"An Avatar . . . in a Physical Space":
Researching the Mediated Immediacy of Electronic Dance Floors

— Feature Article —

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Abstract

This article addresses the mediations of technologies and user experiences on the dance floors of Melbourne techno underground scenes. Interviewees for my doctoral research project recalled embodied experiences of a "second life", similar to computerised virtual realities but in the physical space of the party. This article argues for the application of Baudrillardian theory in the investigation of such experiences, contending that the chemical and musical object of electronic dance music is capable of the virtualisation of its immediate environment and the adjustment of the subject's everyday life. Emphasising the merits of ethnographic fieldwork in electronic dance music research, I call for a reading of Baudrillard that allows an empirically based exploration of his concepts. My focus on insider accounts of virtualisation processes is conducive to the close investigation of the dance floor "vibe" in the context of consumer culture.

KEYWORDS: vibe, mediation, drugs, virtual, techno, Baudrillard

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The electronic dance music (EDM) genre of techno emerged in late 1980s Detroit, relying on influences such as Kraftwerk, funk, European synth-pop, and the post-industrial cityscape of decaying Detroit City (Brewster and Broughton 2000: 320–32). In the early 1990s, in the second wave of Detroit techno, DJ/producer collectives such as the Underground Resistance and +8 developed a harsher sound inspired by electro, UK synth-pop, industrial music and electronic body music, partly as a counter-reaction against the mainstream entertainment industry (Reynolds 1999: 219–20). With the dramatic increase in EDM genres and subgenres since the 1990s, techno became a diversified phenomenon with numerous crossovers to other genres. My research addresses the Melbourne incarnation of the genre, primarily focusing on its acid-Detroit-hard-industrial subgenres.

For the individual partygoer, regular participation in techno events is a constantly evolving experiment shaped by the mediatory agents building the club environment such as the music, drugs, visual arrangements and audience interactions. Although the subjective interpretation of the dance floor experience may vary, those I have interviewed within the Melbourne scene emphasised the need for encountering strange sounds and rhythmic structures, which often generate feelings of confusion and displacement. Within a soundscape dominated by machinic effects, this draws attention away from the echoes of industrial production and opens up a psychedelic space that disrupts normative rational processes through peculiar arrangements of repetitive musical structures.

Downstream from Detroit techno, the dance floor may open up a mindset that is constituted, in the words of Kodwo Eshun (1998: 120), through "the covert operations of drumcodes, the synthesis of unknown sensations, the modulation of frequent emotions". Such syntheses and modulations are carried out in the "laboratory" of the club, where in most cases the pitch-black darkness is impregnated by techno music, a few lights, the occasional strobe and artificial smoke. These synergistic mediations are further enhanced by recreational drugs, some of which may induce synaesthetic perceptions, providing access to a zone that is hidden beneath the everyday realities of consumer culture. As stated by one interviewee of my research:

> Cooper (35): Especially if you start taking any hallucinogenic drugs . . . you put yourself in a mindset or a zone, and from this zone you get out this whole layer of stuff that most people miss on their own.[1]

In understanding the ways in which such multimedia experiments adjust and overwrite urban realities, I employ a reading of Jean Baudrillard. The heavily mediatised, immersive environments of EDM clubs provide a particularly good fit for Baudrillardian theory, and the latter's focus on the transformative capabilities of the medium is conducive to the discussion of clubbing in the context of consumer culture and everyday life. However, I also contend that the media ecology of the dance floor is not a straightforward recombination of everyday media processes, and the ethnography of clubbing is capable of altering what Baudrillard identifies as the simulacrum and the virtual in particular ways. To clarify this statement, in this article I argue that recreational drug use enables a virtualisation of the self

that shows similarities and differences with the consumption of everyday media contents. Clubbing encompasses a chain of thoroughly mediated, immersive experiences akin to participation in computer-based virtual worlds but distinctly involves the ritualised and excessive consumption of specific mediating technologies in contexts that are commonly regarded as extraordinary and in which the gap between the virtual and actual is eliminated, leading to profound reconfigurations of everyday life. The in-depth understanding of such virtualisations calls for the analytical transposition of the dance floor experience or "vibe". This connects Baudrillardian theory with insider, self-reflexive methodology, the possibilities of which are addressed below.

Tracing (Retro-)Futuristic Knowledge: Epistemological Concerns

This article relies on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over one year (2011–2012). I opted for a micro-level qualitative approach suited to a close analysis of the dance floor experience. The fieldwork involved three overlapping layers. First, I conducted self-reflexive participant observation at ten techno events held in Melbourne to investigate the interplay of music, drugs, setting and partygoers on their dance floors. The second layer involved four focus groups and four individual interviews addressing the insider experiences of the field, focusing on the contexts and mediations of the dance floor experience. My preferred interview format was the focus group, with follow-up interviews strengthening the results. I used pseudonyms during the evaluation of the results to ensure the anonymity of the participants. Finally, I examined some of the social media representations of the relevant parties.

This investigation of Melbourne techno dance floors was facilitated by the application of Baudrillard's media theory, results from which will be discussed later in this article. While Baudrillard's writing is often hyperbolic, deliberately adopting an anti-empiricist perspective, which questions the necessity of extensive empirical fieldwork, the tension can be resolved by considering a critical reading of his work that allows an empirically based exploration of his concepts.

