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## HIP HOP UNDERGROUND: THE INTEGRITY AND ETHICS OF RACIAL IDENTIFICATION

ANTHONY KWAME HARRISON

Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009.

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Anthony Kwame Harrison's book *Hip Hop Underground: The Integrity and Ethics of Racial Identification* examines the racial dynamics of the San Francisco Bay Area's underground hip hop scene, with the larger goal of exploring processes of racial self-identification among American youth at a time in which the nation is growing more racially diverse and discourses on race increasingly revolve around an ideology of colorblindness. In his view, the Bay Area is a good case study for an elaboration of contemporary American racial dynamics because of its uniquely multiracial demographics, which are currently very similar to the projections of a non-white majority population in the U.S. by 2050.

Harrison's research is strongly informed by the method of "critical ethnography", which views the process of ethnography as intimately connected to the interpretation and representation of the findings. In this vein, he describes his decision to become an active participant in the Bay Area's underground hip hop scene and to assume two identities, anthropologist and emcee (rapper), despite his initial misgivings that he might be received as an interloper. While critical ethnography is by no means a new method of anthropological research, the level of self-reflexivity here is arguably taken to the extreme with relatively large doses of "autoethnographic narrative" (58). Harrison's second chapter provides detailed accounts both about his personal history with hip hop and the ways he inserted himself into and moved through the Bay Area underground hip hop scene; however, his discussion of the hip hop group he helped to form, the Forest Fires Collective, seems at times overindulgent.

Harrison's first chapter details the emergence of underground hip hop in the mid-to-late 1990s, highlighting the movement's preoccupation with notions of authenticity, its goals of reclaiming hip hop from the mass corporatization following its crossover into the mainstream, and its contestation of commercial hip hop's "ghettocentric" representations of blackness.<sup>1</sup> He argues that the alternate representations of blackness offered by underground hip hop are accompanied by a more racially inclusive criteria regarding who can lay claim to the practice. Nevertheless, despite his suggestions that this more inclusive vision is a progressive tendency, he frequently contests the stated ideologies of his fellow hip hoppers<sup>2</sup>—that it is competency, rather than race, that matters in terms of underground hip hop authenticity—by asserting his own view that blackness is still privileged in hip hop and that non-black participants, especially whites, face a more arduous road to establish their legitimacy.

Harrison's third chapter provides a good critical summary of the ways hip hop scholarship has articulated the relationship between race, authenticity and claims of ownership, detailing three principal approaches. The first frames hip hop as a distinctly black practice, despite recognizing that non-black youth, specifically Puerto Ricans, were involved in its emergence and is exemplified by Tricia Rose's 1994 canonic work on hip hop *Black Noise*. As Harrison notes, a host of scholars (Juan Flores, Raquel Rivera) have argued strongly for inserting Puerto Ricans into hip hop origin

narratives. Harrison provocatively asks, if we can recognize the role of Puerto Ricans and other Latinos in the formation of hip hop culture, should we not do the same with white b-boys who joined the movement only a few years later? The second approach views hip hop as one in a long line of Afro-diasporic traditions in the Americas and tends to draw direct links between hip hop and African and/or Caribbean traditions. The final approach is an orientation toward contemporary manifestations of hip hop, and a recognition of its creative appropriation by youth across all continents. Harrison concludes this review by asserting that the ongoing reification of hip hop as essentially black has obscured a more realistic and dynamic picture of the ways that youth of all colors engage with the practice and that underground hip hop challenges these essentialist notions.

Harrison's principal goal is to examine and unpack the ways that underground hip hoppers articulate claims for their own hip hop legitimacy through racial performances of self. Departing from Sarah Thornton's theorization of subcultural capital and the boundary maintenance that is such an integral part of subcultural scenes, Harrison critiques the hegemony of "authenticity", viewing John L. Jackson's notion of "sincerity" as a better analytic. Jackson's notion "subverts the standard checklist of subcultural capital [markers

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“sophisticated and innovative discussions about the racial politics of authenticity in underground hip hop”

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of authenticity] in favor of a personal code of underground hip hop ethics and integrity... what matters most is the perceived sincerity of these racial performances... for the non-black hip hopper, an overzealous display of urban African American posturing, no matter how authentic, is under most circumstances suspected as insincere” (118). While I agree that the sincerity of a racial performance is an important element in the positive reception of a non-black emcee, I do not perceive a big difference between the notions of authenticity and sincerity. Harrison’s position that a display of black posturing is authentic but not sincere is not entirely convincing—why would it not simply be considered inauthentic?

Chapter four puts the notion of racial sincerity to work, as Harrison provides examples of white emcees who perform “sincere whiteness” (140). His primary example concerns a white emcee who, during a Mos Def<sup>3</sup> show, got on stage to freestyle (improvise rapped lyrics). Although he was initially booed because of the audience’s assumptions about his competency based on his “bummy white guy” look, the emcee ultimately won over the crowd with his lyrical prowess. Harrison astutely states, “Had Top R not been a *sincere* white guy...the entire story might have played out differently: no boos, no surprises, no turning of the crowd; perhaps just a great freestyle, which is hardly the kind of thing that gets talked about to any great extent days after the show” (140). While I find this analysis quite persuasive, Harrison’s criteria for performing “sincere whiteness” is more problematic: in this and in other instances, he bases his characterization of racial sincerity on physical appearance and fashion choices, noting in particular the white emcees’ “dorky looks” and “bummy shirts” (140). He perceptively analyzes this mode of self-representation as a reaction against past white emcees’ “insincere” performances of racial identity, exemplified in the “wigger” persona,<sup>4</sup> that claimed to fully understand the experience of black youth without recognizing their own white privilege. The issue is not only that Harrison’s notion of white racial sincerity is fully based on the emcee’s physical appearance, but also the implication that “bummy clothes” are *essentially* a white fashion and that emcees cannot be racially sincere unless they are dressed in this manner. In his final chapter he provides what I believe is another problematic analysis, when he discusses the sound of an all-white underground hip hop group as “so sincere and self-assured in its whiteness”, precisely because people have described their music as “avant-garde hip hop”, “emo rap”, or “goth-hop” (161). Harrison’s argument here seems to reproduce the same essentialist notions of race and culture that he has previously challenged and the reader is left to assume that he would only deem racially sincere those white emcees who mix rap with “white” musical styles or dress like “dorky white guys”.

Harrison’s final chapter continues elaborating the notion of racial sincerity, although here he offers a rather pessimistic commentary on racial politics in the underground hip hop scene. He recounts a party where the aforementioned white underground hip hop group performed a satire using an exaggerated style of black speech in order to parody the image of the hyper-violent, misogynist “gangsta” rapper that is so often promoted by the mainstream music industry. Noting that the audience was predominantly white, Harrison describes this performance as a form of “contemporary minstrelsy” (158). However, he

then characterizes this analysis as too simplistic, asserting that the group was very aware of a history of white appropriation and racist imitation of black music. He states:

I would contend that Sole and the Pedestrian saw themselves as crafting a tremendously ironic satire of the racial insincerity embodied by... wigger icons of the past. Arguably, if we accept that this group... was engaged in a theatrical performance of past white hip hoppers' exaggerated performances of blackness, this could be viewed as about as profound an expression of white racial sincerity as one might find. However, somewhere within this cauldron of sincerity, satire, and racial symbolism, for me, the circumstantial logic breaks down (160).

