

e is for *Ekstasis*

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Dance culture is interesting for its journeys through sound and explorations into bodily expression, but also for the numerous sites of cultural activity that have grown up with it or been inspired by its example. Debate all too often focuses on the question of its association with the drug 'ecstasy', however. In what follows I seek to shift the terrain away from pharmacology by investigating ecstatic dimensions that do not come in tablet form. This has required an extensive philosophical discussion to develop terms adequate to the task, although I try to balance this with a consideration of concrete events, wherever possible discussing events I have experienced at first hand.

Traditional cultural critique has drawn on the notion of *authenticity* to oppose the tendency of capitalism to reduce all social interaction to commodity relations of universal equivalence. This, it is claimed, drives all experience towards the meaningless exchange of commodities, and renders the genuine expression of the actors' social conditions impossible. Any attempt to subvert this order quickly gets 'recuperated', resulting only in a strengthening of the capitalist machine.

This strategy then would have us *protect* culture from capitalism's tendency to subvert its codes and undermine its points of reference. But in doing so it only serves to provide the support that capitalism needs to progress. Capitalism needs a continual supply of new markets, and it is through developing new sites of meaning that new markets are opened up. It is the practices of knowing and naming with which we deal with culture that create these spectacular sites of cultural meaning. And, apart from certain sections of the media, no-one does this so well as those academics who build careers out of searching out and naming new sites of resistance or authentic culture in the name of a politics of liberation.

An alternative strategy that is perhaps more appropriate to an age of nihilism is to work from within so as to 'push that which wants to fall'. Rather than clutch at the elusive straws offered by a past we never had, seek points of departure within the potentials of the present. Instead of placing hope in a future liberation, exploit folds or fissures within the machine where new autonomies can flourish today.

A term that may be articulated against the technologies of the present without drawing us into a dialectical, and so ultimately self-defeating, opposition is *ekstasis*. This is the original Greek word for 'ecstasy'. It was reanimated by Martin Heidegger, in whose philosophy it stands for a difference or a standing out from the surface of life's contingencies that allows a more profound contemplation of Being. Heidegger considered this to be the fundamental ontological principle of human Being, the most essential dimension or dynamic of human existence, and yet to be compromised by the technologised existence of modern life, which does not give people the chance to stand apart from the discourses and practices in which they are ensnared.

This may seem an inappropriate term for a cultural site edified for its hermeneutic depthlessness. House is the dark side of critical theory's dystopic moon. It has flowered on the barren ground consequent upon the death of aura and authenticity: house is not art *in* the age of mechanical reproduction, it is the art *of* the age of mechanical reproduction. It is a celebration of the texture of expression, a manipulation of sounds and a soliciting of

distortions: the medium is the message, and its mutation the mode. But here I want both to place under question the easy assumption of an insipid postmodernism and to depart from the heights of Heideggerian philosophy and rearticulate a theorisation of *ekstasis* in accordance with the concerns and considerations of dance culture itself.

In this paper I shall be using 'house' as an inclusive term for what has come to be termed 'dance music' and 'dance culture'. In doing so I am following the use of the term prevalent in the UK between roughly 1988 and 1991, the period which provides most of the inspiration to this paper. I shall thereby depart from an understanding of house as one specific genre of dance music. This creates some strain in the text when I discuss the evolution (or involution) of the various genres, but this is a strain that is already present in the cultural field.

House Without a Home

To understand the kind of escape that *ekstasis* offers, we first need to understand the general predicament of the modern individual.

It is revealing to consider the genealogy of the meaning of the word 'ecstasy': it has changed from denoting religious revelation to signifying a mixture of intense pleasure and loss of control (usually sexual or drug induced). What is important is not the religious aspect, but that it has degenerated from a life affirming experience fundamental to one's orientation to the world to a casual and inconsequential psychological state. Indeed, the meaning has strayed even further from that of any significant lived experience with the word coming to denote a means by which this state is achieved, namely the drug methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA). To say that this amounts to a degeneration is not to criticise a particular technology (MDMA), but to criticise the general technologisation of modern life.

Whilst we might be dissatisfied with the condition of modernity, it would be a mistake to call for a return to a pre-modern form of life. The ecstatic mode is less of a lost past than a potential which lies dormant in the present, blocked both by modernity and by the hallucinogenic visions of the Good Life with which modernity is opposed. To turn to *ekstasis* is to (re)turn to a mode of existence which we have forgotten - which we have written off as *mere* pleasure, not worthy to be treated as a serious concern, and as an exception or extreme, as something extraneous to day to day existence.

