Berghain, Techno and the Body Factory: Ethnography of a Club's Regulars

Transposition

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Abstract

This research explores the sociological dimensions of Berghain—the iconic Berlin techno club—by focusing on its regular attendees and their shared experience of secrecy.[1] The fieldwork-based study draws parallels between Berghain and ancient Bacchanalian rites, both spaces where social norms are suspended, allowing for a collective transformation of bodies and identities. It emphasizes the club's "code of silence" as a vital element of the communal experience, creating a space where anonymity and discretion are key. Methodologically, Robin employs ethnographic methods, by combining qualitative interviews and participant observation sessions, immersing himself in the Berghain scene to understand how this secrecy fosters a sense of belonging among regulars and releases the body. This research also explores how the COVID 19 pandemic has reshaped the club's sociological contours, including shifts in the audience and the reinvention of the space. Overall, this study addresses how secrecy, rituals, and social dynamics at Berghain shape its audience's collective identity.

Keywords: secrecy, ethnography, bacchanalia, collective identity, techno culture

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Introductory note from the Foreign Languages Editor

The first three sections of this Transpositions article are translations of the first three chapters of Guillaume Robin's book *Berghain, Techno und die Körperfabrik: Ethnographie eines Stammpublikums*, originally published in German in 2021. The book was also published in 2021 in French, as *Berlin Bacchanales.* The fourth and final section of this article—in the shape of an Epilogue—was written by the author exclusively for *Dancecult* and is based on his ongoing research on the impact COVID 19 has had on electronic dance music culture (see Jóri and Robin 2024). Berghain was substantially affected by COVID 19, as well as the ongoing war in Ukraine. Please note, this Epilogue has not been subject to double blind peer review.

"Dance, dance, otherwise we are lost!"[2]

– Pina Bausch

The Return of the Bacchanalia?

A typical Monday morning in Berlin's Friedrichshain district: while cars begin to park in front of Aldi for the day's shopping, Berghain gently closes its doors. In the nearby park, exhausted ravers rest on patches of sparse grass, winding down after a long party night. The night owls draped in black fabric emerge into daylight, which the club has released after thirty hours of pounding basslines and frenzied dancing. The wasteland around has since been replaced by a public garden where exhausted ravers like chilling out after a night of partying. By devoting their bodies to dancing instead of the logic of efficiency, Berghain dancers defy the social convention of resting on Sundays. Much about Berghain is "typically Berlin", but not everything. Few places make you feel as alive in your body. It is a space that resonates with what Foucault describes as "heterotopias" (Foucault 2019): where self-discovery and community converge; where "utopias of the body" come to life. The era of Ostgut, an underground gay club from Berlin's late nineties subculture, is over. Berghain has replaced it and in twenty years has become the ultimate destination of pilgrimage for techno fans worldwide. Berghain has become so famous that criticism is rife of the club having become too commercial. This fame in the era of social media generates a collective fascination or even a cult that can border on fetishism: S. collects Berghain flyers to build his "wall of shame"[3]; C. carefully preserves the colorful stickers on the back of her smartphone; K. spends up to five hours waiting in line; W. flies several times a year to Berlin to enjoy the famous Berghain's *Klubnacht* ("Club Night"); M. used to spend an average of 30 hours in the club every week and hadn't missed a single club night in three years until the COVID-19 lockdowns. No place in electronic music history has fuelled such fantasies. Just hop on the first budget flight to Berlin and you'll hear people talking about Berghain. It's almost as

if the struggle tourists have in pronouncing this German word hints at the challenge of actually getting into the techno temple.

The well-known club owes its name to the contraction of Kreuzberg and Friedrichshain, the Berlin districts once under American and Soviet occupation. The slightly remote Berghain is located in a former industrial area near the Spree River, just a few hundred meters from the former "death strip" that once divided East and West and is now home to the East Side Gallery. Originally housed in a former goods station warehouse, Ostgut—the former name of Berghain—closed in 2003 to make way for the construction of the O2 World Arena (today Uber Arena), a sports and events venue. A year later, Berghain opened nearby in a former power station built in the style of socialist classicism, which then belonged to Vattenfall. Initially, the club's owners Norbert Thormann and Michael Teufele rented the space from the energy provider, then decided to purchase it in 2011. The proximity to a demilitarized zone, abandoned in the 1990s and far from appealing at the time, along with the lack of nearby residential areas and the low rents, explains why so many bars and clubs flocked to this urban fringe along both sides of the Spree River.