The reason he gives for ultimately eschewing his own, quite sophisticated analysis and concluding that the performance was a “racial impersonation” (162), centers around the fact that these white emcees were performing for a mainly white audience. However, another perspective might view the performance as quite racially sincere precisely because, as stated by Harrison, it was a *parody*. Furthermore, it seems that the key to determining whether the performance reinforced stereotypes or not resides largely in its reception: how aware was the audience of the performers' intentions to perform a satire? Although Harrison does not pursue this question, it is likely, following his own discussion of the blurred line between performers and audience in underground hip hop, that the spectators were “in the know” and viewed this performance with a critical perspective.

Ultimately Harrison's book offers some sophisticated and innovative discussions about the racial politics of authenticity in underground hip hop. However, while he presents various compelling analyses, his final conclusions are at times less nuanced and thus lessen the persuasiveness of his theoretical points.

## NOTES

- 1 The subgenre of “gangsta” rap, in which rappers frequently spin tales of violent and sexual pursuits, is most closely associated with a “ghettocentric” mentality.
- 2 Harrison often refers to participants in the local scene as “hip hoppers”, which I understand to include anyone who engages with at least one of the four principle elements of hip hop culture—emceeing (rapping), DJ'ing, break-dancing (b-boying), or graffiti art.
- 3 Mos Def is one of the most celebrated and visible emcees in underground hip hop, so much so, that some might not describe him as part of the underground scene anymore. His first album, *Mos Def and Talib Kweli are Black Star* (Rawkus Records 1998), was a collaboration with the highly respected emcee Talib Kweli and in many ways defined the terms of underground hip hop in its critique of the music industry and mainstream rappers who have “sold out”.
- 4 “Wigger” was a derogatory term that emerged in the 1990s referring to white youth who fully adopted the fashion and speech of African American youth for the purposes of gaining subcultural capital, but who were ultimately perceived as having a superficial connection with blackness and not a true investment in the politics of racial equality.

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## THE LOCAL SCENES AND GLOBAL CULTURE OF PSYTRANCE

GRAHAM ST JOHN

New York/London: Routledge, 2010.

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Psytrance is not well known or widely understood. *The Local Scenes and Global Culture of Psytrance*, edited by leading writer in the field of electronic dance music (EDM) culture Graham St. John, is the first book to cover this form in any detail. To many, psytrance is lumped together using ill-defined journalistic terms that have little meaning or substance such as “dance music”. This collected volume attempts to unpack the term and explore the field in a more rigorous fashion.

St John bookends the volume; his introduction provides a useful assessment of writing on psytrance, whilst providing a contextual framework. He makes a strong case for the need for the collection and prepares the ground for the variety of different approaches that follow. The book is divided into three sections, the first dealing with the roots of the music in Goa trance. This begins with Luther Elliott’s proto-trance history. It makes a strong case that musical roots of psytrance grew not principally from Goa but originated in sixties counter-culture, Ibiza, house music and acid house. Its description of the development of Goa trance is rather vague, lacking specific dates, names and interviews with key players. Fortunately this is covered in the next two chapters and in any case this is an interesting and well-paced first chapter.

Anthony D’Andrea next provides a spicy taste of the nature of the Goa full moon party scene. Like several sections of the collection, it prioritises the opinions of the ‘authentic’—the scenesters, the faces, the core members—and allows the flavour of the narrative to be determined by self-appointed spokespeople. Indeed many of the writers can be accused of this, related it seems to their immersion in psytrance culture. In some cases the writers have led a psytrance lifestyle and have become interested in writing about their passion. This provides insider knowledge, without which this book would lack credibility, but inevitably means it sometimes becomes evangelical, treating internal psy-perspectives as “truth” and outsider perspectives as “false”.

Arun Saldanha provides the final chapter in the Goa section and manages to avoid this trap. His well-written account describes the myriad influences on the Goa scene as a meeting point of multiple substreams, a developmental crossroads rather than a point of origin. His use of Derrida's ghost metaphor elegantly blends sociology and ethnography and embeds into psytrance the term 'communitas', which returns many times to form a key focus of the book.

The sequel to the Goa section discusses globalisation, bridging the gap between Goa and the growth of psytrance in Europe. In fact it is the well-defined and well-written specificity of this chapter by Hillegonda Rietveld that clarifies the origins of European psytrance and its relation to Goa. It names specific recordings and artists, dates and places, building on the earlier chapters which were rather more freeform, reflecting perhaps a Goa trance state of mind. In particular this mature chapter gives credit to various sources often overlooked in such histories, such as Electro Body Music (EBM) and KLF.

Charles De Ledesma goes on to explore the growth of psytrance in London. There is strong data here and interviews with key players, but this is inevitably a very London-centric ethnography, rather more local than the claimed UK coverage. Robin Lindop casts a wider net, defining and discussing the music itself, as well as the culture surrounding it. However, without a use of technical musical terminology, this is rendered a little vague. De Ledesma does critically engage with the ways in which EDM sometimes defines itself as "authentic" in opposition to the "mainstream", but then goes on to claim that "psytrance is exemplary". It is similarly contradictory over the subject of genre purity.

Like the following chapter by Joshua Schmidt, Lindop provides some paradoxes in his writing, but overall provides useful information to the emerging wider narrative. Schmidt uses pairs of dichotomies to critically analyse Israeli trance. Again this is a view from the inside of a scene, shown when it condemns as "chronic" the media's description of Israeli desert trance *mesibot* as "drug parties", although it is clear from an external perspective why that description might be used. However Schmidt's work is succinct, well structured and provides a convincing argument.

The last of the trilogy of sections weaves in and out of a vague focus on liminal culture. Botond Vitos begins by providing a rare insight into Czech psytrance, although his argument is a little circular, perhaps due to a closeness to interlocutors who had recently and regularly taken LSD, a proximity which he tries to stretch away from instead of embracing. The fact that some of his interviewees described their activities using his own theories of DemenCZe shows a rather acid splintered blurring of boundary between the emic and etic. Chiara Baldini's approach is far bolder and more successful, making her position as party organiser clear and embracing material and references with a voice clearly internal to her and to psytrance. She draws upon the psy-spirit of Dionysus in an effective correlation with her own experiences.

The next two chapters, by Jenny Ryan and Alex Lambert, discuss the relationship of the web to psytrance from the perspectives of San Francisco's Tribe.net and Australia's Oztrance

community. The difficulty with this work is the use of individual web-posts to represent the views of the group, as there is often inevitably an opposing view that contradicts any point. However the significance of the web to this scene merits such attention, which is especially well presented in Lambert's cultural circuit.