But a turn to *ekstasis* is not intended to rescue our humanity - quite the reverse. For it is our humanity, and specifically the puritan self, that holds our desire in suspense, and which would be undone by a resurgence of *ekstasis*. 2000 years of Christian history has burnt DEBT into our flesh. Under capitalism this heritage is reanimated such that the same expenditure is seen not as atonement or penance for an original or prior sin, but as the price of the pleasures and securities which we naturally lack. Under the cover of the seemingly benign discourse of needs and wants, desire is driven towards a negative determination.

The deliberate creation of lack as a function of market economy is the art of a dominant class. This involves deliberately organising wants and needs amid an abundance of production; making all of desire teeter and fall victim to the great fear of not having one's needs satisfied.¹

Lack actively structures the subjectivity of the modern individual, resulting in Nietzschean terms in a reactive, slave mentality, where action is guided not by its own propensities, but by a resentful reaction against its environment. This is not just a matter of individual angst, however, but of the determination of desire by social codes: blocked up and hemmed in,

¹ Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, (University of Minnesota, 1983), 28, 35-6

desire is channelled down prescribed routes, unable to follow the trajectory of its own potential.

This is a dilemma which will not be answered by political means, which operate at the level of calculative rationality. This itself drives desire towards stasis and only serves to reproduce the dominant mode of organisation and investment of desire. As opposed to introducing an extra level of codification - as a political intervention would do - it is only through scrambling the social codes that desire can be let loose.

But to say that politics is inadequate to this task and call for an intervention in the structuring of desire is not to invoke a naive politics of self-expression. It is rather to confront questions of unconscious desire that are effaced or ignored by standard modes of political action. This is thus what Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari refer to as *micropolitics*. This involves a thinking of desire as a positive and primary field of forces which underlies subjectivity and the derivative determinations of need, and which is not restricted to the internality of the human subject, but directly invests the social field. These forces are a conjunction of intensity of desire and direction of desire. The rationalist ego represents a sedimentation of these forces in which they are pinned down and secured against their own tendency to divert.

In dance the body stands forth and becomes ecstatic. If the self is a sedimentation of a certain stable alignment of forces, the ecstatic body sets those forces loose. To lose the self, then, is not just an abandonment of rational thought, but a positive freeing of the forces that traverse the body. *Ekstasis* exposes the body to its own finitude, by taking emphasis away from the body as an object and placing it on the body as the unstable intersection of these forces. The ecstatic body is constantly unfolding: completed only by death, a body's inner most nature is to differ from itself, to break with the present, to stand out from the norm.

Much is made of such a 'loss of self' on the dancefloor. But it should be noted that we are witnessing a generalised loss of self both on and off the dancefloor. The self that is 'lost' on the dancefloor is neither abstract nor eternal, but the historical product of a puritan heritage - and this heritage is in crisis. Amidst a generalised loss of meaning, the modern subject is cut adrift, disorientated and unsure.

But while some shift the features of the cultural landscape around in a postmodern pastiche, for others irony doesn't signal detachment. On the other side of nihilism new formations are emerging, this time exploiting the faultlines in the cultural landscape by slipping through the gaps. Ecstatic dance offers one such line of flight. Dance culture exploits the power of music to build a future on the desolate terrain of the present.

it may be that the sound molecules of pop music are at this very moment implanting here and there a people of a new type.²

This autonomy exacerbates the insecurity of traditional power centres - from international corporations to local politicians - and thus invites reprisals. Steering a course between *flight* ('dreams are not enough') and *protectionism* ('don't protect it, let it loose'), house builds a space which functions by an independent logic - and which is thus hidden by virtue of being incommensurable and protected by virtue of being unassimilable. This explains its enigmatic relation to the postmodern world of which it is a part: at the same time as being a method of escape, house has provided many with their only home, a source of meaning in a meaningless world.

Music is a force of making mobile. It carries an unrivalled force of breaking the restraints imposed by an environment, of uprooting and setting things in motion. But at the same time

² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, (Athlone, 1988), p.346

the practices of taking up the music and making it one's own (listening, dancing, playing, producing, promoting/organising) yield a sense of belonging and a space in which to dwell. This is more than metaphorical excess when it comes to house music. The history of house can be seen as an answer to the command to *turn this house into a home*.

The present privileges enjoyed by club culture had to be fought for. It was only through the struggles of the early pioneers that a space was created within the socius for a nondenumerable cultural site: the relaxation in the licensing of night clubs took place only to 'defuse the acid bomb.' I do not wish to fetishise the efforts of any one set of 'pioneers', however. It is only retrospectively that their actions seem heroic, and the greatest pioneers are not necessarily those who do it first.

