Experiencing electronic dance floors

Botond Vitos
Monash University

Abstract
In this paper I illustrate a possible course of analysis of drug-fuelled, genre-related particularities within electronic dance music (EDM), focusing on the embodied experiences of techno dance floors. My intention is to outline some of the starting points of my PhD research exploring Melbourne techno and psytrance scenes, and addressing an experiential dimension interlocked with socio-aesthetic sensibilities intimately related to the inherent structures of the genres. The term “techno” will refer restrictively to its “harder” sub-genres loosely defined along an acid-Detroit-hard-industrial techno axis, which, according to my preliminary observations, attracts a relatively homogenous crowd in Melbourne.

Keywords: electronic dance music; aesthetic experience; techno; ritual; simulation.

Theoretical considerations
As discussed by Ward (1997), the inherent meaning of dance events resides in the embodied experience of dancing. In the case of electronic dance music (EDM), this experiential dimension is closely related to drug consumption, a crucial link in the drug-music-dancers-visuals ensemble providing the ritual context of electronic dance floors (Gore 1997). These rituals often seem devoid of referential messages or detached from textual explanations, as indicated by the music’s lack of lyrics and the scarcity of ideological references. Another characteristic of the genre is its obsession with the raw material of mediated sound and the application of technological effects. The latter is also manifest in drug consumption, the ritual experience being broadcasted through the drug-fuelled medium of the dance floor. These elements seem to carry McLuhan’s (1964) thesis “the medium is the message” to
its extreme by the eradication of the content-message from the formula, and point
towards Baudrillardian simulated territories.

As a starting point, I will briefly reiterate the theory of simulation. Baudrillard
(1993, pp. 50-75) distinguishes three orders of simulacra, exemplified through three
historical periods. The counterfeit is born in the Renaissance, when the circulation
of the signs of distinction is no longer restricted by a strict symbolic or “natural”
order. The second-order simulacrum appears in the industrial era, where the serial
reproduction of identical objects and signs is no longer tied to the natural but to the
market law of value. Finally, the third order emerges when technique as a medium
becomes the principle of a new generation of meaning, and simulation carries out
the production of the real according to the generative core of the model or the
“code”, operating through trajectories such as mass media, binary code and genetic
engineering. Ultimately, the universal reduplication of the real triggers the collapse
of reality into “hyperrealism”, a realm of pure simulation beyond representation.
This brings forth the aesthetic hallucination of reality and the subliminal fascination
with special effects.

Similar to science fiction, Baudrillard’s work can be considered hyperbolic and
futuristic on the grounds that while “utilizing the vantage point of a future intensi-
fication to present social trends”, it neglects other, more traditional aspects of pre-
sent social frameworks (Kellner 1989, p. 203). From this perspective, his work from
the 1970s and 1980s can be regarded more as visionary theory than conventional
social science. Considering that these past visions are crystallised in strongly medi-
ated segments of today’s society such as cybercultural phenomena, and the inherent
concern of EDM resides in manipulating the medium of cutting edge technologies,
many of Baudrillard’s then-futuristic concepts can be usefully applied in the discus-
sion of EDM-related phenomena evolving from the 1980s to the present. Setting out
from the theory of simulation, my PhD project investigates the experiential dimen-
sion of electronic dance floors, taking into account (sub-)genre peculiarities and
processes of technological misappropriation1.

The ritual context of music and drug

Seen through a Baudrillardian lens, EDM production has been governed by simu-
lation from its earliest years, when artists started to “misuse” drum machines and
synthesisers, which were originally designed to substitute for “real” instruments
as counterfeit or representation, to produce simulacra as copies without originals.
Moreover, the inexhaustible manufacturing of repetitive sound patterns in EDM,
traceable to the working mechanisms of the drum machine, are reminiscent of a
possible modality of simulation evoked by Baudrillard (1993, pp. 72-73): the serial
form of models generated in infinite chains, which carries out the murder of the
original through its infinite diffraction into itself – as in Warhol’s pop art. Much of
the characteristic “machinic” sound of EDM is derived from sound patterns return-
ing into themselves and usually aligned to a repetitive flow of bass, which dimin-
ishes temporal referentiality. This structural particularity produces a second modality of simulation in the music.