The last dance is reserved for Graham St. John, who applies his experience and skill as an EDM commentator to both reference other chapters and make significant points of his own, providing an appropriate climax to the narrative. St. John's final chapter is the strongest in the book. It largely focuses on festival culture and on those technomads who travel from festival to festival, making psy-trance a lifestyle choice rather than a part-time activity. This is a recurring feature of the book, which focuses on the intensely committed few, rather the many casual psytrancers. This focus on festival culture feels unbalanced. In many cases the authors show their partisan attitudes and don't so much struggle to maintain an objective attitude to their subject, as willingly submit to a pro-psytrance attitude. It is unsurprising that some chapters are written by relatively inexperienced researchers, rather than late career researchers with several books under their belts. This gives the work a currency and directness and although one could criticise the text in terms of clarity of emic or etic approaches, this would ignore the benefits that the writers' proximity to psytrance culture provides.

There have been many studies that have pointed out the difficulties Western society faces in a fractured world that struggles to resolve issues of community, identity, belonging, hope and the loss of popular rituals that address such issues. Studies addressing cultures that seem to be orientated around solutions to these issues, or new approaches to them, inevitably raise difficulties, may be controversial or inconclusive and in a post-meta-narrative world, fail to provide simple answers. However this book's approach to issues such as *communitas* provides an engaging and novel approach to such problems.

Overall then *The Local Scenes and Global Cultures of Psytrance* provides a valuable insight into a world-wide movement which has had comparatively little study so far. I am no novice to the world of psytrance, but this book provided a wide range of interesting, thought-provoking and informative detail, and is one I can highly recommend as essential reading to any researchers interested in EDM culture.

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## PINK NOISES: WOMEN ON ELECTRONIC MUSIC AND SOUND

TARA RODGERS

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Tara Rodgers' book *Pink Noises* is a long overdue feminist intervention in the historiography of electronic music. *Pink Noises* emphasizes the pioneering, substantial and diverse work that has been accomplished by women but so far remained largely invisible in previous accounts of electronic music development. Thereby, Tara Rodgers starts to correct the century long lack of representation that profoundly underestimates the presence and diversity of expressions by women working with sound and electronic music. The title *Pink Noises* (which is also the name of the producer/musician/DJ network pinknoises.com founded by the author in 2000) refers to *pink* in terms of a "marker of female difference", and *noise* as a "site of disturbance and productive potential". Tara Rodgers also refers to the term *Pink Noises* in physics and audio engineering, as "variations of white noise, or unstructured sound that contains every audible frequency". Moreover, Tara Rodgers introduces her interviews with women artists as *Pink Noises* in and by themselves: "sonic interventions from multiple sources, which destabilize dominant gendered discourses and work toward equal power distributions in the cultural arenas where sounds reverbrate" (2010:19).

Structured as a collection of interviews/ conversations, *Pink Noises* documents and explains ground breaking innovations and visions in electronic music production and technology from the perspectives of the pioneers themselves. Ground breaking and legendary international artists are interviewed, like Pauline Oliveros, Kaffe Matthews, Giulia Loli (Mutamassik) and Chantal Passamonte (Mira Calix). The book is structured into six themes in electronic music; time/memory; space/perspective; nature/synthetics; circulation/movements; language/machines/embodiment; and alone/together. From a variety of different angles, Rodgers and her interviewees disentangle assumptions that cast technology and music—and electronic music in particular—as male domains while, most importantly, discussing the dimensions and meanings of sound, expression and representation. Moreover, *Pink Noises* reflects upon the cultural and political potential of sound itself. Tara Rodgers conceives of the potentials of sound, as a category of critical and aesthetic analysis, to feminist concerns in particular, arguing that "sounds can be thought of as *pressure* and *movements*, doing cultural work" (2010:19).

*Pink Noises* is an extremely important contribution to the study and documentation of electronic music because, unlike previous literature on electronic music, Tara Rodgers refuses to stop at the “thresholds that have silenced women’s work in historical accounts”. Tara Rodgers thus looks beyond the commonplace observation where most standard accounts stop and conclude that women constitute a minority in electronic music—as if this observation would explain their absence in literature and media. With *Pink Noises*, Tara Rodgers challenges the normalization of male dominance in the patrilineal historiography of electronic music. Against the grain of ideologies aligning women with normative modes of heterosexual and capitalist reproduction, Tara Rodgers makes the argument that sounds themselves are *reproductive*, “To account for reproductive sounds in all their temporal depth is to challenge the patrilineal lines of descent and the universalizing male claims to creation that have thus far characterized dominant discourses in electronic music” (2010:15).

Although the professional interventions of interviewed artists go as far back as the 1950s, it is striking that similar gendered issues and experiences seem to reoccur throughout the generations of women who work with sound and electronic music. However, it is encouraging to read about the ways interviewees have prevailed and ignored gendered biases in the business; only to cultivate their subversiveness, innovation and determination even further.

To someone who is extremely interested in the technical aspects of working with sound and music production it is very instructive to read *Pink Noises*. However, to someone who does not have a specific interest for technical aspects it could be difficult to follow the very informed conversations between the author and her interviewees. Helpfully there is a detailed glossary on technical concepts.

It is apparent throughout the book that the author has had previous contacts and collaboration with many interviewees, presumably through her own professional activity as a musician and her work with pinknoises.com. Many of the participants in the book are part of the same international and/or overlapping musical/ professional scenes. It would be interesting to read more about the ways the author is situated in her field of study and the ways in which this influences her selection of interviewees, her questions and the responses. Although Rodgers probably has many good reasons for her decision to let interviewees speak for themselves and make their own analysis I sometimes feel that additional concluding, contextualizing and comparative commentary would be helpful. Also, it would have been great to have a chapter on Tara Rodgers herself, and her long standing experience, electronic music production and reflection as electronic musician Analog Tara.

All in all, *Pink Noises* is an extremely well informed, informative and inspiring discussion of some of the most crucial aspects and developments in electronic music. The innovators and actors behind these developments happen to be women and *Pink Noises* thereby highlights the astounding male centeredness in standard accounts and representation in electronic music.

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“ Rodgers challenges  
the normalization of  
male dominance”

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## TECHNOMAD: GLOBAL RAVING COUNTERCULTURES

GRAHAM ST JOHN

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Graham St John is a cultural anthropologist whose latest publication explores “themes of counterculture and resistance” in global electronic dance music culture (EDMC). Previous publications by St John explore psytrance and the intersection of rave culture and religion, key themes in *Technomad*. The book is the result of eight years of research and offers a utopian study of rave culture, one in which legislation such as the UK’s Criminal Justice Act and the onset of corporate clubbing hasn’t stopped the development of the free party scene. It adds to the evolving canon of academic literature that explores EDMC culture and demonstrates a rigorous level of research.

In an echo of Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) theory, St John frames the global techno-countercultures explored in *Technomad* as “resistant”. St John acknowledges that Anthony D’Andrea has also explored the intersection of rave culture and post-1960s new (age) spirituality. Where D’Andrea attends to the cultural economy of psytrance “neo-nomads”, St John makes use of a significant range of theoretical stances including Bey’s concept of the temporary autonomous zone (TAZ) to unpack the “fleeting permanence of contemporary counterculture” (2). *Technomad* provides a cultural history of diverse alternative global EDMC formations, the techno-underground, whose mobility has been partially facilitated by new digital technologies. The book’s focus is mainly on the nexus between hippy culture and rave culture, which has resulted in the evolution of EDM sub-genres such as psytrance.