The Berghain is surrounded by supermarkets and parking lots, so-called "Non-Places", as coined by the French anthropologist Marc Augé (2010) in reference to these spaces of transit and interchangeable modernity which render humans anonymous. The only other nearby buildings are the fire and police stations. Like all heterotopias, Berghain is located on the urban fringe, part of an abandoned landscape in a post-industrial environment. It's this geographic location above all that gives Berghain its heterotopic character. The club fascinates because in some ways it contradicts the values that have structured Western society for millennia: belief in progress, a sense of decency, self-realization through work, order, moderation and reason. Through its excesses widely reported by the media, Berghain would come to mark the return of the Bacchanalia.[4] *Klubnacht* after *Klubnacht*, it offers a bacchanal, a temporary triumph of the Dionysian over the Apollonian, a duality Nietzsche described in *The Birth of Tragedy* (2008). As Western countries are witnessing a strong return of the Dionysian, this return to paganism—which controversial sociologist Michel Maffesoli calls the "return of the tribes" (1996)—could be considered as a response to the individualism of modern societies, now seen as a dead end. Hubris arises in rebellion against moderation and rationality, as well as against the urge to impose restrictions and control on everything. Berghain seems to embody all of this and the hedonistic utopia used to be symbolized at the foot of the entrance stairs by a statue of Bacchus drinking from a cornucopia.[5] From the rave scene and Berlin's "*Keller-Jahre*" ("Cellar-Years") of the 1990s to today's sex-positive techno parties, there's been a distinct Berlin pursuit of unrestrained hedonism: an embrace of raw, unapologetic animality, free from moral judgement. By maintaining strict silence about what happens within its walls, Berghain enables bodies to fully surrender to excess and the indulgence of emotion, the enjoyment of dance, drugs, nudity, sexuality and trance without shame. In *The Shadow of Dionysus*, Maffesoli (1992) argues that the orgiastic surge is a way of resisting the hyper-rationality of modern societies, obsessed with control and zero risk.[6]

If we take seriously the hypothesis of a return to these pagan times of *communitas*, in which individuals in (and under) ecstasy reconnect with their bodies, the community, and the cosmos in general, then we can see an analogy between the ancient mystery cults and Berghain.[7] Before they took on their current meaning of noisy, orgiastic festivities, Bacchanalia were religious celebrations in honor of Bacchus in ancient Rome, starting from the 3rd century BC. In ancient Greece as well, Dionysia—the annual celebrations in honor of Dionysus—had been held since the 6th century BC. Like Bacchanalia, Dionysia were mystery cults where secrecy played a central role. These cults were not public but practiced only among insiders, called *mystes*—a Greek word meaning "the silent ones". Insiders had to recite an incantation proving they belonged to the circle of secret-bearers. Without knowledge of this code, entry to the temple was denied. During the initiation ordeal, to get through the *mystes* were not allowed to speak. The near-religious silence that Berghain's regulars maintain lining up and the carefully guarded secret that manifests itself through the photography ban, show striking similarities to the secrecy of the Bacchanalia. Piotr Nathan—whose giant mural *Rituals of Disappearance* could be admired in the cloakroom area until 2017—described his work as a "gateway to the mystery", an invitation "to enter the mystical ambiguity, to marvel at the enigmatic nature and explore the secret behind this massive mural" (Coultate 2017).[8] The artwork made of 171 aluminum panels, 5 meters high and 25 meters wide, depicted natural phenomena like "volcanic eruptions, sandstorms, waterspouts, and the shimmering of the northern lights over a nocturnally quiet place"—mystical landscapes that also evoke the mysteries of antiquity. Like a door to another world, Berghain recalls the Roman Bacchanalia, which were associated with these mystery cults. Bacchanalia were a pretext for drunkenness, orgiastic outbursts, and sometimes even ritual killings. Due to the scandals they provoked and the threat they posed to public order, the Roman Senate eventually banned them. Nathan's work reminds us that secrecy lies at the heart of the Berghain's festivities. Unlocking its secrets requires understanding its heterotopic dynamics. If bodies move and express themselves differently at Berghain, if they sweat and radiate so intensely, it's because the club—through its distinct visual and acoustic design—creates a unique relationship with the body. In many ways, like the Bacchanalia, Berghain remains a heterotopia, captivating precisely because it disrupts the order, decorum, and rationality of modern life. It offers a space for collective release, a place where primal instincts are reignited, transforming the club into a modern-day sanctuary for the body's most profound desires and untamed energy. In this sense, Berghain embodies one of those "other spaces" that Foucault (2019) speaks of—a heterotopia where celebration and secrecy go hand in hand, a marginal place that fosters the body's utopias.