In *Baudrillard and the Media* (2005), William Merrin reflects on the anti-empiricist methodologies of Baudrillard, as well as Marshall McLuhan. For both thinkers, innovative theory cannot be based simply on empiricism because processes of cultural transformation are concealed by the familiarity of the observed phenomena, just as the apparent "content" of a medium blinds us to its transformative capabilities (McLuhan 1964: 9). Such theory is raised through speculation and escalation; in an accelerated world that seems to overcome our ideas, thought itself must become extreme and confrontational (Merrin 2005: 61–2). Baudrillard describes the emergent "semiotic system" of contemporary complex societies as a means of social control, culminating in his idea of the simulacrum. Yet in Merrin's (2005: 99–100) reading, theory for Baudrillard also provides a site of resistance against this semiotic system through the identification or awakening of resisting "symbolic" processes derived from the Durkheimian tradition of social anthropology. In this sense, theory is a "process of invention and inversion" aimed to be "not simply a descriptive statement of the real but its critique and transformation" (Merrin 2005: 158). The following discussion

addresses the ways in which this late 20th century position can be reconsidered.

Baudrillard himself was subject to severe criticism and accusations of denying the "real" casualties when he described the overwhelming and mediated military offensive of the Gulf War as a "non-event" in which the absence of direct confrontation and the controversies around the casualties were overshadowed by the production of a media model of the war. However, by the 2003 invasion of Iraq, similar accounts of "virtual wars" became popular clichés or parts of the canon of media analysis (Merrin 2005: 96). Thus the danger of such provocative thought is not that it is deemed wrong, but that it is deadly accurate and subsequently justified by the world. Yet once realised, radical thought also loses its edge, and in this way Baudrillard himself could be "eclipsed, reduced to the ghost of his own semiotic simulacra" (Merrin 2005: 159).

In an interview, Baudrillard (1995) evokes a conversation with his Japanese translator, who explains that the interest in his works declined among Japanese readers as his theory of the simulacrum has become a commonplace reality. This anecdotal account signals "the paradox of utopia made real [that] clearly makes every utopian dimension perfectly useless" (Baudrillard 1995). For the purposes of this article it is insignificant whether contemporary Japan provides such complete realisations of the simulacrum, or even if the conversation actually occurred. If Baudrillard's writing is not necessarily founded in empiricism but develops as prophetic theory not unlike science fiction to which the world is then elevated— and this elevation has indeed been accomplished in various aspects of contemporary society—then his thoughts are highly relevant to the analysis of a heavily mediatised, remix-laden culture, the central focus of which lies in the experiential transformation of its dance floors into hallucinatory environments through communal consumption of cutting edge sound and drug technologies. Just as the Japanese "[ha]ve been living in the future for such a very long time now"— according to Canadian science fiction writer William Gibson (2001)—my starting argument is that since the 1980s EDM parties have been generating psychic conditions for experiencing a chemical/musical object bleeding into or conquering urban realities, driven by a logic of consumption that can best be understood through the concept of simulation.

If the post-utopian dreams of Japan seem far away from the context of this research, a quick stroll through Melbourne's CBD reveals snapshots of the simulacrum. In the *Clinique*lly[2] clean spaces of most distinguished shopping malls, glamorous shopkeepers are selling the luxurious magic of "scientifically proven" beauty products for clients from a population struggling with obesity (Pink 2011), while competing with pin-up girls: such is the magical thinking governing consumer culture (Baudrillard 1998: 31–4). Shoppers are checking the inexhaustible succession of Facebook posts and notifications pumped out by their phones with an intensity that shifts Baudrillard's (1998: 122) mass media programme analysis into the next gear. During a May night in 2012, partygoers smoking a cigarette in the outdoor designated area of The Liberty Social nightclub are being harassed and directed to stand straight under the street lights of Flinders Lane by bouncers sustaining the fantasy of order at all costs, as part of a general project of over-protection feeding the "rationalist paranoia

of our social systems" (Baudrillard 2002: 99). Yet, there's a flip side to this: descending into the darkness of the club, the order is turned inside out, behaviour that is criminalised "overground" becomes the norm underground (ironically, Melbourne bouncers tacitly encourage drug consumption by preventing access to those intoxicated with alcohol). Partygoers are "losing it" as their senses are bombarded by flashes, lasers and thick layers of simulated sounds within the "ordered disorder" (Featherstone 1991: 82) of the techno party. Such underground encounters with the future-present tend to avoid the gaze of the mass media or appear distorted in their simulations. Antonio Melechi's portrayal of early UK acid house discusses one such "disappearance" of the subcultural subject within the "cyber-space" of the party, which is followed by a distorted and "hysterical re-inscription" in the mass media (Melechi 1993: 33–5).

When describing the disappearance of the subject, Melechi adopts Baudrillardian terminology that describes the interaction between the object and the subject in consumer culture. For Baudrillard (1997a: 14–15), the (consumer) object has become a "strange attractor", a vertiginous organising principle that seduces the subject in a world that is now invented for its assimilation by media and advertising. From this perspective, products are imposing their presence on consumers, sacrificing ambiguity and illusion to the technological perfection of models broadcast through mass (and social) media. A typical symptom of this process is the profusion of amateur photographs transforming the lived experience of the consumer into a reflection of technological trends. Photographed, broadcast and consumed, the subject's identity is conjured away and reconstructed through a web of technological mediations. Baudrillard depicts a system where fetishised objects are devouring the identities of their subjects as sacrificial masks, problematising the subject's identity in a world that is now modelled through simulations. Such perspectives are uncomfortable for a social analysis that tries to defend the human subject by designating value to human agency. Yet in media studies, Baudrillard's work can be considered particularly useful because, by emphasising form over content, it investigates the medium as a transformative means of social control, providing a historical and philosophical foundation for this process through his theories of simulation and virtuality (Merrin 2005: 154–6).