St John divides the book into eight chapters and in the course of the first chapter, which serves as an introduction, quotes from much of the academic literature that explores rave culture. Key themes are introduced that are then explored in more depth throughout the book; these include digital technology—both in terms of facilitating DIY music production, its role in enabling alternative modes of communication and in framing dance music as a form of resistance used by activists to oppose rampant capitalism; gender issues and environmental issues. A key argument of *Technomad* is that non-commercial forms of EDMC are directly politicised by restrictive regulation and subsequently offer alternative spaces for a liminal communitas to evolve.

The second chapter explores the proliferation of a specific form of rave culture practice, the UK free party scene. The intersection of post-hippy UK free festival traveller culture and acid house music was in part facilitated by the appropriation and subsequent growth of sound system culture, a concept originally developed in Jamaica in the 1950s. This chapter explores the growth of mobile dance music sound systems and what St John refers to as 'traveller circuses' such as Spiral Tribe. This nascent free party culture eventually culminated in the festival at Castlemorton Common in 1992, the event that precipitated the UK's Criminal Justice and Public Order Act of 1994. Subsequent police attention and legislation had the unintended effect of gradually spreading these cultural practices around Europe and beyond. St John notes the influence of various sound system crews as they stage events outside the UK. The third chapter maps the development and proliferation of sound system based EDMC scenes in America, Canada and Australia. The integral role of the sound system in both reggae and hip hop culture has been noted in numerous histories of those genres, but St John successfully explores the key role that sound system practices have played in the global dissemination of particular strands of rave culture.

St John then seeks to define the elusive "vibe" of a successful dance music experience, tracing the origin of the popular usage of the term back to the 1967 "Summer of Love" in San Francisco. The study explores the idea that the term may have Afro-American origins and connotations of Eastern mysticism, "...the term now legion within EDMC is used to denote a spatial and temporal experience, a collective and individual happening where a profound sensation of connection and mystery transpires" (99). From this definition various tribal EDMC subdivisions are discussed in terms of "vibe tribes". These tribes are not framed as mutually exclusive but explored in terms of "...a spectrum upon which the vibe may be characterized as libratory and divine at one end, and militant and proactive at the other" (103). The straightforward hedonism and release sought and achieved by many participants in mainstream EDMC isn't explored, as the project of the book is concerned with utopian outlaw countercultures. The various shamanistic/spiritual and activist tribal standpoints are explored in some depth offering useful insights for researchers interested in contemporary cultural anthropology. The author then explores a wide-ranging history of carnivalesque counter-cultural tribal gatherings, from San Francisco's Golden Gate Park to the Burning Man. These 'temporary alternative zones' (or TAZ's) and countercultural dramas are framed as "alternative futures".

The themes of spirituality and activism mentioned above inform the next two chapters. In chapter five *Technomad* explores the intersection of rave culture and spirituality through an analysis of psytrance culture. St John defines psytrance as "...a carrier of the 1960's counterculture flowering in the present" (165). He mentions the commercial "progressive trance" scene very briefly, acknowledging that it has 'significant exchange value', although it seems unlikely that the concept of the Technocult explored by St John would mean much to the denizens of Gatecrasher ([www.gatecrasher.com](http://www.gatecrasher.com); see also Moore 2010). The pantheistic values of psytrance culture are discussed and the various occultist manifestations of the "trance ritual" are investigated, "Itself a network of deviant and hidden knowledge and practice, from magic, prophecies and shamanism to astrology, esoteric Christianity, UFOs,

and alien abductions, psytrance constitutes a discernable field of contemporary occultism” (169). Parts of this chapter would seem familiar territory to readers of Shea and Wilson’s *The Illuminatus! Trilogy*, mainly as St John explores some of the global psytrance events leading up to the millennium and also some bizarre examples of psytrance ideology. For students and researchers interested in the evolution of Goa-trance and the cultural practices and beliefs of the psytrance community, this chapter will provide a useful resource.

The next chapter explores the harnessing of electronic dance music to a variety of activist agendas. These include anti Criminal Justice Bill protests and Reclaim the Streets events. St John notes that “official” culture seeks to limit the dangers of carnivalesque excess, whilst recognising that carnival has a role in maintaining the equilibrium necessary for capitalism to thrive (Presdee 2000). Activists in turn have noted the dissident energy within the insurrectional dance-carnival and utilised it as a feature of contemporary protest and direct action. The implication of EDM in a wide range of progressive and occasionally militant courses of action are explored; St John uses the neologism “protestival” to categorise these events of “radical conviviality”. Initially the protestival was concerned with the regulation of dance music culture, but has since been harnessed to a range of different causes. The protest-carnival template has proliferated globally, partially facilitated by the Internet. This leads to an interesting exploration of the intersection of activism, theatre and carnival in Australia, the techno-tribes and sound systems discussed are concerned with injustices to both the Aboriginal population and the environment. Australians refer to outdoor EDM events that synthesise transgressive, anarchistic and ecological sensibilities as “doofs”. The mobile sound system counterculture or “doofscape” discussed in this chapter is concerned with establishing valid links with the Aboriginal population and seeks a respectful relationship with both the indigenous population and the land.

The final brief chapter summarises the project of the book, to unpack the cultural politics of electronic dance music scenes. In many ways *Technomad* achieves this successfully, although the focus of the book on the “outlaw” aspect of EDM omits a significant range of practices and participants in EDMC. However, as a contribution to the understanding of globalised dance music culture *Technomad* offers many useful insights, both in terms of cultural anthropology, neo-religion and spirituality and the potential for EDM as a form of activism. This exhaustively researched and meticulously crafted book provides a significant resource for all those interested in contemporary popular culture.

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## SONIC WARFARE: SOUND, AFFECT AND THE ECOLOGY OF FEAR

STEVE GOODMAN

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Rave culture has long known of the power of sound to seduce bodies into becoming particles of a movement. Dancer and DJ become but one conduit of a feedback loop that affects the physical and the psychic. Ecstasy, fear, horror, awe and excitement, as well as melancholy, nostalgia and transcendence form the connective tissue of the event.

Focusing on the “politics of frequency”, *Sonic Warfare* seeks to outline how the limits of sound are deployed within “vibration ontology”. Goodman overviews military-state and countercultural usages alike, from audio assault weaponry for crowd control to dub audio viruses that transmit the offworld heritage of Afrofuturism. An earworm, for example, can operate as an Afrodiasporic riff of black noise that functions “as an attractor in processes of group catalysis” (157), such as the mobilization of dance; or, as a preemptive strike by hypercapital that “sets up a structure of allure for products for which you had no desire... because they do not necessarily exist yet” (186).

Tracing these parallel developments to early 20th century Futurism and its “art of noise in the art of war” Goodman dismisses the avant-garde camps of noise and silence alike, choosing (wisely) to focus on an ecology of rhythm and to argue for a complex and—perhaps essentially—incomplete philosophical inventory of vibration ontology.