Most books on techno for the broader public are focused on the phenomenon from the perspective of its musical actors (DJs, club owners, party organizers) but rarely from the viewpoint of its audience and its bodily dynamics. They often refer to its musical origins in Detroit (Sicko 1999) or the techno boom of the early 1990s (Denk and von Thülen 2014), helping to forge the myth of its origins. The pioneering work of sociologists and cultural

anthropologists has expanded the scope of knowledge from various perspectives, focusing on techno as a form of post-traditional community (Hitzler and Pfadenhauer 2001); the ethnography of the Berlin scene (Schwannhäuser 2010) or the club economy (Kühn 2016). Berghain has inspired academic research but also contemporary literature like the novels *Tomorrow Berlin* by Oscar Coop-Phane (2015), *Demande à la nuit* by Anne-Laure Jaeglé (2016) and *Axolotl Roadkill* by Helene Hegemann (2012).[9] As for reports from journalists or bloggers on Berghain, they are prolific. They focus in general on the excesses of the club, with the ban on photography only heightening the tendency towards hyperbole. These countless reports about Berghain often resort to recurring stereotypes: Berghain is sometimes compared to a temple or cathedral and overinterpreted from the perspective of a religious experience. Other times, it is portrayed for its monumental and dystopian aspect, akin to the Moloch in Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), as a god-machine devouring dancers under the watchful eye of Sven Marquardt, who is elevated to the role of Cerberus, the guardian of the underworld. Some books, like Tobias Rapp's *Lost and Sound* (2009), mention Berghain only in passing. Only one work, written in a patchwork style, is entirely dedicated to the club: *Die Clubmaschine: Berghain* (Schulz and Kilian 2018). This question of the machine's role is undoubtedly an interesting approach, but it alone does not explain the dynamics of the audience.

This ethnographic analysis aims to move beyond the blind reverence of insiders and scrutinize clichés. The reflection which follows is based on three years of ethnographic research within Berghain's techno scene. Methodologically, it draws on fieldwork conducted among Berghain's regular clientele through observation once or twice a month, particularly on Sundays during peak hours of the so-called Berghain *Klubnacht*. The focus of this study is on bodily practices within the techno scene.[10] It combines participant observation sessions with twelve interviews and approximately thirty online questionnaires from regulars.[11] It is important to approach the term "audience" with caution: there is no singular "techno scene", just as there is no singular "Berghain audience". The regulars of *Klubnacht* are neither the same as the Saturday night crowd, nor those attending the *Snax* parties (reserved for gay people only) or the *Finest Fridays*. Yet, how can one establish a sociology of these regular guests? How can the club be conceptualized as a heterotopia in Foucault's sense? To what extent is Berghain, unlike any other club in the world, a place for the expression of Foucault's "utopian body"? Is it truly an inclusive space and as queer as it is often presented to be? The idea of conducting an ethnographic study on Berghain emerged when I observed at various festivals in Brandenburg (*Garbicz*, *Nation of Gondwana*, *Her Damit*) that Berghain regulars were often identifiable by their distinctive dance style.[12] One thing was clear: Berghain is much more than a machine. It is a generator of bodily experiments. It is nothing without its audience and without the bodies that fill, shape, and bring to life the space by dancing.