In my case even the possibility of fighting these battles presupposed prior struggles. I was the DJ at the first regular house club in Leeds, the 'acid blues' Twilight Zone.³ This gave house the chance to establish itself and develop the strength needed to take on the establishment. But it managed this by inserting itself into the space created by the West Indian sound-system culture of all night parties ('blues'), and was wholly parasitical on the prior efforts of the West Indian community in Chapeltown to persuade the police to back off. This space has now effectively been closed down - although this is more a result of the ravages of crack-cocaine on the inner city than of police action.

In addition to such concrete ways in which house has built a home, dance itself is an articulation of belonging in the sense of an existential projection, the negotiation of Being through the expression of individual style (in the sense of the playing out of one's being-in-the-world). The music is an environment, a house in which one can dwell. And it is through the dance that this house may be turned into a home:

This mutation [of secondary production - the dance] makes the text [the music] habitable, like a rented apartment. It transforms another person's property into a space borrowed for a moment by a transient.⁴

In moving with the music the dancer becomes a transient, a *nomad*. Just as Australian aborigines sing up the ancestral territory as they travel the songlines, so ecstatic bodies create their own world through the dance. The change is from a sedentary structure of desire, determined through a negative reaction to a hostile outside, to a nomadic structure wherein desire is guided by the features of the landscape themselves. The difference is in the relation between the site of belonging ('house') and the belonging pertaining to it ('dwelling'). A nomad is never without a house - for he takes it wherever he goes - but that house is constantly driven on, never reaching the stasis of a final resting point. And this continual slippage means that the nomad is constantly faced with the task of turning the house into a home. Only for a nomad is the question of dwelling so immediate.

Nomadic mobility cannot be taken for granted, however. Modernity suppresses the potential for *ekstasis* through the insistence of its time of continuity. If there is to be any actualisation of the potential for *ekstasis* in the present the temporal structuring of experience must be contested. Walter Benjamin noted that a general prerequisite for an action-event to affect the world rather than just perpetuate its constrictions is that it must be wrested from the present of historical continuity by a 'blasting apart' of the 'empty, homogeneous time' (calendrical or clock time) that serves only to mask and prolong injustices.⁵ Benjamin's

³ I was no pioneer, however. The credit must go to Jungle Warrior sound system and the urban warriors who provided the energy and attitude to go with it. More than anyone, Angela Cameron was responsible for teaching Leeds how to let it loose.

⁴ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (University of California Press, 1988), p.xxi

⁵ See 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, (Schocken: New York, 1968). This text has been referred to as 'a handbook for urban guerrillas.'

primary concern was with the possibility for political action, but the same temporal considerations apply in the case of *ekstasis*. The ecstatic dance is not in itself political, but it is a *micropolitical* event - an intervention in the structuring of desire. This requires that the chains of the rationalist ego be broken, and these chains are linked by time.

It is in the resolute encounter of entering the dance that the individual is blasted apart and given anew. Time is given a shock, shattering the coincidence of past-present-future and opening up the crack of time from which dancing bodies issue forth. This is the moment of the present's differentiation from itself: the crack of time is the fracture between past and future that is the condition of creativity and change.

This moment is that of the dancer confronting the limit of pure possibility; the point of indiscernibility at which intensity reaches a vanishing point amongst its background conditions. The disappearance into the singular field of the music is articulated within a general becoming-unlimited, by which the identities and hierarchies of the ego are abandoned. At this point both self and others disappear together. Indeed, the categorical distinction between Self and Other itself disappears, releasing a profound sense of unity.⁶

In entering the dance bodies are lifted out of themselves and onto a plateau at which they confront the externality of the potentials and directionalities of the music. In this collective moment bodies become one with the music, each distinct gesture the fractal-expression of the singular sonic algorithm. This convergence is not-yet an identity; it is rather that music and body enter into a zone of proximity with each other, such that each term becomes indiscernible from the other. This is a reciprocal relation wherein the musical flow is actualised as body-music: music becoming embodied in dance, dancers becoming disembodied as music. These are the two sides of a singular symbiotic relation or block of becoming: 'block is formed, essentially mobile, never in equilibrium.'⁷ This doubled structure of becoming ensures that this is an *unnatural participation* rather than a return to either a primitive-tribal or natural-infantile state. The externality of the field of music opens up experience to the contingency of the world, thus supplying a vehicle for a becoming-other of the body.

House functions by taking a simple melody or unit of sound (a refrain), setting it in motion, weaving it through a rhythm: 'what is necessary is a simple figure in motion and a plane that is itself mobile.'⁸ This mobility ensures that the refrain is always in excess of the structure, able to stand out from its environment. It is out of this ecstatic distance that its affects are produced: set loose from any determining context, the refrain is able to assert itself all the more forcefully in the instant of its recurrence, its power amplified by its simplicity and space. It draws a zone of consistency, a territory, but only in the ambiguity of a territory unsure of itself, perpetually in motion. It is a nomadic block of space-time, a house without a home (HWH).