As Goodman briefs in the introduction, readers looking for a detailed, historical account of sonic warfare should turn elsewhere. It is also worth noting—as Goodman himself warns of his “dense theorisation”—that readers looking for an exegesis or comparative study of the text’s many philosophical sources should come prepared for neither. Prepare instead for a somewhat chaotic assemblage of theoretical trajectories that zoom in and out of zones

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“Goodman’s development of *affect*  
remains indispensable to studies of soniculture”

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of inquiry, from the *futurhythmachines* of the Black Atlantic to the bass materialism of global ghettech. If that's an earful, listen and repeat until sedated, for Goodman has well adopted the Deleuzo-Guattarian maxim of conjoining it all with an "and".

### FEAR NOT RADICAL EMPIRICISM! AFFECT AND ONTOLOGY OF VIBRATION

Goodman's development of *affect* remains indispensable to studies of sonic culture. For Goodman, affect is the vibration—the good or bad vibes—prior to organisation into organised feeling (prior to what phenomenology would call intentionality). Sonic weaponry seeks to disrupt or enhance the vibrational flux; it is capable of provoking feelings such as fear, dread or ecstasy through its good or bad vibes. Goodman details actual sonic weaponry as well as fantastical projects that have promised more than delivered. He also aligns particular electronic music genres with various sonic effects, noting in particular how bass heavy genres—such as dub—generate atmospheres of dread, quipping their *bass materialism* as the "subpolitical power of music to attract and congeal populations" (172). Elements of these theses were developed in Goodman's 2004 article, "Speed Tribes".

Goodman's approach, which he groups with radical empiricism, mixes the realms of the material and physiological with their often hazy effects upon subjects and cultures—the contested realm of the social sciences and cultural studies. In this respect, Goodman develops a materialist perspective for grasping the affective potential of sound, be it the marching drum of the military, sonic cannons fired on insurgent protesters, or wobbly subbass let loose on East London club-dwellers. Radical empiricism does not so much eschew cause and effect as much as it claims that effects operate autonomously of cause in an "ecology" of interrelationships (or rhythms and anticipatory echoes). Radical empiricism opens the material world to pre-conscious interpenetration by its bodies (which can be any population, as Whitehead's "actual occasion"), as well as prehensive temporality, where "Such an occasion itself starts as an effect facing its past and ends as a cause facing its future" (Whitehead, quoted in Goodman 152). In short, Goodman eschews the *a priori* claims of phenomenology, substituting the radical empiricism of ecology. This, of course, requires an epistemological claim concerning knowing that which is aphenomenal and asubjective to the world.

What we call sound itself is merely the human heard of the spectrum; Goodman delves beyond even the ultra, sub and infrasonic, developing philosophies of rhythm analysis by Bachelard, Lefebvre and Whitehead (though one wishes he had spent more time with Lefebvre, who explores the political capacities of rhythm analysis, and in general less time with Deleuze and Guattari's toolbox of usual suspects). In this respect, Goodman practices what Deleuze and Guattari call a "minor science"; he delves headfirst into claims concerning hard science and metaphysical inquiry while suspending their epistemological uncertainty, thereby granting this form of empiricism, for better or for worse, its radicalism.

That said, Goodman footnotes the moment where his radical empiricism and Graham Harman's speculative realism depart, noting his adherence to Whitehead's theories of relation over Harman's insistence on the rigorous conception of the discrete object (ch. 17). Yet speculative realism holds intriguing consequences for Goodman's ontology of vibration. Could discrete objects mark a particular phase of Whitehead's *eternal object*?

Here I'll dive into one particular argument to give a sense of what is at stake in the thesis of vibration ontology.

### THE ETERNAL VIBRATOR

Goodman does not note if his adoption of the *eternal object*—which ingresses from pure potential into the real potential of the actual as it vibrates out-of-phase with itself (whew)—departs or concords with Alain Badiou's Neo-Platonism. This becomes all the more significant when Goodman talks of Whitehead's "actual occasions"—which are bodies in the general sense—being able to *select* eternal objects, which is how affective encounters between "discrete actual entities" occur (98). Not only does a shadow of the discrete return, drawing attention to how radical empiricism shadows speculative realism, but Goodman often writes as if a rhythmic *power* underpins vibration ontology (he treats audio viruses, or earworms, in a similar fashion, granting them an undefined agency he nearly denies human subjects (149)). In this respect, his adoption of the eternal object approaches a quasi-idealism, or a transcendentalism he elsewhere seeks to avoid. Goodman's radical empiricism, not surprisingly given its theoretical ground, dances around the question of Spinoza's God, i.e., the Eternal Vibrator.

This problem can be recast in terms of politics. While Goodman critiques Bachelard for seeking equilibrium between counterrhythms (107), he nonetheless accepts Philip Turetsky's account of rhythmic synthesis that forms matter into a single body (111). What is the difference between the two? Well, for one, it is one of politics, or as Goodman sees it, the micropolitics of frequency. Goodman conceives of the "ontological ground" as fundamentally turbulent, a rhythmic anarchitecture which:

... does not dictate the orientation of such a micropolitics; it does not lay down a set of generalizable laws but rather throws up a series of engineering problems. As such, any micropolitics derivable from this base can be only tactical rather than strategic—a war without aims concerned more with disposition and potential movement than ideology, although certainly susceptible to abduction (107).

The problem is, of course, with alien abduction. The other always swoops in, alien, capitalist, totalitarian or otherwise viral, an earworm "takeover of the body by an exterior entity" (150) that overcodes tactical movement with strategy, setting up a violent mechanism of control over heterogeneous rhythms, and ultimately, of the "actual occasion" that is the self. Like Deleuze and Guattari's war machine, the tactical micropolitics of frequency or turbulence remain fundamentally inculpable. Of course, we have hit upon the ideology of this position, which is its first generalizable law. Its second generalizable law is already expressed above: being concerned with disposition and potential movement precisely *is* the ideogram of the micropolitics of frequency, its unification or expressed ideology as the perceived good, pre-abduction, of rhythmic anarchitecture. Elsewhere Goodman writes that "A theory of sonic warfare is particularly fascinated by this turbulent boundary layer between dance and violence" (111).

What I understand Goodman as trying to argue is that while vibrational control

techniques such as sonic weaponry (from dub viruses to military means) seek to control the crowd by unifying it through resonance, thereby dictating it to move as one, at the ontological level its rhythm remains turbulent and nonunified. One can also see dance as a similar assemblage, where the soundsystem unifies differentiated bodies into what Kodwo Eshun called a “futurhythmachine”. Thus, unification is not, in itself, a bad thing, but can be wrought for different ends - say that of the military state, on the one channel, or that of *jouissance*, such as rave culture, on the other. That we are talking of ends and means suggests strategy, however, rather than tactics. This argument is a strong one, and smartly counters Adorno’s well-worn conservative moralisms against mass dancing and jazz music, or Benjamin’s aestheticization of politics, as somehow fundamentally fascist, questioning whether “aesthetics need be sacrificed at the altar of a political cause” (175).