Keeping this in mind, my intentions are far from saving the subject, yet I am still using ethnography to provide analytical depth and a nuanced investigation of local contexts. My research is not carried out under a positivist agenda, and I contend that there are differences and reversals in EDM consumption that need to be addressed. In underground scenes, drug/music technologies are used with reflexivity, and deliberate goals of aesthetic fulfilment are to be achieved. While Baudrillard propagates a "radical thought" that is deliberately anti-empiricist and non-representational, his theoretical perspective is reconciled within my methodological agenda. My project explores technological mediations and local contexts, drawing on interviews that are primarily focused on form (technology) instead of content (representation). Following Hennion (2001: 5), my main concern is not with the determinisms or beliefs of participants, but their ways of achieving aesthetic pleasure and their perceptions of the applied media processes.

A Second Life in Consumer Culture

Building on focus group interview fragments, I now turn to one phase of my research focused on recreational drug consumption and its relation to everyday life. Framed by the context of the local scene, the effects of drugs are as integral to the dance floor "vibe" as musical structures and environmental arrangements. Indeed, club culture can be succinctly defined as a "heady combination of dance music . . . and drugs" (Moore 2003: 138). Yet the circulation and use of illegal substances separates clubbing from many other recreational activities or hobbies. Accordingly, my interviewees often note that letting others know about their drug consumption would be received with bewilderment or stigmatisation in many everyday environments.

Even so, consumer culture does promote inversions and transgressions through institutionalised techniques of "controlled de-control" (Featherstone 1991: 81–2). Mike Featherstone traces such techniques to the "carnivalesque" (Bakhtin 1968), arguing that the grotesque bodily processes of the medieval carnival were first excluded from the civilising process of modernity that led to the formation of the middle classes, only to return in the cultural sites and spectacles of consumerism such as theme parks, malls and tourism (Featherstone 1991: 81–2). Erik van Ree (2002: 351–2) argues that as extremely potent products of consumer culture, recreational drugs may immerse the consumer into "dream-worlds" that overshadow the effects of other technologies applied for similarly "hallucinatory" effects. The focus groups of my fieldwork signal that the intense, drug-infused atmosphere of the party may impregnate everyday values and give rise to the intriguing sentiment of leading a covert "second life" that is shared with fellow partygoers. This reflects the detachment of drug consumption from more mainstream social trends, which criminalise or pathologise it, or resimulate it through media panics.[3]

Kane Race (2005) describes recreational drug consumption as "excessive conformity to contemporary consumer culture" while also highlighting the regulative intentions of the state in its attempt to secure a "distinct moral position in the field of pleasure". Van Ree (2002: 351) notes that criminalisation is not applied to substances such as alcohol and tobacco partly because they are also consumed for their taste and smell, and these practices render their use apparently less "wasteful" and therefore more acceptable. However, the consumption of illegal drugs is detached from practices of tasting and smelling and expresses "the desire for pure pleasure, a principled disdain for the useful" (Van Ree 2002: 351). It ultimately provides an intensified self-image of consumer culture, something which the very same culture strives to conceal. This is reflected in the criminalisation of recreational drugs, which, however, renders their use even more desirable for the consumer by reiterating the consumer trend of individualism. "Defiant consumption", Van Ree (2002: 352) concludes, "has become an established aspect of the Western consumer society". Similar to the roller coasters of amusement parks that simulate extreme danger with the minimisation of actual risks, the weekend consumption of party drugs is normalised within EDM scenes and fits into a wider culture of "riskless risk" that repackages risk into the predictable abstractions

of insurance policies, computer games and moral panics (Harley 2000: 86-87). It should be noted however that with certain hallucinogenic drugs, such as LSD, the course of the experience can be highly unpredictable.

The appeal of drugs is enhanced by not only their legislative but also their ontological detachment from everyday practices. Attempting to address the possible ontological status of drug worlds, during a focus group I enquired about *Second Life*, the online virtual world where users interact with each other through "avatars".[4] The expression had been spontaneously applied to techno parties by Stuart, and subsequently adopted by other participants of the same focus group. I was interested if the drug-infused experience of the party could be compared to computer-based virtualisations:

> Q: So you've mentioned *Second Life*, is [the experience] like an online video game?

> Stuart (23): Yeah, for sure. You're literally like . . . an avatar but in a physical space.[5]

Tom Boellstorff (2008: 19) notes in his ethnographic monograph on *Second Life* that online virtual worlds are dependent on the gap between the virtual and the actual. This gap enables a spatial dislocation that is desirable and constitutive of the virtual (users from various actual locations may interact within the same virtual environment) yet may also lead to temporal shifts that may be disruptive (time resists virtualisation and may hinder the interactions of users that live in different time zones). Boellstorff (2008: 105) emphasises that the existence of this gap "is critical: were it to be filled in, there would be no virtual worlds, and in a sense no actual world either". Stuart's words suggest that the consumption of party drugs enables states of self-virtualisation where this gap is eliminated, triggering the paradoxical awareness of a mediated immediacy that meshes together the sensory experience of actual, physical environments with the consumer experiences of mass and online media contents.

To further explore this statement, an analogy can be drawn between the chemical effects of drugs and the semiotic effects of media ads. Party drugs ironically fulfil the promises of happiness, adventure and enchantment that permeate the mediatised context of everyday life. Contrary to advertisements that distribute tautological imperatives coded in the discourse of the brand as self-fulfilling prophecies ratified by the purchase of the customer (Baudrillard 1998: 127–8), widely used recreational drugs such as MDMA and LSD instantly deliver their promise by replacing the sign value of the media with the use value of the chemical effect. Additionally, they cause an intensified and temporary change in the perception of the world that surpasses the more subtle mechanisms of everyday media. In the context of the techno party, the augmentative effect of a cybernetic or virtual "second life" infiltrates the actual experience of the dance floor: "a [cybernetic] avatar but in a physical space".