Swept up and carried off, dancing bodies move with the drift, across peaks and plateaus, in a journey with no destination, just the intensity of the musical moment. The musical energy solicits a floatation of the senses: all determination, 'everything that roots each of us in ourselves, in our morality'⁹ is abandoned as the body enters this zone of proximity with the

⁶ We must be wary when talking of unity, in case this is taken to imply a reduction to the Same, in the same way that the Nazi's channelled the 'collective fascination' of music towards the affirmation of the race at the Nuremberg rallies. Hitler was well aware of the power of amplified noise: 'Without the loudspeaker, we would never have conquered Germany.' Adolph Hitler, *Manual of German Radio*, 1938. Quoted in Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, (Minnesota, 1985). What distinguishes ecstatic dance from the Nuremberg shuffle is that the former constructs a unity only through an affirmation of the difference of the body: it is a unity which does not add up.

⁷ Deleuze & Guattari, 1988, p.305.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.344.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.279.

music. 'By process of elimination one is no longer anything more than an abstract line, or a piece in a puzzle that is itself abstract.'¹⁰

House music has no 'message' and does not 'represent' the social conditions of the participants. Words do not feature in house - or, at least, not as themselves. What lyrics there are have invariably been converted into musical elements which carry no epistemological content. In general we may say 'house music makes no sense.' And yet that does not mean that it is *meaningless*. If we challenge the view which sees meaning as exclusively propositional and accept a wider definition of meaning as 'a relationality between subtle patterns of matter ... and the faculties of constitution,'¹¹ we see that the dancefloor is a space filled with meaning:

The different processes of perception and interpretation that go into hearing music generate an experience which repeatedly must be seen as one of meaning - as more than just raw gusts of emotion - even though the meaning is not capable of being translated into propositions.¹²

On the dancefloor there is a disappearance of language, and a disappearance from language: the subject of enunciation becomes inoperative, and hence so does the force of objectification that it carries. Neither subject nor object exist in music. This adds to music's effect of displacing the primacy of vision and rendering the objectifying gaze redundant. This is not to deny that the floors of many night clubs are filled with spectacular glamour. But this usually represents a recolonisation of the dancefloor by the male gaze and is not an inherent tendency of acoustic space, itself 'boundless, directionless, horizonless, the dark side of the mind.'¹³

The unnatural participations are intensified by the inhuman sounds of electronic music. The tonalities and structures of traditional music are limited by the parameters of the instruments on which it is played. Electronic music on the other hand sets tonality loose (releasing creativity from the *discipline* - and exclusivity - of musicianship). The alien aesthetic of techno in particular operates explicitly through the deterritorialisation of sonic matter, creating unsettling sonic profiles that defy any easy emotional response. And, pushing contemporary sound technologies to their extremes, drum'n'bass (or 'jungle') predicates its aesthetic upon the infinite extension, decomposition and recontextualisation of the sonic instant. A sample is 'time-stretched' (lengthened without change in pitch, robbed of its temporality) and then broken down into the sonic shards from which the rhythmic shapes and proliferating textures are built.

Here music is an *environment*. Form and content implode to leave a flat intensive surface, with musicality more a matter of texture (the *grain of the machine*) than of progression or tonal harmonics. In a similar way to which Brian Eno's Ambient music presents compositions which work on and with a particular location, musicianship becomes a craft of sculpting sounds to engage with the energetic surface of the crowd - the aim not intellectual refinement, so much as bodily mobility. Under the impersonal address of the PA it is no longer necessary to strain the ears and focus the mind. Instead one can feel the musical energy traverse the body, and surrender to its flow.

As architecture is 'frozen music' (Schelling), so the soundscape is *fluid*. Though house is an affirmation of the instant, it is not a collection of separate moments but a continuous flow. Whilst many affects result directly from the intensities and textures of the sounds, others

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.279.

¹¹ Justin Barton, *Immanence, Will to Power, Eternal Recurrence*, (unpublished doctoral research, University of Warwick, 1995), p.5.

¹² *Ibid*, p.5.

¹³ Marshall McLuhan, *Counter Blast*, (Rapp & Whiting, 1970), p.13.

follow from the dynamics of the overlapping and intertwined plateaus, which are placed one over the other *in the mix* to create a singular dynamic field. In the studio different elements are layered and juxtaposed, whilst the basic frontline unit of two record decks and a mixer allows the DJ to seamlessly blend sounds in a running mix, or contrast and disrupt in a cut and paste pastiche - refusing the art work any unity or completion, submerging the art 'object' within the *process* of 'working' the floor (DJ terminology).