Yet, there is a strict problem here: the potential to be unified is evidently inherent to rhythm. More than potential, it is an incorporated possibility before the fact; it is *de jure*. One could argue just as well that rhythm is fundamentally unified, which is to say one, and that turbulence is an expression of mode. Again, this is Spinoza’s problem, of the monadic substance of God expressed in the many. It haunts Goodman’s text throughout, significantly with the undefined agency of the audio virus or earworm and the supposedly uncontaminated and interiorized body it penetrates by communicating the instruction “record me!” (150). A more ecological sense of interior/exterior would be of use here, of the earworm within that would whisper the effects of consciousness, suggesting the always already incorporation of alterity. In short, to the question: What concept of memory is compatible with the illogic of affect, the virtuality of the past and the active immanence of futurity in the present? One could reply, *différance*, insofar as Derrida speaks of an absolute past, force, and the technics of the sign—the trace—before the re-marking of intentionality. And/or the logic of the supplement, otherwise known as incorporation, of that which is extraneous but necessary (that which is added after to make the thing whole from the start). Derrida’s work on Husserl could bridge the divide to Deleuze and forms the unthought (or unsound) to Goodman’s investigations.

The political question of unified rhythm is raised by Lefebvre, as well as Deleuze and Guattari, the latter whom grasp the State as the superposition of waves, a wave that cancels itself out (see van Veen 2010: 183). Superposed waves become a flat line that masks their turbulence, posing an entire problematic of perception, as well as form/content, ecological or otherwise, within rhythmanalysis. To this end, in the *Production of Space*, Lefebvre even cautions against overstating the parallelism between hydrodynamics and theory (184). Of course, Goodman adequately argues a radical empiricism that claims all as rhythmic; it is a materialist theory of rhythm through-and-through that charts sociopolitical effects from the axioms of vibration ontology.

Which is to say the critical objection to Goodman remains here. Utilising vibrational ontology to script (or prescript) the political will of populations—or rather rendering viral such will, and “mapping” populations as preconscious rhythmic assemblages—dovetails neatly with 20th century second-order cybernetics as well as hypercapitalist (and fascist) strategy. Unquestionably, such strategies—strategies as they serve political endgames—

are powerful. Goodman demonstrates how they work in the world. Yet they also do not work so well; no population has yet been adequately controlled (or so we perceive...). And undoubtedly this is also Goodman's point: that turbulence is *a priori*, that turbulence remains, in short, as a "subpolitics," as it cannot be prescribed, even as resistance (175). It could be "abducted" in any direction. And in this sense, I agree with Goodman, for his rhythm analysis leaves us with a population (and a universe) that is without content, much like Paolo Virno's conception of the multitude, or Lefebvre's analysis of the urban as form. Yet, the alien, as all the sci-fi nightmares of horrific innards warn us, is always within. Abduction occurs from within this same *ontos*; we abduct ourselves, unknowingly, aliens to ourselves.

Which leaves the question hanging: what is this uncanniness of the alien, its strange eternal return as the virus of our becoming? In short there is always an untimely question to the absolute claims of radical empiricism. Whereas the virus remains, the material strategies of its dissemination do not; they mutate and change with the technics of history. For a materialist ontology of vibration, is it not, by its own admission, a tactic and not strategy, a viral thought to the metaphysics of eternal ontology?

## WILDSTYLE ECOLOGY IN MU-MU LAND

The telescoping rhythm of shifting in and out of this increasingly complex and at times bizarre inventory of sonic weapons, inventions and theories touches upon the wildstyle. At times one wishes Goodman would pitch down the rhythm and pause, downsampling more time to his soundbytes.

In a particularly captivating passage, Goodman fast-forwards a discussion between William Burroughs and Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page on the potential of infrasonics; shifts to industrial band and performance artists Throbbing Gristle and their "infrasonic emitters;" and skips on to discuss The KLF's "audio weapons system" as borrowed by techno duo Panasonic (now Pan Sonic). All this on page 24. As Goodman makes clear on several occasions, "a brief overview will have to suffice" (17).

Yet the overview can be stimulating and a scrappy shot of wake-up. Goodman emphasizes the potential of sound, writing how "At the very least, the transduction of bad vibes into something more constructive suggests the need to probe more deeply into affective tonality and the vibrations of the environment" (73). Most ravers would agree.

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## FILM

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**MUSIC WORLD: DONK**

DIR. ANDY CAPPER

VBS:TV (internet documentary), 2009.

<http://www.vbs.tv/en-gb/watch/music-world/donk>

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This review explores the VBS.TV documentary on the UK electronic dance music style known as “donk”. The genre is referred to by a number of names including Scouse house, bouncy house, bouncy techno, bounce or donk. The term bounce will be used throughout the review as the term donk has a pejorative dimension. The style is an offshoot of hardcore techno, which has had a number of variants popular in the North of England. The tunes are around 150 bpm with a four-on-the-floor kick drum, whilst the eponymous “donk” itself is a layered sound or stab that occurs on the offbeat, or “and” of each beat. Synthesised musical parts in the tunes are akin to European techno, a stylistic template that has more in common with the sonic palette of 2 Unlimited than that of Basic Channel. Some bounce releases feature vocals, or rapid-fire MC’ing in an unashamedly UK regional accent.

The focus of the documentary is mainly the Blackout Crew, although other UK MCs and producers are featured. Blackout Crew’s 2008 single *Put a Donk On It* may have only reached number 91 in the UK charts, but the official video had well over five million hits on YouTube, and consequently attracted “mainstream” media attention. The genre is little known outside of the North West and North East of England. Indeed, in the North West of England the style is mainly popular in the satellite towns between Liverpool and Manchester such as St Helens and Wigan, and towns to the north of Manchester such as Bolton, Burnley and Blackburn. The documentary is on initial viewing quite funny, until the realisation sinks in that it is a heavily biased, stereotype-laden snipe at the leisure practices of the white northern working class.

The documentary begins by exploring Blackout Crew’s origins in a Bolton youth centre. Notably, considering the multi-cultural makeup of most of the towns named above, the only representatives of ethnic minorities filmed in the documentary are the managers of the youth centre (and a promoter later in the video). Northern hardcore and its sub-styles have never been of much interest to young black or Asian clubbers. The black respondents’ comments in the video are subtitled despite being perfectly comprehensible; indeed this

patronising use of subtitles occurs randomly throughout the video.