Stuart's definition of this crossover between the "physical" and the "virtual" also urged me to think about the recreational drug's function as a medium or technology in consumer culture. On a cross-cultural note, in various traditional societies the consumption of psychoactive drugs, such as preparations of hallucinogenic plants including cacti and fungi

among Native Americans, not only disturbs the categories of everyday reality but also takes place in a highly structured, ritualistic framework, and is inseparable from cultural and religious beliefs (Davis 1985). At the symbolic level, traditional rituals provide access to "a world beyond process": by leaving the mundane world behind, the participant can be part of a life-transcending entity (Bloch 1992: 3–4). Contrary to this, the consensual "code" of contemporary Western societies defines the possible effect mechanisms in terms of a molecular process of interaction with serotonin transporters within the body. Further investigation of this molecular mechanism defines the role of everyday reality in the evaluation of the drug effect.

Before this examination I first specify the most prevalent drugs in the scene. The following diagram shows the various substances discussed during the focus groups, ranked according to the frequency of occurrence. The participants were urged to discuss any drugs that they considered relevant.[6]
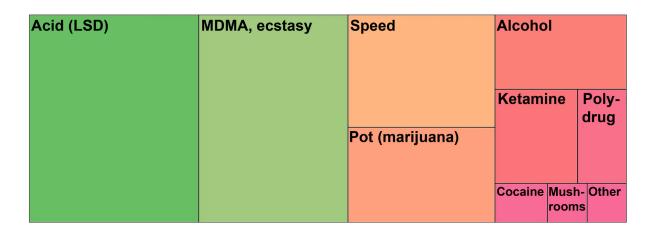

FIGURE 1. SUBSTANCES DISCUSSED DURING THE FOCUS GROUPS.

The most frequently discussed drugs are acid (LSD) and MDMA (the desirable active compound in ecstasy pills), followed by speed (amphetamine) and pot (marijuana). I give particular attention to LSD and MDMA as my fieldwork suggests that speed and pot, in accordance with the diagram, are less relevant in the context of the investigated subsections of the Melbourne techno scene. Both LSD and MDMA can be classified as psychedelic substances. The core group of psychedelics is typically divided into two cohorts: hallucinogenic tryptamines such as LSD; and entactogens such as MDMA (Brandt and Passie 2012: 539).

During the waking states of sense perception, the external sense organs (detectors) collect information from our surroundings which are then transmitted for processing in the brain. LSD and MDMA affect neurotransmitter activities, acting as internal mediators (more precisely as secondary mediators reprogramming the primary mediator of neurotransmission) that alter reality as this is perceived, as opposed to non-altered or

everyday sense perception. Similar accounts were stated by my interlocutors, with one describing the influence of such drugs through the analogy of using coloured sunglasses. While musical mediation at parties—and also the circulation of media signals in day to day environments—originates from outside the physical limits of the body, the drug mediates internally by influencing neural activity, prescribing a deeper and more convincing immersion into one's virtual environment. The process is operational (the intake of the drug is analogous to the push of a button, although the sensory effects are often delayed) and continuous with very limited interruptibility (partygoers are seldom in possession of antidotes that could neutralise or alleviate the effects).

From the current perspective of neuroscience, LSD most probably inhibits serotonergic cell firing and triggers an effect of sensory overload in the brain (Passie et al. 2008). This increases responsiveness to stimuli previously of little significance (Key 1965) leading to dose-dependent distortions in sense perception. Visual distortions are common, as well as auditory alterations.

> Thomas (25): [LSD] can play with your head and make you do, not make you do things, but just focus on a few things. I had some moments where the music just died down all the sudden, and I could just hear everyone's conversation, like really distinctly. . . . I just focused, and just chattering everywhere. I'm just talking to a mate, like why is there so much chattering? [He says:] Ah, it's probably the trips or something. And I'm like: Ah, yeah [laughs]. And it goes on for a good 20 minutes, and finally the music comes back again.[7]

As for MDMA, its street name "ecstasy" refers to its mood-enhancing psychological effects that are primarily mediated by its pharmacological interactions with serotonin and dopamine transporters (Liechti and Vollenweider 2000). The drug is often consumed in recreational settings for its "empathogenic" or pro-social qualities (Bedi, Hyman, and Wit 2010).

> Cooper (35): Proper MDMA, it almost gives you a feeling [that] you're one with everyone. You don't hate your enemies; it really does give you this empathy, whether it's false or not. For the time you're on it, you really just, you can't understand why people fight in the world. . . . And it really shaped the scene, and it really did have a lot to do with the type of people that went there, and you've got to give it credit. You know, it's the reason why there were so many nice people there, and not any fights. But unfortunately, with any kind of amphetamine, there's gonna be a time when it wears off, and people get cranky, and the after-effects [laughs].[8]

The experiences recalled by Thomas and Cooper exemplify some of the general effects of hallucinogenic tryptamines, which may produce profound alterations in the perception of surroundings, and entactogens (or empathogens), which facilitate intimate connection to the subject's social (and musical) environment. Moreover, while the effects of LSD are often unexpected and more influenced by individual set and setting, MDMA shows a more predictable pattern of effects (Brandt and Passie 2012: 539).