Bodies in Space

Initiated into the Secret

> It was so hot and humid that the sticker came off my iPhone. A security guard saw it and tried to escort me out, thinking I had broken the house rules. I asked him to wait for a few seconds so I could warn my friends that I was leaving. I ditched the guy with my phone and kept dancing all day in the Panorama Bar. After 10 hours, he finally found me again. He was still holding my phone and was really angry. It was the latest generation iPhone. He told me I was messing with him. I got banned for three months. After all, there are other priorities than smartphones! (A., Poland)

In the beginning was the body. We must immediately temper the expectations of readers who have not yet experienced Berghain on a Sunday who imagine they can approach the mystical experience of the *Klubnacht* through sleazy details or sensational anecdotes. Both the writer and the field researcher fail in their attempts to describe the Berghain experience in concepts, so impossible is it to put into words the electric atmosphere on the dance floor at peak times, when the techno tracks roar like thunder. The Berghain experience is lived in the present moment, through and within the body. It takes shape in the belly, thighs, breath and skin. The *Klubnacht* cannot be photographed. Bodies dance more freely when they know they are not being observed by a camera's eye. Just as secrecy was central to the mystery cults of antiquity, so too is it at Berghain, as it protects the club from the outside world. When exposed to the secular world, such spaces risk losing their heterotopic essence. In the age of social media, the danger is particularly acute: these carefully guarded realms of intimacy could be instantly shared, reducing lived experience to mere images, and threatening the very privacy and uniqueness that define them. The photography ban isn't just limited to techno clubs in Berlin but is a subcultural code of conduct, as evidenced by the "no photos" signs at the entrances to the *Wagenburg* ("trailer park") in Lohmühle and the Køpi squat. In such places, tourists quickly learn to leave their camera at home. Berlin is not a zoo to be toured. This "no photos ethic" (Glad 2017) has become a fundamental pillar of Berlin's subcultures, reflecting a general rejection of the touristification and mainstreamification of the city. It has allowed Berlin clubs to maintain their brand image of providing unique experiences. In 2019, the photography exhibition space C/O Berlin nostalgically paid tribute to the city's techno scene with an exhibition titled *No Photos on the Dance Floor!* Not without contradiction, the exhibition subtly implied that photography could never fully capture the essence of the present moment in a party, but only fleeting remnants—like the bodily fluids seen in Wolfgang Tillmans' images. Berlin's clubs, it suggested, possess no photographic memory. The dimension of secrecy is central to maintaining heterotopias. This is why Berlin techno clubs, enforce a strict no-photo policy, as displayed in black and white at the entrance to the Berghain. The club's official Instagram account boasts 277,000 followers. Yet, on the page, there is just a single post: a dry reminder of the photography ban, repeated in four languages. This paradox—where, in an image-saturated world, the absence of images becomes more compelling than the images themselves—reveals a deeper

truth. By forbidding the visual documentation of the party, the club slips into the realm of fantasy. The only way to communicate the experience is through storytelling, which fuels its mythos. The rare videos that manage to bypass the watchful eyes of the audience and security provoke an outpouring of outrage from regulars and are swiftly removed, reinforcing the club's elusive allure. Tourists who dare to snap photos while waiting in line at Berghain, unaware of the rules, are admonished by regulars. Those bold enough to take pictures inside the club are immediately thrown out:

> Yeah, that was the first year. A Spaniard took a photo from above inside Berghain. It was dealt with quickly. He got in at 12:10 a.m., and fifteen minutes later, he was out. There aren't many rules in the place, except that one (T., Germany).

At the club's entrance, phone cameras are covered by the security with a colorful sticker. Removing it results in an immediate ban. By strictly enforcing this policy, Berghain presents itself as a photographic black hole. There are almost no pictures of the club's interior online. To get around the rule, various stratagems are resorted to on social media to depict the Berghain experience. When it comes to selfies, regulars master the art of staying off-screen: they capture their party outfits, the club's façade, or the bracelet on their wrist. From forbidden selfies in Berghain's bathrooms known as *Kloporn* ("toilet porn") and fleeting shots of the queue for @berghainlinelife on Instagram, to a simple black screen hash tagged in tribute to the DJ—all these traces hint at the ineffable nature of the moment by merely suggesting it. Some even find creative loopholes, snapping photos under colored stickers to frame the unrepresentable.[13] In an era of ubiquitous smartphones and blurred lines between real and virtual spaces, Berghain stands as a countermodel. It partly shifts focus away from self-obsession and instead fuels the construction of its own mythology.