The next sequence takes place in Burnley, introduced by a series of visual tropes intended to convey a sense of acute urban deprivation. The presenter briefly interviews an ex-MC and questions him on local drug use, this respondent seems to have been included solely as he has been to prison. After some more clichéd camera shots the next respondent offers a more positive view of the town than the earlier montage suggested, despite being repeatedly questioned on the area's alleged propensity for violence. A bounce producer DJ Greenie is subsequently interviewed; he responds to questions about the scene's drug use by coyly stating a comparison to the film *Human Traffic*, inferring the use of ecstasy. Greenie is questioned on the centrality of steroids to the donk scene, to which he responds, "Wigan Pier's full of big lads on steroids". In the next sequence the documentary follows Blackout Crew to a gig in Scarborough. The documentary crew film some sequences outside the venue, one is an interview with a promoter who discusses the problems of booking the band outside the style's heartlands, describing the Southern audience as "more urban, more sophisticated in a sense". The narrative then returns to Bolton, signified by a montage featuring a pie shop, a tanning salon, a tattoo studio and a barbershop. After more interviews the focus shifts to a Blackout Crew performance at Wigan Pier, but not before another montage including a camera shot of a local newspaper headline proclaiming *Wigan Thug Beats Mum To Be* and yet more shots of fast food shops. Footage of young males being checked for weapons with a hand-held metal detector is included to connote a threat of violence.

The next sequence sums up the overall tone of the documentary, despite the friendly interviewees and carefree enthusiasm of the Pier's crowd, the documentary team can't resist sniping at the provincial working class audience, "As the night went on hundreds more fake-tanned, steroid-pumped donk enthusiasts filled the floor, tongues blue from drinking WKD". As the Blackout Crew perform, the presenter then comments that the music starts to sound like being trapped in a nail factory, before paraphrasing Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, "What you see here is the beating heart of donk, the heart of donkness, oh the horror, the horror". To bookend the video the documentary team return to Bolton the next day to interview one of the Blackout Crew MCs.

As a product of the Vice media group the documentary has a pre-ordained agenda to be mildly controversial and to come across as edgy gonzo journalism, hence the underlying fixation with drugs, violence and urban deprivation. This subtext is reinforced by the

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**“quite funny, until the realisation sinks in that it is a heavily biased, stereotype-laden snipe at the leisure practices of the white northern working class”**

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connotations supplied by the montage sequences and the chosen edits. The documentary team are given a consistently friendly welcome and open access to the scene by all - whether practitioners or clubbers - yet still choose to mock the northern working class whenever possible. This isn't a highbrow dance music style, but then again neither are grime or funky (UK Garage sub-styles), which are generally treated with some degree of reverence by the British media, possibly as these styles initially emanated from the South of England and have greater perceived (sub) cultural capital. Other related media coverage demonstrates this bias. The *Guardian* newspaper included a brief feature on donk in 2008 (by a Vice contributor) which had the headline, "Bouncy techno meets terrible rapping? Welcome to Donk. Keen on sportswear? Prone to taking your shirt off in clubs? Donk is made for you" (McDonnell 2008). In a promotional article in the *Metro* newspaper the producer discusses the making of the VBS documentary:

The most shocking element was just how massive most of these dudes were. They all had their tops off and the drugs are paramount. They take ecstasy, steroids, a bit of cocaine and then blue or red alcopops. We've been making a load of films recently, including one about cannibals in Liberia, but there were bits of donk that were just as scary—like being the only sober ones among 3,000 ravers on steroids and ecstasy (Capper cited by Day 2010).

The documentary says much about the predominantly middle-class media's attitude to white working class Britain and specifically London-based media's attitude to the north of England. The selection of material, the content of the montages and the editing reinforces entrenched stereotypes concerning the North of England and white working class leisure. The documentary is augmented by a *Vice* article on the making of the programme, which is noticeably more scathing than the documentary. For example, in a passage describing Burnley the writer states the following hyperbole:

What used to be a prosperous cotton-mill town is now decimated by the terminal decline of industry, with entire square miles of housing steel-boarded-up, repossessed and marked for demolition by the local council. Unemployment is all-consuming, violence is a popular pastime—as is the rampant theft of expensive copper pipes from condemned houses to sell as scrap to pay for heroin and crack. It's practically a ghost town these days, but instead of headless cavaliers with chains clanging around their wrists and ankles, there are gaggles of toothless, skeletal smackheads waddling around in skid-mark-stained tracksuit bottoms. Actually, scratch that—it's more zombie town than ghost town (Hodgson 2009).

Obviously, Burnley isn't that bad, although if you look for that kind of social deprivation it can be found in many urban centres. Crack and heroin use are not exclusively northern pastimes and neither is violence. Another example of tabloid journalism in the *Vice* article is the following statement describing the crowd in Wigan Pier:

The crowd was a mixture of skimpily dressed, emaciated rave bunnies and some of the most gruesome thugs you'd ever come across—blokes whose faces had been

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permanently disfigured by a lifetime of being pummeled by fists every weekend, who've probably washed down massive doses of steroids with gallons of Stella for breakfast every morning since they were 11 years old (Hodgson 2009).

Although the VBS.TV documentary is aimed at popular consumption, it does raise issues of academic interest other than media representation. There is potential for further academic research on the various dance music subcultures that have blossomed in the north of England outside of the metropolitan centres. An example of an interesting piece of previously published work on northern dance music culture is Ingham's (1999) *Listening Back from Blackburn: virtual sound worlds and the creation of temporary autonomy*. This is a brief but fascinating study of the warehouse party scene that blossomed in the Blackburn area in 1989-1990. Northern Soul has now achieved a mythic status and has received some academic attention, but the audience demographic was very similar to that of bounce nowadays, as were the audience demographics for the other hardcore house and techno variants that preceded bounce in the same geographic area. Linking these styles historically could be socially and culturally revealing.

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“The crowd was a mixture of skimpily dressed, emaciated rave bunnies and some of the most gruesome thugs you’d ever come across—”

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## SPEAKING IN CODE

DIR. AMY GRILL

USA: sQuare Productions, 2008.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1474864/>

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You can still smell the revolution a bit, you know.

—Modeselektor

With the proliferation of digital film technologies, I've been waiting to witness a film that captures the obsession and exuberance of the worldwide technoculture. By techno I have a specific meaning in mind. With the collapse of North American rave culture thanks to 9/11—which, among other things, disrupted vinyl distribution as well as introduced draconian police powers that were deployed everywhere against autonomist enclaves—DJs, producers and adherents of the house and techno sound fled the States. This remains an undocumented exodus of creative luminaries. Though Montréal served, for a few years, as a nexus of technoculture thanks to the MUTEK collective—many of my Canadian comrades moved to Montréal around 2002—it was Berlin that soon overcame all comers. Easy travel within a united Europe, cheap living and the fierce protection of personal freedoms made Berlin not just an inexpensive and convenient place to live, but made it (along with Barcelona) *the* place to imagine collective cultural anarchism. The *jouissance* of deep, psychedelic, minimalist or maximalist techno betrays not only this yearning, but its reality, which is what few North Americans realise. Berlin and Barcelona, though each fighting their battles against gentrification, are singularities of the way things could be. Perhaps even should be.

Amy Grill's film captures something of the meaning of techno to Berliners. Techno is not just clubbing catharsis; it is the soundtrack to the fall of the Wall. As a few interviews (and deleted scenes) explain, when the Wall fell in 1989, the centre of Berlin opened into unoccupied and stateless space. Ravers crept in, setting up technoclubs in bunkers and buildings. The infamous Tresor was such a space; today Berghain upholds the tradition. Signs of this sociocultural renaissance appear everywhere in this film, where modernist-

inflected graffiti, inside and out, signifies resistance to speculation in property values.