MDMA also internalises, intensifies and converts music into heightened bodily sensations or into closed-eye hallucinations, especially with higher doses:

Curtis (31): For me a lot of the time it helped me to . . . literally visualise the music. And I remember one [occasion], it was actually a rave party. . . . There was a point where I actually stopped dancing, and I sat down, on one of the stands inside the arena, and listening to the music, I was really getting into the music. And I just closed my eyes, and there was a very strong visual hallucination. Closed eye visuals, and the music completely guided what was happening in my, you know, visual experience. And I stayed there for an unknown amount of time, and then when I came out of it [I felt] this reconnection of reality that I've never experienced before. One particular experience. For me it was connected to the drug being a visual kind of catalyst. Very strong MDMA.[9]

Curtis evokes a hallucinatory journey within the music that is disengaged from the visual environment of the venue and involves synaesthetic perceptions or mixed sensory experiences. Such perceptions are sometimes triggered by MDMA and are particularly characteristic of LSD consumption. Cretien van Campen (2007: 146) describes synaesthesia as "the result of a stimulation of one sense that results in a multisensory perception": the brain may add, for instance, colours and forms to the experience of the music, from which the music becomes inseparable. The synaesthetic perception is not grounded in an external sense organ, such as the eye or the ear, but operates beneath the senses, similar to a "hidden sense" (van Campen 2007: 158).

Van Campen (2007: 113) notes that the drug-induced synaesthetic experiences of non-synesthetes significantly differ from the perceptions of synesthetes. While actual synaesthesia is, in most cases, an integral part of the subject's everyday life and normal functioning, the drug experiences of non-synesthetes may trigger temporary and haphazard sensory correspondences that differ from their normal states of mind and hence are often perceived as hallucinatory or disrupting (Van Campen 2007: 113). Accordingly, my research suggests that drugs such as MDMA or LSD enable the virtual augmentation or distortion of reality that may lead to the development of new insights and in this case even new senses. Finally, the "reconnection with reality" that Curtis "never experienced before" signals that the individual participants may traverse multiple drug-altered realities (in this case from the synaesthetic experience of the music to the heightened and unique perception of the actual physical environment).

The production of these drug-altered audio-visual effects and feelings takes place in the human brain, and their referent is the (consumer) reality of everyday sense perception that is commonly experienced during the "normal" functioning of the nervous system. By altering the transmission of the message, the medium of the psychedelic drug affects perception in such a way that it temporarily overwrites the real referent, potentiating a raised awareness of the social and cultural conditioning of reality. In certain contexts, the altered state may trigger insightful reflections, and my interview findings generally support

the argument that psychedelics "have the potential to show mind-manifesting properties under appropriate internally and externally supported conditions" (Brandt and Passie 2012: 539). As suggested in the following fragment:

Q: So there's something that, generally speaking, drug use adds to your personality.

Christina (28): Yeah, exactly, it's not only about the music and the gigs.

James (24): Yeah, maybe I'd say as a whole package I guess.

Christina: A package to grow up [laughs].[10]

The subjective interpretation of the drug experience itself may vary among respondents and scenes. In recent research on UK clubbing (Rief 2009), some respondents regarded drug-influenced encounters in clubs as "not real" or illusory in character, while others connected their experiences to "genuine" or "real" feelings. For my interviewees, the internalised drug-medium creates a distorted augmentation of the real (everyday sense perception), with the latter already being affected by everyday media processes. During the experience the effect is either accepted or lived as real (for Cooper, MDMA "really does give you . . . empathy"); or self-reflexively questioned as fake (evident in Thomas' assertion that "it's probably the trips"). This is dependent on substance, set and setting. Following the experience, the drug-influenced perspective is generally considered artificial or fake by my interviewees, as a virtual reconfiguration of actual reality that is strikingly different from everyday environments. In my research the theoretical relevance of these findings resides in the possible connections to Baudrillard's discussions of simulation (1994) and related concepts of virtuality (1997b) and psychedelic violence (2002: 96–101).

Back to the Future: Theoretical Feedback

As indicated by Poster (2001: 133–5), the virtual appears in Baudrillard's writing from the 1990s, first used interchangeably with simulation and gradually connoting an intensification or perfection of simulation through the widespread use of increasingly more immersive environments that require additional human interaction. For Baudrillard (1997b), virtuality pervades everyday reality, where it is for the most part undetectable. In consumer culture, lived experience is necessarily raw material that feeds the virtual. The potential virtualisation of all aspects of life places the virtual camera in our head: we have "swallowed our microphones and headsets" in the obsession for operationalising the world and trapping the real into its hyperreal model (Baudrillard 1997b: 19–20). By the application of this metaphoric imagery Baudrillard highlights the almost invisible influence of mediatisation and virtualisation on the immediate context of everyday life. Yet he denies the possibility of complete virtualisation: a perfect, "high-def" doubling of the world would render the non-virtual useless, effectively eliminating us from the formula or forcing us to retreat into extinction. At the end of this text Baudrillard argues that a complete fulfilment of virtualisation is, fortunately, impossible.

Drug use at techno parties involves the internalisation of an external object that accomplishes the mediatisation of the surrounding reality in the context of a ritual that temporarily enacts a similar condition of "high-def" virtualisation. The lived experience of the party is formed and transformed in "real time" (Baudrillard 1997a: 25): the flow of the (non-)event is mediatised immediately by the drug. Drugs mediate by altering the transmission of neural messages in the brain: this definition situates the effect in the wider context of operationalising or micro-processing human experience through virtualisation technologies:

> The era of miniaturization, of remote control, and of a microprocessing of time, bodies, and pleasure has come. There is no longer an ideal principle of these things on a human scale. All that remains are miniaturized, concentrated and immediately available effects. This change of scale is discernable everywhere: the human body, our body, seems superfluous in its proper expanse, in the complexity and multiplicity of its organs, of its tissue and functions, because today everything is concentrated in the brain and the genetic code, which alone sum up the operational definition of being (Baudrillard 1988: 18).