These mechanisms were already apparent in the early years of EDM in its first manifestations such as house and techno. House music had originally been popular among a hedonistic, gay black community of early 1980s Chicago, and later gained increasing popularity in the UK especially with the advent of acid house, a sub-genre developed by the accidental misuse of the Roland TB 303 synthesiser setting its way the acid sound (Brewster and Broughton 2000, pp. 292 et seq.). Techno, an EDM genre originally related to Chicago house, was invented by the more intellectually oriented middle class black youth of the late 1980s Detroit, relying on influences such as Kraftwerk, funk, European synth-pop, and the post-industrial cityscape of decaying Detroit (ibid., pp. 320 et seq.). In the early 1990s the second wave of Detroit techno artists pushed the music closer to the form as we know it today. Inspired by electro, UK synthpop, industrial and Euro [sic] Body Music, a harsh sound was in development, partly as counter-reaction against the mainstream entertainment industry (Reynolds 1999, pp. 219-220).

After the second wave techno lost popularity among the black inhabitants of Detroit, and due to influences of global EDM culture and geographic/cultural shifts it apparently ceased to be “black” music, with Berlin becoming one of its main global hubs. However, certain Detroit DJs did not even regard techno as a black phenomenon in the first place (May 2006, pp. 345-349). A similar detachment from black realities is discussed in More brilliant than the sun: Adventures in sonic fiction, a book by Kodwo Eshun (1998) on the musical manifestations of black science fiction sensibilities. Eshun situates Detroit techno within the context of Afrofuturism, which, in contrast with, for example, the street reality of mainstream hip-hop, is engaged with the unreality-principle of a sonic science developing the “alien discontinuum” of machine music. With techno, according to Eshun (1998, p. 107), “the machine goes mental”, it “turns the soul into sound-fx” and burns out colour. Eshun notes that there was a general confusion about the skin colour of the first Detroit techno producers.

In this way EDM has been signalling from its earliest forms the emancipation of the medium. It not only started to use the drum machine and the turntable – and, later on, the computer – as a musical instrument, employed according to the principle of simulation, but in its present form it also disintegrates the aura of (urban) reality with the sparks and flashes of a nocturnal clubbing environment morphed into hyperreality by means of an additional mediating agent: the drug. Drug consumption at electronic dance parties differs from the ritualised drug use in traditional societies where, as Bloch (1992, pp. 3-4) clarifies, the explanation - or content - of the experience is connected to the terms of an external, symbolic realm of representation building up the transcendental frameworks of society. At parties the modified context of consumption dissolves this content-referent and triggers the engagement with the medium of drug technologies itself. In the following sections I argue that party drug use can be understood as a particular form of consumption which is both
generated and condemned by contemporary society, and evades the category of the transcendental.

Reflecting on the saturation of the world of consumption, Baudrillard (2002, pp. 97-99) discusses drug use as “both apogee and parody of the same consumption”. Rather than being linked to disadvantaged socio-economic conditions, recreational drug use derives from an over-capacity for organisation and rationalisation, or an over-protection of the social body. In the case of societies strongly affected by simulation, this overregulation is carried out not by the political absolutism of a repressive regime but by the invisible penetration of a Baudrillardian “code” which determines the semiotic hierarchy of signs. Drug use takes the aesthetic hallucination of a simulated reality to its extreme, ultimately providing an intensified self-image of consumer society, something which the very same society strives to conceal (van Ree 2002). This results in legislative criminalisation and mass media stigmatisation, which, however, renders the drug even more desirable for the drug/music consumer because it reiterates the consumer ethos of standing apart from the crowd. Hence the Baudrillardian code simulates the potential of leaving the system behind by means of a social metalanguage (the perceived independence of the music scene is cherished by the criminalisation and stigmatisation of a normative function), replicating its critique and twisting back to its very own (amplified) categories (individualities constructed through hedonistic consumption).