Already, there is much to film: the relation of a free Europe to the policed urbanism of North America; a thorough updating of the AfroGermanic Detroit/Berlin Axis wrought back in 1990; and the development of the later cross-Atlantic dialogue with Montréal, diving South in this regard, with MUTEK's Mexico and Chile editions.

Though digging into Berlin, and touching upon Barcelona, *Speaking in Code* falls somewhat short of investigating the planetary potential of this techno matrix. Focusing on Grill's hometown of Boston, and her ex-husband David Day's struggle to produce technoculture in a town that mostly doesn't care (like the rest of the conservative US), the film often forgets to provide some much-needed context to this mini-cultural revolution. After a few starts, it settles down on German labels BPitch Control and Kompakt, as the personal lives and meteoric careers of Modeselektor and the Wighnomy Brothers become central to the narrative. Both duos have to deal with celebrity and stress, as they find themselves gigging constantly, with Modeselektor playing to tens of thousands at Barcelona's Sonar festival. The massive scale of Sonar is well contrasted to David Day's burnt-out efforts in Boston, where Day eventually loses track of his community, driving his new afterhours loftspace into the ground (at one point, he talks of putting on events night after night after 'getting everyone else [i.e. his fellow artists!] out of the building').

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You will find more years to say something without words.

—Modeselektor

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A few other technorati make appearances, including the ever eccentric and incredibly inventive Monolake, a.k.a. Robert Henke, prime programmer of Ableton Live and dub techno composer, whose spartan, all-white loft matches, without irony, his all-white techno outfit. Another memorable appearance is that of music journalist and DJ Philip Sherburne, who strives to explain, in an incredibly touching moment—he breaks down on camera—the true significance of hearing and what it means to him, thanks to his relationship with his deaf father, who received a hearing implant a few years before his death in 2005. Indeed, Philip's ever articulate and composed persona is a highlight of the film; one wishes there was more from this evocative American writer. Likewise, the ever elusive Wolfgang Voigt—an acid house-era techno producer and owner/operator of the Kompakt empire—appears in fine form, situating “cultural techno” as not only still a part of ecstatic rave culture, but as a step beyond—a form-of-life.

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The artist set-pieces of *Speaking in Code* are beautifully composed. Each taps deeply into the ups-and-downs of living-and-breathing technoculture. The Wighnomy Brothers are exceptional; they live in the six person “small communist collective” of *Freude-am-Tanzen*, sharing equally in profits and running their own label, work/live space and distribution out of the small, mostly rural town of Jena in former East Germany. Yet one wishes that the film went deeper still. When the very lovable, teddy bear-like Robag Wruhme of the Brothers decides to take a breather from the relentless touring schedule, his absence remains something of a mystery.

As a former technoculture journalist, I can't help but think of what to ask him. I'd ask him if he misses his commune—surely, because he has spent his life, up to that point, working and living in an autonomist collective? To be thrown headfirst into the hypercommercialism and opportunist corporatism of mainstream European techno-pop culture must have been a dilemma—if not a cultural shock to the system. At Sonar, massive digital billboards advertise alcohol, as if by bastardized simile they have overcoded the absent artistic visuals (look closely during Modeselektor's set). I'd hypothesize that Wruhme's retreat signifies that not all are comfortable with what “successful” technoculture has become. Yet, the film only glances over divided yet interconnected levels of technoculture in Europe. Some are quite literally underground; the incredible MUNA club in Jena reclaims a WWII-era rocket factory. An entire dimension of the ritual denazification of this space through dance is left uncommented.

Then there are the arena festivals of cigarette sponsorship bound by chain-link fences.

The very opening of the film, for reasons that are left unexplained, rolls with some rather uninspiring footage of a Dutch techno festival. As the camera enters through the VIP gate, a sea of garbage and burnt-out bodies meets the eye, everyone seemingly unaware of the destitution of their camp-like surroundings... this is a fenced-in wasteland of the wasted, yet it is presented, without critique, as a tease of what's to come. Is this wasteland symbolic for something else in this film?

Well, yes. The evident struggle between technoculture's collectivism and its commercialism, its schizoid, yet symbiotic relationship with corporate entertainment, is sacrificed to Amy Grill's focus on her disintegrating relationship with David Day. Choosing

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“*Speaking in Code* shows that technoculture can be a communal, lifelong adventure in art, music and living, achieving escape velocity, at least for the inventive, from its youthful escapism and burn-out hedonism”

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to narrativise her failing relationship with an always-omniscient voice-over, Grill never places herself before the camera, even as she captures Day in all his darkest moments. The film's gaze does not match its voice; the director indulges in a selective narcissism, revealing only a strangely affectless narration to what is left unseen. By the end of the film the pair are divorced and what begins as an aside becomes the film's peroration. Their disintegration into divorce eschews *cinema verité*, embracing instead the conventionality of Reality TV.

What is more intriguing is all that is left unsaid. For example, why is Montréal only mentioned once and the MUTEK festival never mentioned at all? North America is depicted as the graveyard of electronic music, yet there is no mention of the cities where technoculture has survived. Also absent are Vancouver's New Forms Festival and Seattle's Decibel. And then there's Detroit—its festival and heritage left unheard and unmentioned. The same can be said for San Francisco, Chicago, NYC and the Midwest.

This not only leaves the average audience unawares of the States' founding as well as *continuing* contribution to electronic music, but it also leaves the current depiction of Berlin's technoscene and Boston's lack of it—despite Day's valiant attempts at a brief flowering—as somewhat hollow and meaningless. The United States *lost something* with 9/11—the total expression of a generation, silenced off the airwaves, policed and beaten down, denied even the nostalgia granted to punk. Rave culture was not only underground; it has now been buried in the US, as if it never existed, as if the blurring of gender and colour and dance never happened.

Which brings me to the inevitable but essential question of representation. Though Ellen Allien appears as head of BPitch Control, speaking wonderfully of the emotive aspect of techno and the supportive atmosphere she strives to create in her label collective, she remains the sole woman onscreen. But most embarrassingly, there is not one single black person in the film. One would think techno was invented and played solely by white people in Berlin. In fact, the only reference to techno's heritage in black Detroit is a symbol, worn as a badge of respect by Modeselektor. During their massive but ad-ridden Sonar concert, Sebastian Szary wears an Underground Resistance t-shirt. Good for him.

Full disclosure. I like others am a ghost in this film. I saw it being filmed. I've DJed in many of the same places. I know and love most everyone in it. I love the music. It is difficult, in this respect, to write critically, especially given the usual laudatory press. But ditch the melodramatic divorce narrative and you have a documentary of profound intimacy and insight into the fragility of collective creation. *Speaking In Code* is a snapshot of a radical soniculture attempting to achieve a strange kind of equilibrium in the 21C. Both Henke and Voigt say the same thing: they don't see the need for change. But it's more than that. *Speaking in Code* shows that technoculture can be a communal, lifelong adventure in art, music and living, achieving escape velocity, at least for the inventive, from its youthful escapism and burn-out hedonism. Sometimes divorce is necessary for radical togetherness.