The chemical model of drugs belongs to the same semiotic system as the genetic code, taking its share of the virtualisation of the world.[11] However, LSD and MDMA both signal a diversion from pharmaceuticals (applied to sustain the healthy model of the body) to recreational drugs (applied as virtualisation technologies to "abnormalise" the body). Similar to the "misuse" of antiquated bass and drum synthesisers by early EDM and Detroit techno producers (Pope 2011: 38), the rediscovery of pharmaceutical drugs as recreational can be regarded as a technological appropriation, with both MDMA and LSD being invented as pharmaceuticals first and then appropriated for other uses (Redhead 1993a; Russell 1993).

On the macro level of social processes, Baudrillard (2002: 97) metaphorically defines recreational drugs as antibodies that are released by the social body in response to the threat of its hyperoperationalisation. Within this biomedical model of the social, drugs emerge as a lesser of two evils: the temporary disturbance of reality through the anomalous effect of drugs expels the overwhelming effect of totalitarian rationalisation, just as "human beings gain effective protection from madness by resorting to neurosis" (Baudrillard 2002: 99). When reality is increasingly pervaded by simulation, so is its antibody, leading to an internal clash within the system: drugs question the sovereignty of the code as an "anomaly becoming institutionalized" (Baudrillard 2002: 100), one which is still reproved in most dominant medical and governmental discourses. This tension between drugs and reality is exploited by techno dance floors, where chemical catalysts actualise the "waveform transmission" (Eshun 1998: 136) of techno tracks within the body, and togetherness is found in the alienating sensation channelled through the music. The repetition of the night out in terms of clubbing leads not only to momentary departure from the real, but creates a prolonged distancing from the everyday as well:

> Stuart (23): Telling people: wow, I'm going to Japan to the most amazing techno festival in the world. They're like: what the fuck are you talking about? . . . That's not the reason I like the music, but I'm sure it contributes something to that feeling that you're finding and exploring something new. Exploring in another life, like pushing boundaries in another world.[12]

Distinct from parties, home listening would constitute an in-between phase, appropriate for actualising the qualities of the music and possibly delivering flashbacks of the music/drug experience. Something is brought back to the everyday from the party, and this also relates to the enduring effect of taking recreational drugs in general, as the perception of everyday reality undergoes alteration. According to respondents, especially in the case of LSD, sensibilities are raised and attention is directed toward "weird things" or surprising associations stirring up the contexts of the everyday. It is as if the naturalising processes of consumer culture would lose from their aura of objectivity, confirming the assertion that the virtualities induced by psychedelics may increase awareness of the cultural conditioning of reality.

This is a significant departure from computer-based virtual worlds such as *Second Life*, where the perceived intimacy and reality of the experiences can be seen an extension of the medium's operation as a means of cultural conditioning. Boellstorff (2008: 239) notes that although the online environment facilitates the development of exotic avatars and unusual structures, during his ethnographic fieldwork he was "struck by the banality of Second Life", reflected in the "mundane creativity, conversation, intimacy, shopping, entertainment, even tedium" of its regular events. Boellstorff (2008: 209–11) suggests that such interactions are impregnated by an ideology of "creationist capitalism" and an economic model of "prosumption", where creativity is celebrated as self-expression and freedom, and consumption as a form of leisure is turned into a form of production with the possibility of actual world profits.[13]

None of my interviewees would consider their psychedelic drug experiences as mundane or financially profitable. Instead, they often evoke extraordinary journeys through virtualised sound- and clubscapes that are far removed from everyday contexts or work environments. Some even claim that techno is more architecture than music in the sense that its effect is an organisation of abstract spatiality rather than narrative temporality—(synaesthetically) intensified at parties by drugs such as LSD and MDMA. During my visit to the Japanese capital in 2012, where I was reading the essay collection of sci-fi writer William Gibson (2012), some of my interlocutors' comments remained vivid in my memory. Focusing on the sequential experience of machinic sounds and rhythm, a journey through the soundscapes of a techno club night could be visualised as a *gaijin*'s (foreigner's) wandering the neon canyons of Tokyo without a native language compass. What prevails here is the fascination with the pattern variations in the sensory overload of neon lights where the advertised messages are incomprehensible or merely add atmospheric effects to the trip. While the Energy Flashes[14] of techno music are much more stark and minimalistic than the kaleidoscopic pulsation of the

Japanese metropolis, its special effects still generate immediate intoxication while on drugs, providing entrance to a hyperreal environment governed by semiotic codes and mediating technologies. Such futuristic visions of the urban nightscape lack divinity: as Gibson (2012: 44) states, the "capital-F Future", which has been a cult for many science fiction aficionados in the 20th century, is now perceivably over. Contrary to the utopian mindset or even religious sentiments of the older generation, 21st century youth are consuming events (or non-events according to Baudrillard) in the mediated context of an "endless digital Now, a state of atemporality enabled by our increasingly efficient communal prosthetic memory" (Gibson 2012: 44). Paul Hegarty (2004: 106) traces Baudrillard's concept of the virtual, among others, to the 1980s cyberpunk sci-fi mapped out by authors such as Gibson. The retro-futurist connotation of the concept resonates well with the mythical Detroit origins of techno, where producers used antiquated and retrofitted electronic equipment in their sonic exploration of post-industrial urban dystopia (Pope 2011).