Since the first time Kraftwerk left the stage and let the drum machine do its thing, repetition has been central to electronic music. Building on the minimalist beats aesthetic developed by the early deck pioneers (who played drum breaks back to back using two copies of the same record), machines which failed in their representational function of simulating real instruments¹⁴ were used to construct a new paradigm characterised by intensive, insistent rhythms. This has resonated with a beats philosophy that traces its origin to tribal ritual and which has marked both the cultural impact and aesthetic of dance music. In this, rhythm is not restricted to a discrete realm of aesthetic contemplation or pleasure, but directly invests the field of lived experience.¹⁵ All action-events have rhythm, a 'way of flowing', just as the body has its own ingrained, 'natural' rhythms (breathing, walking). By creating a sphere of play and experimentation that is fundamentally rhythmic, the music can set up interference patterns that excite the body at the same time as instilling a *zen*-receptivity free from the inhibition of the mind.

With relentless machinic repetition, what used to imply a lack of change becomes the very condition of change, as innovation enters between the beats. Each beat is a sonic missile which cuts into the fabric of narrative continuity, punctuating time and soliciting change. In the continuous 4/4 time of house the main beat propels you forward while cross rhythms pull at you from the sides, distortions and contrasting rhythmic motions toying with your expectations by creating tension and strain.¹⁶ This regular structure can inhibit sonic expression (as is all too often the case), but can also supply a platform from which to depart - both in dance and through disruptions of its rigidly quantised structure in syncopation and swing. Whilst the time structure maintains the regular flow, the spaces between the beats can trip you up and undermine the security of a regular pulse.

These are general points, although their specificity varies across domains. Whilst house and techno play with continuity, jungle is a play on continuity, picking you up just to drop you down, haunted by the reverb, and then catching you with another break before you can fall back to earth. Fusing the hyperintensity of hardcore with a ragga bassline playing at half the speed, jungle raises rhythmic complexity to a new plane, cultivating chaos in its disjointed exploration into the genetics of the percussive code.¹⁷ From the dancefloor pragmatics of DJ Hype to the erudite musings of Squarepusher, jungle's broken beats and fractured soundscapes refuse any moment of harmony or resolution, demanding a very different kind of attention to that of the disco trance. In contrast, a tune like Lil Louis' *French Kiss* (Diamond Records, 1989) is an endlessly repeated loop with only minor modulations in texture and tone. This simplicity greatly enhances the potential of the running mix: less

¹⁴ A special case is the Roland TB-303 which functioned by breaking down: notoriously bad at what it was designed for (simulating bass-guitar lines), it was very good at making mistakes. Its programming procedures were so complex that the operator's intentions would become lost and unexpected results appear out of the confusion - with the mistakes proving more interesting than what was intended. Soon the misuse became the norm, as the unique squelching sounds produced by its filters came to define a whole genre of music - acid house. Like the drum-machine which kick-started the house revolution, the Roland TR-808, it was bought cheap on the second hand market following its premature discontinuation because of its failure to emulate real instruments.

¹⁵ Art and artist are modern inventions.

¹⁶ Not to be confused with the dramatic tension aiming at resolution that is common in Western music.

¹⁷ Rather than programming just synthesised drum sounds, samples of drum patterns are used, each one a window onto a different temporality. Just as the genealogy of house is intimately related to the accessibility of synthesisers and drum-machines, so is the development of jungle intimately related to the availability and creative application of digital sampling technology.

determined by the structure of the record, the refrain is able to drift in and out, such that its point of entry is forgotten, its direction lost.

After catching the critics off-guard, jungle has since found favour with the music intelligencia. But it is not its 'sophistication' which is radical, but the fact that it took the body poetics of house and the raw energy of hardcore - fused with influences from black musical traditions - into new zones of (musical and cultural) experimentation. Just as hardcore took dance music beyond itself towards a limit of sheer intensity,¹⁸ and ambient has floated away from the dancefloor towards more abstract, 'musical' zones of expression, drum'n'bass has exceeded dance music's determination (fracturing house music's claim to inclusivity), at times even abandoning all pretence of being 'dance' music at all (Squarepusher). But whilst sometimes unmoored from the demands of the dancefloor, these lines of flight are not yet (decapitated) 'head' music. Rather than dance music maturing and returning to a traditional register of musicality, these initiatives demonstrate how the dance virus has mutated while spreading and impacting on a wider musical sphere.