Since heterotopias are maintained through a cult of secrecy, the smartphone camera would first act as a bridge to the outside world, bringing the profane into the sacred. Besides, the immediate experience of music and dance is distorted by the presence of the photographic eye, which acts as an instance of control and judgment. As a regular from Germany said: "No one would feel so free here if they knew they were being filmed or photographed". Those who feel observed tend to control their behavior and movements more. The absence of the smartphone camera guarantees the sense of freedom that allows for an immediate physical experience. This no photos rule could be seen as a form of digital detox. Only when separated from their own image and free from any interference in their immediacy can bodies fully immerse themselves in the experience of being alive, since Berghain is a physical experience and a show to be lived in the moment and in that sense, capturing the moment resists the smartphone lens. The photography ban also ensures respect for privacy in a space where deviance is permitted. For historical reasons, linked to state surveillance practices during the Nazi dictatorship and later under the Stasi in East Germany, the German public is particularly sensitive when it comes to private data and the threat of surveillance through the camera's eye.

An Ethnographic Sketch of the "Crows"

The *Berghainis*—a German term for the club's regulars—are often compared to crows because of their black outfits. Regulars are considered those who have visited the club at least once a month for more than a year and continue to do so.[14] They can be seen dressed in small groups in the streets leading to the club, especially on Sunday mornings or during peak hours on Sunday evenings, spending an average of 16 hours inside the club. Some stay for as long as 36 hours, from the opening on Saturday at midnight until closing on Monday morning. Since this ethnographic study is qualitative rather than statistical, it was still necessary to choose a sample that would be as representative as possible of the gender diversity that characterizes its regular audience. Therefore, the full spectrum of the LGBTQIA community was included in this sample. It should be noted that this field survey was carried out between 2018 and 2019 and that since then the share of the club's historic gay audience and the queer community of Berghain may have declined in favour of a more heterosexual crowd. A rough estimate of the gender distribution aligned then with that of the surveyed regulars: it suggests that the audience as a whole, at peak times, consisted of half LGBT+ members and half heterosexual people, though the proportion of LGBT+ visitors can reach up to 60%, especially when popular resident DJs like Boris perform for the closing.

Despite the eclecticism of the regular audience, it is still possible to establish a typical profile of the *Berghainis* based on the criteria of nationality, origin, age, education level and professional status. First, the regulars are not only registered residents of Berlin. The majority have lived in Berlin for an average of three and a half years, but there is also a small proportion of commuters who travel to Berghain six to ten times a year as regulars. These regulars come from Munich, Bucharest, Nice, Brussels, Stockholm, Tbilisi, Kyiv, even Dubai. This international club tourism—popularized by Tobias Rapp as the "easyjet-set" (2009: 268) and documented in a report from 2019 commissioned by the Berlin Club Commission—raises questions about identity in the context of globalization.[15] Luis Manuel Garcia (2015a) described this phenomenon of shuttle migration, linked to "techno tourism" and facilitated by cheap flights, as a modern form of "affective citizenship". As a regular from Paris said: "In Berlin, I really feel at home". The Berghain, as a new home, thus reflects this geographic displacement of affects. Frequent visits to Berlin gives these "techno-tourists the paradoxical feeling of being both at home in Berlin and a tourist in their own city" (Garcia 2015a). This sociocultural belonging to a subcultural scene far from their home country resembles the search for a chosen citizenship based on a community of affect rather than traditional identity markers tied to language, origin, or regional or national culture. In this nightlife tourism, there is a form of post-industrial neo-romanticism that emotionally connects these "techno-migrants" with local Berlin scenes, with the city, its vibe and its musical landscape (Garcia 2015b). Like Berlin as a whole, Berghain fuels the fantasy of belonging to a place where one can fully immerse in the party, but ultimately remain a stranger. The Berghain audience is not composed exclusively of Berliners or even Germans:

it is fluid, mobile, and globalized. This study confirms the immense diversity of identities at Berghain. The panel of respondents included 11 Germans, 7 French, 3 Australians, 3 Americans, 3 Poles, 2 Italians, 2 Spaniards, and also regulars of Brazilian, Korean, Finnish, Greek, Iranian, Irish, Dutch, Kyrgyz, South African, Russian, Swiss, Syrian, Ukrainian, Franco-Lebanese, German-Russian or German-American origins. What stands out most in the Berghain crowd is its vibrant cultural mix.