Finally, I wish to address the significance of the ritual context provided by techno parties in contemporary consumer culture and its deviations from rituals in traditional and non-Western societies. The latter can be typically associated with Baudrillard's concept of the "symbolic". Merrin (2005: 12) shows that the symbolic can be derived from a Durkheimian tradition built around the concept of the "sacred": a state of the divine actualised in traditional rituals that produces the experience of a profound reality which has a transformative power in everyday life. This "symbolic", forming the basis of social interaction and communication in traditional societies, provides the ground for Baudrillard's category of the "real" (used in the sense of an underlying reality),[15] which he situates as a critical foundation against the simulacrum (Merrin 2005: 42). This juxtaposition pervades his whole oeuvre: for example, in a genealogy of the simulacrum Baudrillard (1994: 5) derives the "metaphysical despair" of iconoclasts from the realisation that the power of the image may extend beyond the mere distortion of the Platonic Idea. Thus the image became monstrous as it potentially enabled the dissolution of its original (divine) referent, suggesting "that deep down God never existed, that only the simulacrum ever existed, even that God himself was never anything but his own simulacrum" (Baudrillard 1994: 5).

Rex Butler (1997: 51) notes that much of Baudrillard's writing revolves around this tension between the original and the perfection of its copy. From the moment of its technical perfection the copy no longer constitutes an imitation but a simulacrum that only resembles itself (the relationship is no longer of resemblance but of two distinct originals). Baudrillard's category of the real signifies the very difference or the distinctive essence of the original that permits resemblance and resists the act of copying, becoming an internal limit of simulation. This creates a paradoxical situation because at its best, theory itself constitutes a simulacrum that tries to approach this real that resides outside its grasp. In other words, in this epistemological model "any attempt to speak of [reality] can only turn it into a simulacrum, and . . . reality is the limit to all attempts to speak of it, to turn it into a simulacrum" (Butler 1997: 54). While culture itself is interwoven with simulation processes, Baudrillard suggests, in accordance with his critical position on the side of the symbolic,

that traditional cultures attempted to sustain a symbolic balance with the "unconditional simulacrum" reflecting the reality or the "radical illusion" of the world (Baudrillard 1997b: 18). Elsewhere Baudrillard (1997c: 49) describes this illusion in terms of an unknowable hypothesis of an enabling condition where "nothing is itself, nothing means what it appears to mean". The possibility of illusion is, however, jeopardised with the emergence of the "conditional [or] aesthetic form of the simulacrum" growing out from our current socio-cultural conditions that seeks to reduplicate the real with its hyper-operational model (Baudrillard 1997b: 18).

A contemporary example for this tendency is provided by (online) virtual worlds such as *Second Life.* Boellstorff's (2008: 170) work signals that many residents of *Second Life* consider their online experiences and intimacies as profoundly real and sometimes more real than their actual world counterparts. The foundations of this virtual world are indisputably defined by an underlying code composed of sets of discrete signals (bits) stored on a server farm, which in 2007 approximated a million gigabytes (Boellstorff 2008: 103). Theoretically, it is possible to gain a perfect snapshot of the world in any given moment in time by creating a backup copy of it (the only condition is that the size of the backup storage must equate the storage size occupied by the virtual world). No matter how sophisticated the virtual world becomes, the operational definition of this underlying code remains an internal limit of its system. Boellstorff (2008: 231–2) addresses the ways social forms, interactions and even notions of place and embodiment are encoded into the platform, which suggests that "[v]irtual worlds raise the possibility of a whole new degree of control over culture". At a highly evolved state, the virtual world will seem perfectly real and meaningful for its residents while lacking an essential feature of reality: the enigmatic disputability of its ontological status. This is the "radical illusion" that Baudrillard considers as an indispensable condition of reality and attempts to defend in his work.

While the techno party is situated in the virtual, rather than the symbolic, domain, it may also compensate for the sense of losing touch with the sociality and shared meaning sustained by the symbolic rituals of non-Western societies, not unlike other simulated rituals of consumer culture (Merrin 2005: 26) (while Baudrillard's discussion of the symbolic does betray nostalgia, he also defines this traditional mode of social relations as sustained by rituals that are inherently violent). Thus the weekend warrior of EDM could be compared with the after-hours resident of virtual worlds (or with the sports supporter, or the consumer of community-forging TV shows, etc.). Yet for Baudrillard such mediated communities simulating collective meanings serve as artificial defences of a social system still haunted by symbolic demand, and are inadequate to counter the possible "revenge" of the symbolic through events such as riots and terrorist acts (Merrin 2005: 27). Baudrillard (2002: 96–9) situates the emergence of recreational drugs alongside such violent events: the "psychedelic violence" of drug use might represent a symbolic reaction against the excessive normalisation and rationalisation of the semiotic system. Yet again, drugs have developed into an anomaly that is no longer heroic or subversive, but becoming institutionalised and losing its violence (Baudrillard 2002: 100)—thus reincorporated into the semiotic system

of consumer culture. The remaining question concerns the role of drug consumption after having lost this symbolic edge.

The drug-enhanced EDM phenomenon is not only capable of offering a paradoxical "escape from the objective drudgery of life" (Baudrillard 2002: 99), but it may also contribute to a particularly effective substitution of the symbolic that, in the case of techno, happens in its purest form, stripped bare of messages, focusing on the channelling of intensities. This is the trajectory of the "safe" military campaign where the collision lacks the target, and there are no real casualties. Still, the experience in its drug-mediated intimacy moves beyond the hyperreality of mass and social media simulations, with the brand being abolished, the sign value being substituted by the use value of drug/music technologies, enhancing the simulacrum and transferring it into the bodily experience. Techno is percussion-music, characterised by a structural minimalism that builds on repetition with subtle changes. Similar to Warhol's early soup can series in the visual arts, the music "attack[s] the concept of originality in an original way" (Baudrillard 1997a: 11), opening the doors to a Warholian repetition factory where metrical processes are produced and programmed, comprised of simulated sound patterns arranged into continuous loops of interlinked textures. Of major concern for my interviewees is the experiential incorporation of this "machine-made music that turn[s] you into a machine" (Reynolds 1999: 28) through the "programming" of sounds within their own bodies, a process that is often considered inseparable from actual or recalled drug experiences. The paradox of this mediated immediacy triggers the experience of that cybernetic "avatar . . . in a physical space" that seems to be potent enough for providing my interviewees a transformative profusion of the semiotic that in the Durkheimian tradition was previously characteristic only to the symbolic, thus effectively negating the indispensability of the symbolic in this cultural context. Of course, by referring to the role of simulation processes in the production of the symbolic in traditional rituals, one can also argue that "the symbolic was itself only ever a simulacrum" (Merrin 2005: 38, 41).

