couple years and I would have never believed I could experience it live in front of my eyes and twitching muscles. Witnessing this act really made the festival for me, showing that music can really create extraordinary junctions between audiences and scenes.

From this perspective, despite the partiality of my account, this year's CTM showed even more interest towards the subterranean, the peripheral and the subcultural. As noted by Juliet Hoornaert in her review of the festival for the magazine *Gonzo Circus* (2023), CTM presented a broad, generous conception of music, in which scratching the surface already meant pointing at the underlying artistic and social symmetries and disparities between manifold scenes. What I personally found to be the most remarkable aspect of the festival was its ability to put the listener in the right conditions to experience sound. Whether it is for the dauntlessness of the curation or for the carefully selected list of locations, there was always the feeling that one was always offered the possibility to listen to something in the best technical and contextual conditions possible, whether with their ears or through the whole body in motion, creating the possibility for a range of extremely different styles, from pop and hyperpop to black metal, folk, spoken word, singeli and wisisi to coexist as equals. Throughout, agreeing with a discussion I had with CTM cofounder Jan Rolf, which informed this piece, I appreciated the feeling of urgency that the festival expressed in reorganizing the field of musical knowledge, trying to push many peripheral phenomena to the foreground of the clubbing experience, highlighting distinct aspects of geographical and subcultural locality.

In this sense, going back to the possible question of what a current club culture is or should be today, I support the stances of scholars such as Silver (2014), Labelle (2018), Rief (2009) and Magaudda (2020), arguing that clubbing today should employ music and technology as vibrational tools to cultivate particular forms of reflexivity and modes of experience that reconfigure the boundaries around youth cultures and other social identities, allowing a better circulation of sociality and power. Therefore, the contemporary club culture that I envision, and that CTM seems to support, sees sound, festivals, venues, scenes, and encounter as the fundamental infrastructures allowing this special type of circulation; an alternative flow proving that, contrarily to what Attali (1985) has noted, music does not only move along the routes of war, power and trade.

Accordingly, the portal is an apt metaphor of how to reflect on this ambiguous and exceptionally powerful type of infrastructure. Seeing the progressive attention to socializing the organizing process through open calls, curatorial collaborations, and commitment to support less-known music movements, I have no doubt regarding this edition's awareness

relative to these issues. Nonetheless, accounting for my own experience as well as the one of many attendees, journalists and even participating artists with whom I chatted during the events, some elements seemed worth reconsidering.

First, even though focusing on the netherworld of the global underground, the large majority of the invited projects still benefits from the support and visibility offered by many institutional organizations (e.g., SHAPE+, Goethe-Institut), agencies and renown musical labels (e.g., Nyege Nyege, PAN) albeit from the fringes of the music industry. Thus, even though these associations often work with positive affirmation strategies, how it is possible to create further representation and inclusion for projects that fall off the actors' curatorial purview still needs to be assessed. Secondly, the petty hostility and unwillingness to help finding solutions of some of the Berghain staff, arguably a staple of CTM's program, inside and outside the venue, remains at odds with the "be respectful to others" attitude promoted on their website (Berghain n.d.), creating spaces in which edginess and even mockery have prevailed. This has prevented me, for instance, from entering the night I was looking forward to the most ("Bodily Overdrive"), which is hence not mentioned in this review. Then, more in the form of a suggestion than a critique, I argue that this edition's theme should be, in view of the next, socially meaningful topic of 2024 edition "Sustain", further examined, keeping in focus how these infrastructures come into being, shift and are regulated; what are the portals that are still difficult to open, that benefit from advantaged access or remain closed? When translating the metaphor to the reality of today's musical infrastructures, we should ask ourselves who controls the points of entrance and exit. Who has access to them and under which conditions? How can we make sure that they remain functional, but their usage is not overly regulated? Overall, for me this edition was a definite success and a positive example to follow for other festivals of the same kind. Thus, I'm confident that all these points might be explored in the next years.

REFERENCES

- Attali, Jacques. 1985. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Berghain. n.d. "Awareness". <<https://www.berghain.berlin/en/awareness/>>, (Accessed 22 August 2023)
- Berti, Paolo. Forthcoming. "Megadungeon: A Model for Media Complexity". *Magazén* 4(1).
- CTM. 2023. CTM 2023—Portals. <<https://www.ctm-festival.de/festival-2023/welcome>>, (Accessed 21 August 2023).
- Hanson, Kara. 2021. "At the Threshold: Science Fiction Portals as Agents of Liminality". *Medium*, 9 August: <<https://kshanson.medium.com/at-the-threshold-science-fiction-portals-as-agents-of-liminality-1f1e65ff1b2a>>, (Accessed 21 August 2023).
- Hoornaert, Juliet. 2023. "CTM 2023: een futuristisch ravecongres". *Gonzo Circus*, 14 February: <<https://www.gonzocircus.com/ctm-2023-toekomstfestival-vol-klankanarchie/>>, (Accessed 21 August 2023).

-
- Labelle, Brandon. 2018. *Sonic Agency: Sound and Emergent Forms of Resistance*. London: Goldsmiths Press.
- Magaudda, Paolo. 2020. "Music Scenes as Infrastructures: From Live Venues to Algorithmic Data". In *Popular Music, Technology, and the Changing Media Ecosystem*, ed. Tamás Tófalvy and Emília Barna, 23–42. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Purgas, Paul. 2023. "Introduction". In *We Found Our Own Reality: An Exploration of India's First Electronic Music Studio and its Resonances into the Present*, ed. Paul Purgas, 4–5. Berlin: CTM Festival.
- Rief, Silvia. 2009. *Club Cultures: Boundaries, Identities and Otherness*. New York: Routledge.
- Silver, Micah. 2019. *Figures in Air: Essays Toward a Philosophy of Audio*. New York: Inventory Press.
- Yalcinkaya, Günseli. 2022. "The Worlds of Technology and Magic are Closer than you Think". *Dazed*, 4 July: <<https://www.dazeddigital.com/science-tech/article/56442/1/new-age-of-technology-mysticism-magic-somerset-house>>, (Accessed 21 August 2023).