From Repetitive Beats to Repeated Beatings

The ecstasy of the body has invigorated electronic music - heightening an *ekstatic* standing-out within the music itself - as well as in the world beyond with its influence felt in fields as diverse as the visual arts, technical innovation, multimedia and the internet. And just as the determination of art extends beyond the record onto the dancefloor, so the dance crowd extends its affect beyond the intimate space of the discotheque. The crowd's disruptive unity is a chaotic mass that knows no bounds: neither internal regulation nor external boundary. *Ekstasis* upsets modern individualism on two fronts: as we have seen, the codes of proper conduct that striate and compose the internality of the modern self are disrupted. But there is also a corresponding disturbance of the social codes that govern the privacy of space and property.

A nomadic structuring of space was thrust upon the early dance scene. Driven underground by its criminalisation, it was forced to situate itself outside of the established framework by which space is divided up and parcelled out. It became impervious to the distinctions of property relations, and seeped and flowed into whichever place presented itself. In the 'warehouse parties', the abandoned spaces of the industrial age were reclaimed and turned to a new purpose - a saprogenic flowering on the corpse of industrial decline. The inner city breakout was not enclosed by any wall or channelled along any established route. It was thus hydraulic, posing a challenge to everywhere and everybody simultaneously. Its proper place is on the dancefloor, but in HWH the dancefloor is not tied to any one place, but is a space which follows the dancer wherever he goes. The nomad carries his house on his back. In HWH the dancefloor is not *in* space but *of* space. The refrain is a way of thinking the occupation of space: it fills it as it goes; smooth space is simultaneously filled and composed.

House was already an affront due to its amoral excess; but it was in this conflict over the structuring of space - between the open plain and the fenced and patrolled enclosure - that house became a menace that could not be tolerated. And this isn't a question of possession or even of occupation. The conflict over space marks the conflictual liminality or margin of modernity, at which the hegemony of its disciplining mechanisms is contested and enforced. In this conflict we see the disproportionate dread inspired by an unbounded unknown, and the consequent paranoiac enforcement of the norm. This should not be analysed in terms of a struggle between social mores and individual desires. It was rather a struggle over (the modern form of) sociality itself.

¹⁸ A limit at which noise and speed operate as cultural weapons.

This conflict may be traced in one of the most intense and sustained periods of disco debauchery in the history of house. Over a two year period (1989-1990) Blackburn, a small town in the North of England that 80's economics forgot, became the focus for a series of weekly acid house parties involving up to 12000 people. What was remarkable about this was that the actions of so many individuals could be covertly co-ordinated without an institutional framework and without any clear leaders. After a decade of Thatcher and economic decline, the parties provided a source of hope and an outlet for the immense amount of energy released by the breaking down of the social codes of a bankrupt reality. An anecdotal testament to this was the renaming of the city 'Boomtown' - paying homage to the anti-Thatcher dream at the same time as marking its emergent illicit economic power. The area was declared an Autonomous Zone:¹⁹ the alternative road signs were still in place 3 years later.

It was a continual struggle between party-goers and police, each side trying to outwit the other. A different location would be used each week. And new equipment would have to be constructed or acquired to replace that confiscated the week before. There was a need for a continual mobilisation of resources, which interrupted the sedimentation of control around any particular group or individual. And the close attention of the police meant that no stars or personalities could in any case emerge.

Like an Amazonian flower, Boomtown was only visible once a week, surviving the rest of the time as an underground network of roots that had no leader but constituted a flat rhizomatic meshwork that linked at every point. It was continuously evolving, and so police action against a single point meant nothing as the flow simply redirected itself and swept on, forever in excess of its own achievements. You can't arrest what you can't see.

Confronted with this profusive excess, the authorities responded by attempts at re-stratification. The first major intervention was at a warehouse near Nelson in Lancashire, when a solid line of blue marched into the party zone, batons hitting linked riot shields in time with the beat of their hob-nailed boots. A pure line of control stamping order upon the chaotic mass. Blue lines operate by dissection and 'sterilisation' (police jargon). The chaotic mass is first blocked and hemmed in, then divided and striated, and finally annihilated in the reclaiming of the contested space.

The events at Nelson changed the nature of the situation altogether. The incident entered the collective memory not only of the people there, but of everyone involved in the northern rave scene. It welded people together as a community more determined than ever not to lose their way of life. It gave rise to the imagined community (*halluci-Nation?*) of *House Nation*. An entertainment had become a movement, for which people were willing to break the law. In the resulting climate, new people were attracted to the parties who went only to fight with the police. Months of violent confrontation were to follow: 'repetitive beats' met with repeated beatings. This situation reached a climax on the 21st July 1990 in the mass arrest of 836 people at a single party at Gildersome near Leeds. This was one of the biggest peace-time arrests in Europe this century, and yet virtually no charges were brought. I had my records confiscated at this event, and the only other DJ - Rob 'parasite-electric' Tissera - was sent to prison for inciting a riot (Section 2 Public Order) and 'Dishonest Abstraction of Electricity.'²⁰

House was a flow of the unnameable that was intrinsically non-oppositional, and yet which found itself in direct opposition to the striated space of property relations. It is revealing that the primary justification for closing down the warehouse parties was not illegality or danger, but *the lack of a clear regulative framework*. Even in the health and safety debate what is

¹⁹ Compare Hakim Bey, *The Temporary Autonomous Zone*, (Autonomedia, 1991).