Given the average age of the regulars, it would be problematic to describe techno as a youth culture in the case of Berghain. While this may be true in most European techno clubs, Berlin is different. Berghain, more than any other club, is a place where where the denormalisation of subcultural practices is not linked to age. While age often dictates cultural practices in most social contexts, Berghain is heterotopic, especially considering the youth obsession prevalent elsewhere:

> Once, I was kissing a guy in the garden outside, and he told me his mother was there too. Then she appeared, and he called her over. He didn't stop cuddling and kissing me while she was there. She hung out with us for a bit, and we talked about the music. Then she gave him a bag of speed. What a beautiful mother-son relationship! Only at Berghain! (J. from Ireland).

In terms of age, the average age is just over 29 years, while the average age of men among the regulars seems higher than that of women. The estimated average age of the regular Berghain crowd looks very similar to the median age of clubgoers, which the above mentioned Berlin Club Commission clarified in its 2018 study (30.2 years). The relatively high age of the audience thus contradicts the thesis that techno subcultures would be predominantly youth subcultures. Like the rock scene, the Berlin electronic dance music scene has matured and so has its audience. This relatively high age of ravers is not unique to Berghain but characteristic of the Berlin club scene in general, where different age norms apply compared to European party capitals. However, what distinguishes Berghain from other Berlin clubs is the age distribution of the regulars, particularly guests in their forties, fifties, and even sixties which are more rarely seen in other clubs. In our study, the forties group seemed no less represented than young adults (18–24 years). The youngest respondent, from Leipzig, was 21 years old, and the oldest was 48. There were also people in their fifties and a regular from the US even confessed that he went to Berghain twice a year with his 70-year-old mother, sharing Ecstasy with her. People who would be considered old in a Parisian techno club can enter Berghain without being judged:

> In the queue, I noticed that they rejected attractive young men, and I wondered how the bouncers would react when they saw an old lady in front of them. It wasn't a problem at all. They let me in (M. from Germany, age 48).

However, the age of regulars must also be viewed in the context of their length of belonging to the scene. Membership in the crowd of regulars seems to be temporary. Of

the roughly 40 respondents, only one knew Berghain's predecessor club Ostgut and only two had been to Berghain at its early stages. Very few had been regulars for more than five years. Most regulars stay for only a few years and soon leave the scene, which induces extreme physical strain over time. In 2024, my observations in the field confirmed this observation: many of the people who were interviewed at the time have since left the scene or attend only occasionally.

It is also often assumed that the arbitrariness and "the aura of Jacobin terror" (Rapp 2009) that reigns at the door would create a form of social levelling. Neither money nor social status guarantees entry: unlike New York clubs of the 1970s; Parisian clubs of the 1980s; or today's VIP-table clubs on Ibiza. There are no VIP rooms at Berghain. Nor at the other Berlin clubs. Even the club's booking page makes it clear to DJs that Berghain offers no table reservations or special VIP treatment.[16] While class differences take a backseat to "subcultural capital" (Thornton 1995), this radical equality remains a sociological fantasy.[17] The regular Berghain crowd is largely recruited from a highly socially integrated part of the population, with the majority in stable employment. Among the surveyed regulars, there was a minority of students, which can be explained by the strict door policy towards visitors under 21. The relatively high entry price of 18 Euros at the time of the survey makes it one of the most expensive clubs in Berlin, even though drink prices remain more or less the same. Adding the cost of wardrobe and re-entry, drinks and drugs, the average weekend cost ranged between 50 and 100 euros per capita at the time of the survey. In autumn 2019, the introduction of an additional 5 euros re-entry fee sparked discontent among many regulars, who saw it as a form of financial discrimination.[18] Others found the price increase irrelevant and viewed the debate as a pastime for privileged social classes. At the time of the survey, only two of forty respondents were unemployed or in vocational retraining (8%). Only 16% were students, 60% were employees, and 16% were self-employed. Except for three, all regulars had a university degree, and half had obtained a master's degree.[19] This observation has to be combined with the average educational level within the respective age groups. For instance, only three out of fourty individuals had not completed secondary education. This hypothesis seems underpinned by the breakdown of professions among regulars, with people from low-skilled jobs (construction workers, waitstaff, cleaners, cashiers, etc.) being strongly underrepresented. What's striking in contrast is an overrepresentation of academic professions, engineers, doctors, IT managers, consultants, as well as a group that could be labeled as urban creative workers, such as screenwriters, tech entrepreneurs, music producers and graphic designers. This finding seems to support the established hypothesis that once you cross the Berghain threshold, social boundaries claim to be lifted, but less so in practice. To put it differently, Berghain may not be a place of social segregation, but it's also not the egalitarian and heterogeneous space one might imagine and that some regulars claim it to be. Five years after this study, the social divide has probably widened even further.