Furthermore, as a communal reflex of misbehaviour or as a publicly condemned but nevertheless increasingly institutionalised, built-in anomaly, drug use protects society from the dangers of universal normalisation (Baudrillard 2002, pp. 97-100). When society is becoming too transparent, drugs work, in their ambiguity and haziness, as both disease and medicine. Where does this ambiguity derive from? First, the detachment from everyday practices enhances the potential of drugs as third-level simulacra. Colourful pills and powders are detached from the greyness of their everyday environment, and potentially reconfigure the context of surrounding reality according to their internal (molecular) codes. In fact, the drug acts as a particularly powerful medium of the cybernetic age. Baudrillard (2002, p. 179) defines the computer not as external object but as “true prosthesis” standing in intersensory relation with the user who becomes an ectoplasm of the screen. This is reminiscent of Brian O’Blivion’s statement from Cronenberg’s (1983) movie Videodrome: “The television screen is the retina of the mind’s eye, therefore the television screen is part of the physical structure of the brain”. However, the offline physical space wedged between the screen and the human body points at the hyperbolic nature of these statements. In the case of drug consumption this physical distance is eliminated, the mechanism is intensified and can be taken quite literally, because unlike the screen phosphors or pixels, the molecular formula of the drug penetrates the structure of the body in its empirical verifiability. The object is internalised physically by the subject, and the consensual code of contemporary Western society prescribes the possible effect mechanisms in terms of a molecular process of interaction with serotonin transporters within the body.
However, contrary to most contemporary simulation processes which are masked under the alibi of objectivity, the powerful drug effect tears up this cover as it disturbs and overwrites the sign systems of the everyday. This was suggested by the interviewees of my MA research on the Czech psytrance scene, who claimed that the psychedelic drug effect produced the illusion of a “deeper” reality only in the first phase of their “career” of drug consumption. After more prolonged use, the attentive user may realise the artificiality of the process, which, however, at this point turns the objective reality of his everyday world into simulacrum (Vitos 2010). Of course, the subjective interpretation of this effect may vary. In a recent research on UK clubbing (Rief 2009), some respondents regarded drug-influenced encounters in clubs as “not real” or of illusory character, while others connected these to “genuine” or “real” feelings; some clubbers gave account of enabling/transformative experiences, others of victimisation by disabling effects such as loss of control (ibid., pp. 110 et seq.). The responses commonly expressed reactions to a blurring between the boundaries of reality and illusion, and the disturbance of perceived categories of authenticity and reality.

**Experiencing Techno**

The remainder of this paper focuses on the “harder” techno sub-genres that are addressed by my PhD research and attract a relatively homogenous crowd in Melbourne. Accordingly, I will use the term “techno” restrictively to its sub-genres loosely defined along an acid-Detroit-hard-industrial techno axis.

In his musicological analysis, Butler (2006) identifies techno tracks as excessively loop-based, linear and static in design, with their basic shape often lying unfomed, and awaiting sculpting by the DJ by means of mixing and effects technologies. Perhaps the most popular drug of global techno dance floors is MDMA, widely known as ecstasy for its intensive and euphoric sensory effects. Yet the music-governed ecstasy of the techno dance floor becomes restricted and controlled, not dominated by dramatically articulated formal features or obvious climactic builds characteristic of some other EDM (sub-)genres such as trance or progressive house. Rather, it follows a modular flow of percussion-based, interlinked textures which may gradually progress toward high levels of intensity and complexity, but are always directed by the rumbling ground level of minimalist rhythmic interactions. Through its excessive structural minimalism and focus on percussive elements, the music opens the doors to a Warholian Factory where metrical processes are produced and programmed, comprising of simulated sound patterns arranged into continuous loops of interlinked textures.

It is on the level of these sonic interactions that techno aims to traverse beyond the boundaries of third order simulation by colliding seismic (sound-)waves toward an inward explosion. Cracking the shell of the simulated objectivity building up contemporary urban spaces, the medium spectacularly unfolds from its own reflections, revealing the generative processes of a governing Baudrilardian code. For the drug-fuelled partygoer, this may happen through gradual aural assaults or the ste-
Reophonic interlocking of minimalist textures of sound and visuals, where each pixelated layer simulates a divergent plane of space/time. In a broader socio-cultural context, if present everyday reality indeed tends to collapse into the hyperreal, the creative combination of powerful modules of simulation such as music and drug technologies may open up the multi-sensory perception of an environment developing the complexities of Baudrillardian simulacra.

Such expansion takes place on the testing grounds of techno parties, where the partygoer is overwhelmed by the effects of a medium which in this case is explicitly the (only) message. The dance floor, similar to the technological and psychedelic fantasy of Coppola’s (1979) *Apocalypse now* in Baudrillard’s (1994, p. 59) interpretation, becomes an “extension of war through other means”. This happens in a form of a sonic warfare inherent in simulation technologies: a subliminal martial art governed by the flux of special effects and rhythmic energies, mirrored in the regulated choreography of the dancers. This is a collision with no opponents or targets on post-Apocalyptic landscapes defined by a rigorous soundtrack, a dramatization of the man-machine interaction through careful programming of the body according to technological codes.