²⁰ These events occurred long before the days of the CJA, demonstrating that it is not the law that matters so much as the way that it is enforced.

usually at issue is not the concrete risk of fire or injury, but the presence of recognised procedures of safety.²¹ The parties were closed down *for administrative reasons!* For the dance scene to be permitted in the eyes of the law, it was sufficient that it be brought back from the unknown, and placed within the blue lines of a bureaucratic and legalistic structure. The club replaced the warehouse: a nomad no more, house had come home. Hermetically sealed within a private space, lured by the promise of individual freedom, then policed to extinction.

In 1997 the situation is more stark and more desperate than ever. Following the *Increased Penalties Act* in 1990,²² and the notorious *Criminal Justice and Public Order Act* (CJA) in 1994,²³ the latest piece of legislation under review²⁴ is intended to make it easier for clubs to be closed down, and, ludicrously, to enforce intermittent periods of silence during all-night parties. Here the specifics of the measures are less important than the fact that they will give local authorities massively increased leverage. Indicative of the trend to come, clubs are being coerced²⁵ into installing close circuit television cameras (CCTV) to spy on the proceedings within, turning zones of autonomous expression into panopticons of visibility and control. HMP Clubland.²⁶

Dealing Ecstasy

The demands of regulation presented planet tune with two choices: swallow the poisoned pill of respectability or disappear from view. The current cultural landscape has been split from itself by the binary logic of the law, with the 'free parties' opting to stay outside of the legal framework and the commercialism which it bred. Whilst they are not a movement in the sense of a conscious and explicit project with dischargeable goals of social and political transformation, the free parties are a movement in the sense of a movement away from commercial exchange and towards an unmediated experience of the music. They have maintained the radicalised mode of organisation of the warehouse parties, whilst simultaneously supporting transverse connections with festival and traveller culture (Castlemorton), international political conflict (Desert Storm in Bosnia), and emergent modes of political contestation such as eco-politics and road protest (Reclaim the Streets).

Jealously guarding its supposed 'artistic autonomy', on the other hand, club culture gives the impression of an idealised sphere of maximised expression and release. But this comes at the price of an ever tightening enforcement of the code. Whereas partying was a total social fact - everyone used to do and be everything - privatisation splits the participants into producers and consumers, and places them within a strict hierarchy. Similarly, professionalisation confers on everyone involved a role and a proper place. Capitalism striates the chaotic mass, inhibiting the potential for revolutionary connections. And whereas the warehouse parties produced a strongly inclusive sense of identity, commercialisation yields a reactive identity constructed in opposition to other clubs and other sociocultural forms. The club scene differentiates itself through group fantasies around 'institutional objects': 'name DJs', established clubs and record labels, classic tunes, legendary parties. This is in sharp contrast to the flat plane of autopoiesis of HWH and the crowd open to its own finitude and individuated by group affects.

²¹ These insights are based on an interview with Chief Inspector Beaty, the officer in charge of policing the Blackburn parties (although not responsible for Nelson or Gildersome), at Lancashire Police Force Headquarters, Preston, 15 July 1995.

²² Creating a £20,000 fine for organisers of paying parties.

²³ Draconian new legislation (which includes the prohibition of 'repetitive beats') directed against travellers, protesters, and squatters, as well as festivals and free-parties.

²⁴ Instigated by the Conservative MP Barry Legg - the man accused of rehousing labour voters in asbestos infested flats in a different administrative district to protect his electoral rating.

²⁵ "What have you got to hide?!!"

²⁶ 'Her Majesty's Prison'

Nevertheless, whilst the demands of regulation and visibility suffocate clubland, this is only a relative homecoming. Beyond the statistical reductions of the door and cash register, the crowd retains a certain opacity, providing a site beneath the threshold of visibility of the bouncers, undercover cops and licensing committees from which a thousand becomings and atypical expressions can issue forth.²⁷ Where this does risk stasis is when it degenerates to repetition of the Same, with abstract images towering over the dancers, separating them from their potential, reestablishing them as coherent individuals defined and delimited by their relative inadequacy and lack.