Epilogue: Post-Corona Perspectives on the Profile of Berghain's Regulars

Since the end of the pandemic and the ongoing war in Ukraine, the sociological makeup of Berghain's regular crowd has shifted significantly. One of the most notable changes is the aging of the club's regular attendees. Many long-time Berghain-goers, now in their 30s and 40s, have seen their connection to the scene become more sporadic. Life changes, such as career commitments, relocations and parenthood, have distanced them from the once routine weekend ritual. The sense of belonging in club culture is deeply tied to social accessibility and rising prices along with decreasing purchasing power in Berlin, have contributed to less frequent attendance. Many former regulars now visit only once a month or even once every three months, while others have left the scene entirely. This reduced frequency has weakened the sense of community, which had previously been reinforced by consistent attendance.

As the cost of clubbing rises, this sense of belonging is increasingly replaced by a more individualistic, consumer-driven experience. Berghain, once viewed as a cornerstone of a tight-knit community, is now perceived by many as more of a luxury or occasional indulgence rather than a regular communal gathering. A social leveling has also occurred, marked by an increase in entry prices—from €18 in 2021 to €25 in 2024—further accelerating the club's transformation. The rising cost of living, exacerbated by inflation and higher energy prices due to the Ukraine war, has made clubbing less accessible to many, especially in the post-pandemic period. This has contributed to a noticeable rejuvenation of the crowd, with younger attendees—often from wealthier, more privileged backgrounds—filling the void left by departing veterans.

This transformation can also be seen as part of a longer-term process of "hypisation" of the crowd, as described by fashion historian Diana Weis (Jori and Robin 2024: 63-85), where the underground increasingly intersects with the fashionable elite. As Weis argues, the line between these worlds is fine: through subtle shifts in aesthetic codes, it becomes difficult to tell who is imitating whom—Berghain or Balenciaga, Berlin's techno underground or Parisian haute couture. This blurring of boundaries has undoubtedly contributed to the alienation of many long-standing regulars, who find themselves distancing from these evolving aesthetic norms.

Another key shift is the mainstreaming and "heteronormalization" of the crowd. While Berghain has long been a bastion of gay and queer culture, the growing influx of straight clubbers has begun to dilute the queer-centric atmosphere that once defined it. Some of Berghain's queer regulars have even disengaged for political reasons. The club's decision to cancel Arabian Panther's performances due to his pro-Palestinian stance, has led to a boycott movement within the techno community in 2024, which has further compounded the estrangement.

The war in Ukraine has also had an impact. While many Berghain regulars had travelled to Tbilisi's Bassiani club during the lockdown, the end of the pandemic has coincided with an influx of Ukrainian refugees into the Berghain scene. This porous exchange reflects broader changes in Berlin's club culture, which is now even more international.

Finally, the dynamics on Berghain's dance floor have shifted with the changes to the sound system. The installation of new subwoofers, particularly in the middle-front area, has altered the soundscape and reshaped crowd movement. The once-iconic "front left" corner, historically a sanctuary for "freaks" and queer people, has lost some of its significance as a crucible of unique experiences, as the demographic transformation of the club continues to unfold. These many shifts are not only altering the sociologic composition of the crowd but also changing the ethos of the space itself.

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Notes

1 In German, see Robin, Guillaume. 2021. *Berghain, Techno und die Körperfabrik: Ethnographie eines Stammpublikums*. Marburg: Büchner-Verlag. In French, see *Berghain: Berlin bacchanales*. 2021. Auxonne: Le Murmure.

2 The story of this quote comes from choreographer Pina Bausch's speech when she was awarded the Kyoto Prize in 2007. "Let me start with a story. In Greece I was once I was once with some gypsy families. We were sitting together and talking and at some point they started dancing and I was asked to join in. I had great inhibitions and the feeling that I couldn't do it. Then a little girl came up to me, maybe twelve years old, and asked me again and again to dance along. She said: 'Dance, dance, otherwise we are lost'". This phrase from that little girl became the starting point of a social movement in France in 2020, launched by many concerned dance teachers who were no longer able to practice their profession due to the pandemic. This collective organized dance demonstrations in 15 cities in France.