Conclusion

For partygoers of the Melbourne techno underground, regular clubbing constitutes prolonged involvement in a series of multimedia performances on the flip side of consumer society. Central to these events is the "vibe" of the party, which is commonly experienced through chemical mediation. This article called for a theorisation of the dance floor in terms of the virtualisation of its immediate environment. While this perspective is not prevalent in EDM studies, it is suited to the close evaluation of the processes that shape experience on electronic dance floors. St John (2012), for example, shows that the vibe of psytrance dance floors is affected through the synchronous use of vocal media samples and the sampling of drugs.

This article contended that the understanding of partygoer accounts such as the virtual "avatar" imagined in a "physical space" is facilitated by the application of Baudrillardian theory to field experiences. In EDM studies Baudrillard's concepts were used in Redhead's (1993b) edited volume on early UK rave where audiences "disappeared" into technological

dreamscapes of sound (Melechi 1993: 34) or surrendered to a complete void of meaning (Rietveld 1993: 65). These texts adopt a macro-level perspective and are less focused on the lived experience of the partygoers or the actual music played at parties.[16] Reading Baudrillard in the light of insider experiences opens up new ways for understanding the intrinsic social and techno-aesthetics of such "hidden populations" (Demant, Ravn and Thorsen 2010: 242). This also implies that the context of EDM studies is beneficial for an empirically based exploration and possible reconsideration of Baudrillard's concepts.

This article began an exploration of the embodiment of virtuality (Baudrillard 1997b) at parties and the psychedelic violence (Baudrillard 2002: 96–101) of related drug use in the context of the Melbourne techno underground. Of particular interest for my research is the conceptualisation of the experience in the context of consumer realities. As an institutionalised anomaly, indeed an "excessive conformity" (Race 2005) to consumer culture, recreational drug use at techno parties allows glimpses into a hyper-operational, "virtual programming of the world" (Baudrillard 1997b: 27). This engagement resonates with early Detroit techno's aesthetic project of becoming "aware of the coevolution of machine and human, the secret life of machines, the computerization of the world" by building "Sonic Fictions from the electronics of everyday life" (Eshun 1998: 103–4). At the same time, psychedelic drugs may act as antidotes to (consumer) reality by raising awareness of its cultural conditioning (Brandt and Passie 2012: 539). My findings suggest that by leading the drug-infused "second life" of clubbing, partygoers often experience an opening up of everyday reality as well, which is then conceived as maturation.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   Focus group (Melbourne), 24 January 2012.
2   Clinique is a world-renowned skincare and cosmetics brand that surrounds itself with the aura of science in terms of its marketing strategy.
3   Throughout the history of EDM, party drug use often contributed to the emergence of new "folk devils" (Cohen 1972) in the media, associated with subsequent criminalisation of parties (Gore 1997: 56–7; Homan 1998: 72; St John 2009: 9–10).

4   Second Life is an online virtual world run by Linden Research, Inc. It is shaped by its residents represented by user-customisable avatars, who are able to buy land, build properties, run businesses, sustain relationships and participate in various other social and economic interactions. Real world businesses and institutions such as nightclubs, restaurants, fashion stores and university campuses may also have a presence in Second Life. The economy of the world is based on the Linden Dollar, which can be converted to real world currency (Descy 2008).

5   Focus group (Melbourne), 14 November 2011.

6   The diagram was created in NVivo qualitative research software, and it is based on manual coding of interview data, which improves the reliability of the findings (Welsh 2002).

7   Focus group (Melbourne), 13 July 2012.

8   Focus group (Melbourne), 24 January 2012.

9   Focus group (Melbourne), 13 July 2012.

10 Focus group (Melbourne), 2 November 2011.

11 The co-discoverer of the DNA sequence, Francis Crick was an occasional LSD user, although contrary to a rumour appearing in the British press after his death, biographical evidence suggests that he was not high during the discovery of the double helix (Ridley 2006: 156–7).

12 Focus group (Melbourne), 14 November 2011.

13 Although Boellstorff (2008: 243) does not consider *Second Life* as a simulation per se because its semiotic referent lies within a virtual environment and not in the actual world, he admits that many of its aspects and interactions simulate actual world conditions. This position can be reconciled with the Baudrillardian theory of the virtual by considering that the perceived reality of the *Second Life* experience is sustained precisely by such simulations, while keeping in mind that the regular events of the virtual world are both separate from and experientially interrelated with the similarly "mundane" actual world experiences (and vice versa).

14 Energy Flash is a classic techno track by Joey Beltram (1990). A looped and distorted vocal sample murmurs "ecstasy" throughout the track, a drug reference celebrated by audiences and claimed accidental by Beltram himself (Church 2009).

15 In Baudrillard's works the term may also refer to the reality of Western consumer culture, where the extensive semiotic production and mediatisation permeates and transforms the lived experience of the everyday with the possibility of overturning it into the hyperreal (Merrin 2005: 32).

16 I propose to address the musical characteristics of techno and their interpretation by partygoers in a future article.

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