Such sensibilities can be traced back to Detroit techno, the first manifestation of the genre, produced predominantly by black DJs. Pope (2011) shows how its development was organically embedded in the bleak, post-industrial cityscapes of a Detroit affected by recession, with one of the primary venues in the early 1990s being the Packard auto plant, once proud manufacturer of luxury vehicles. While punk rails against the end of history through its “no future” ethos, Detroit techno blips, bleeps and grooves, or moves further by initially accepting the end and exploring dystopias similarly to black science fiction portraying worlds after the occurrence of the disaster (Pope 2011).

The engagement with a “forever war” in second wave Detroit techno is most apparent in the military aesthetics employed by the collective Underground Resistance (UR), considered by one of its founders an “electronic continuation” of war (Sicko 2010, p. 105). This leads back the discussion to the analogy with *Apocalypse now*. Baudrillard (1994, pp. 59-60) argues that the film transplants totalitarian governmental power into mediated mechanisms, with both war and film acting as testing grounds of cutting edge technology and special effects. Coppola’s (1979) work releases a cinematic power that overshadows military complexes and culminates with the victory of America, as the medium overtakes reality and the film becomes the extension of war. In the early 1990s UR is engaged in a similar process of military expansion, yet instead of radiating the omnipresence of governmental power, it is connected, in the words of Eshun (1998, p. 10), to “the secret life of machines which opens up the [...] coevolution of machines and humans in late 20th C Black Atlantic Futurism”. In other words, instead of acting as an extension of the consensual semiotic code regulating “objective” reality, it shows that the real is unreal as it “builds Sonic Fictions from the electronics of everyday life” (ibid., p. 63) or migrates severely regulated machinic processes to simulate abduction by a post-human, alien agency inherent in Afrofuturist machine music.
The revolving techno record turns the listener, in the words of Eshun (1998, p. 79) “into its own obedient satellite” – and on the dance floor, enhanced by drug technology, it contributes to the simulation of a post-human universe inherent in agents of mediation such as the music and the drug, giving rise to the aesthetic experience. Within the music played at techno parties the “alien” sentiment prevails: those I have interviewed within the Melbourne scene emphasised the need for something uncomfortable, for a play with strange sounds and rhythmic structures generating feelings of confusion. Accordingly, Butler investigates the evolution of multilayered textures in techno where musical texture is always intertwined with rhythmic and metrical processes. Within a rigorous, seemingly restrictive context of pure-duple meter, complex dissonances are created, for example, by repeating non-congruent loops over long spans of time, ultimately generating metrical dissonance emancipated from any need to resolve (Butler 2006, pp. 166 et seq.).

Within a soundscape dominated by machinic effects, this draws the focus away from the productive mechanisms of industrial processes, and opens up a psychedelic space disrupting understanding through peculiar arrangements of repetitive structures. In my interviews it was stated that unlike psychedelic genres such as psytrance which build up narratives leading the recipient, techno lacks such storylines or journeys and simply creates spaces of the unknown: the collision lacks the target. This confusion arises from surprising events in the flow of music, allowing the mind to wander and try to fill the gaps, or hear things that are non-existent in the tracks.

Hennion (2003, p. 90) argues that taste is an accomplishment conditioned by the contexts of pleasure: “[A] strange activity, the conditions of which are continuously discussed” – and therefore developed. The club provides a particularly dense space for a “collective redistribution of creation” (ibid., p. 91) involving the active influence of mediatory agents through which such actors as the public or the generative code of technology are manifest. As a web of interconnected satellites revolving around the turntable, re-experiencing contemporary ramifications of an aesthetics that was broadcast from Detroit to Berlin in the nineties, techno partygoers thus partake in the ongoing evolution of human-machine interactions.

ENDNOTES
1. My ongoing PhD project “Experiencing electronic dance floors: A comparative approach” is aimed to carry out the comparative analysis of two Melbourne scenes based around two distinct EDM genres: techno and psytrance. The research is conducted under the supervision of Shane Homan and Stuart Grant, at Monash University, Melbourne.

REFERENCES


Butler, Mark J. 2006. *Unlocking the groove: Rhythm, meter, and musical design in electronic dance music*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington, IN.