3 A play on words in reference to the so called "walk of shame", the path back to the entrance taken by visitors rejected by Berghain's bouncers.

4 The research revealed that the image of Bacchanal certainly provides interesting food for thought, but by focusing on the excesses, it fails to reveal the important mechanisms of control and self-control within the club.

5 This statue was dismantled and moved to the garden.

6 Critics argue his ideas downplay the importance of individualism and overlook structural inequalities, making his work both influential and divisive in academic circles.

7 The *thiasos* ("processions of initiates") practiced a hidden initiation cult usually at night and in caves. The mystery took shape in the darkness, which reminds us of the half-light of the mountain grove. The Roman bacchanalia associated with mystery cults were a pretext for drunkenness, orgiastic outbursts, but also for ritualistic acts. Because of the scandals they brought with them and the danger they posed to public order; the Roman Senate eventually banned them.

8 "I believe it is not too farfetched to describe this form of celebration as a ritual, a mystery in the sense of a cultic officiating, during which the innermost element remains a secret. In the context of the music and aura of Berghain, the terms cult and secret receive a nonverbal reading. The mural *Rituals Of Disappearance* provides the first visual impression, appearing as a gateway to the entrance area of the club. It is inviting to enter the mystical ambiguity, to marvel at the enigmatic nature and explore the secret behind this massive mural" (Coultate 2017).

9 *Axolotl Roadkill* (Hegemann 2011) was inspired by or plagiarized Airen's novel Strobo (2009).

10 In its 2019 study on club culture, the Clubcommission Berlin provides the following definition of the scene: "As soon as an audience becomes a regular audience and meets regularly at fixed locations (here: clubs) for a shared experience (here: club event), one speaks of a scene. To be more precise, several local audiences form a network, which is then referred to as a scene. It is important to note that club culture is always produced by those in the scene for those in the scene".

11 The anonymity of these people was granted voluntarily. The immersion in the field is what we call participant observation. In other words: by putting on the outfit for the Berghain, do we understand better the physical habitus of the regulars. It is only by becoming an active member in the space ourselves that interactions are established and we immerse ourselves in the physical and psychological disposition of the actors. It is important to prioritize the immediacy of participation, but this must also be prioritized in order to avoid the possible lack of critical distance and loss of information, taking notes afterwards and to develop the analysis at more favourable times (Soule 2007). While aware of this methodological risk of favouring participation over observation, we claim an immersive relationship with the research field. Being part of the dance community and being identified as such is part of this methodological approach. Only active, full and honest participation allows access to interviews and the collection of information.

12 Although techno, unlike codified dances, is not based on a sequence of dance figures to be performed, the dance style practiced in Berghain is still the product of a physical technique that is learnt through imitation and is therefore a factor for integration into the community. "The boring Berghain style...Every newcomer tends to learn this wiggling from left to right like penguin" (A., regular from Ukraine). Although the regulars have difficulty describing the 'Berghain style', they often call it martial, aggressive, robotic or even 'stompy'. The body is anchored to the floor, similar to the squat position (knees and hips slightly bent, buttocks backwards). The weight of the body rests on the feet, while the shoulders and upper body move from left to right.

13 berghainsticker. https://www.instagram.com/berghainsticker, accessed 6 October 2024.

14 Around 40 people took part in the survey, 12 in the form of interviews, about 30 in the form of a long questionnaire consisting of around 200 questions.

15 The Clubcommission Berlin commissioned Goldmedia for a study on Berlin's club culture in 2019. According to this report, 10 percent of clubgoers are foreign and 20 percent of the regulars from outside the city of Berlin and the surrounding state of Brandenburg.

16 The Berghain website stated: "We don't offer table reservations, guest list, advance tickets or VIP treatment". www.ostgut.de/booking, accessed 2020. Please note this link is no longer active.

17 Thornton uses the term "subcultural capital" (1995) to describe the knowledge of codes, aesthetics and style that are important in the club scene.

18 See Facebook of the Berghain Klubnacht Boycott protest movement (Yekaterynin 2019).

19 In 2020, the proportion of university entrants in the total population in the corresponding year of birth was 54.8 %, according to a statistical report which shows the level of education in Germany and the distribution of the population by age group and highest school-leaving qualification. These statistics have since been updated, see Statista Research Department (2024).

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