Further, it would be wrong to conclude that 'buying in' automatically entails 'selling out'. This would be to remain trapped within outmoded oppositions that blind one to the complexity of the situation. Naked simulation and the dilution and compromise that that entails is a tendency and a limit which both club promotion and musical production constantly face. The situation is only distorted, however, when viewed in terms of a simple opposition between original authenticity and vampiric commercialism. A more constructive approach is to look to the folds and fractures that house opens up *within* capitalism.

A concept which can help us both identify ecstatic dimensions within these two spheres and specify their connection is that of a 'minor music'.²⁸ A minor music is a standing out from the accepted norm or established canon. It is not so much an alternative musical system so much as an alternative *usage* of music, one which sets the musical terms and co-ordinates in motion and extracts from them unexpected results.

A minor music isn't something set over and against a people, but is something that is essential to their collective existence and public life. It is not that music is tied to a specific community or group so much as that it itself can create (articulate, unite) a community or group: it is through a minor usage that the house is turned into a home. But neither is it about putting a wall round a certain location and declaring it your own. A minor music can come from the ghetto, but it is not about reproducing or creating ghettos within music - which would just be to instantiate a major music on a smaller scale. It is rather to subvert the major music from within by making it a stranger to itself. A minor usage is like the secret strategies used by a foreigner, who uses linguistic terms for purposes they were not designed for. A foreigner does not create a separate domain or dialect within language, but turns all of language into something secret and strange.

The concept of a minor music thus theorises simultaneously the operationality of the club and the singularity of the music. Clubs are communities of strangers, whose only common point of reference is a *directed alienation*. This is articulated in the music: the music is not the *expression* of the alien-ation, but rather the medium in which it is played out. Clubs run in such a 'minor' key are thus intimately related to the genealogy of a specific form of music. Whilst there is an increasing tendency towards proto-corporate 'supermarkets of style' (complete with their own marketing and merchandising divisions), there is also a trend towards greater differentiation as the club concept is reinvented and reapplied, with a plethora of clubs now providing a specialist experience to a specialist crowd.

But whilst clubs offer an *unheimlich* home to the music, the fact that the music is tied to specific forms of practice does not mean that it is imprisoned within the club walls. The clubs are specific instantiations of a musical tradition which has its own momentum and its own multiple trajectories.

²⁷ This of course is threatened by the penetrating gaze of CCTV and the consequent visual structuring of space it brings.

²⁸ Compare the discussion of a 'minor literature' in Deleuze and Guattari, 1988, pp101-106.

Whilst 'house' music used to be an eclectic fusion of many styles into a singular aesthetic, since roughly 1990 dance music has fragmented and shot off down numerous trajectories (some of which may be accounted for in terms of colour, class and sexuality). The initial sense of unlimited potential started to run up against its own limits, and explorations of disparate frontiers separated out to form distinct styles. This has resulted in proliferating folds of sonic involution, but also in a parallel multiplication of names, as artists and journalists stick a flag in a piece of sonic territory and call it home. Hi energy, nu energy, electro, trip hop, garage, gabber, techstep, hardstep, hardcore, happy hardcore, speedcore, artcore, darkcore, breakcore, breakbeat, industrial breakbeat, drum'n'bass, jungle, darkside jungle, trance, goa trance, psychedelic trance, techno, house, acid house, amyl house, dream house, deep house, progressive house, softhouse, hardhouse, hardbag, handbag, ambient, illbient to name a few.

As the 'loose ends' of the sonic web are reterritorialised, the arteries harden and creativity congeals. A zone of exploration establishes its patent, becoming itself a norm with an official history and a clearly marked set of official co-ordinates - classic tunes, prime movers, seminal times.²⁹ This is most visible at the centre - in the determination of 'house' and 'techno', which distinguish their lineages with the mythology of their respective origins in Chicago and Detroit in the mid-80's.³⁰ Seeking to produce 'true' techno, European artists attempt to emulate the 'Detroit' sound, whilst those who made the original grooves emulate simulacra of themselves. This leads some to devise sophisticated strategies to elude the legacy of their own success (such as Underground Resistance's masked faces, long silences and pointed communiqués), while others get trapped within a backward looking self-referentiality. This can be seen in the recent release (by a major label) of the compilation 'True People: The Detroit Techno Album': 'indeed an apt title for this album ... Techno belongs in Detroit.'³¹ Whilst the record contains much diverse and innovative music, the sense of self-referentiality, of toying with its own inheritance, is clear.

The specificity of distinct genres should not be lost amongst rhetoric of autonomy and diffusion, and yet nomadism isn't about building cities in the desert. The proliferation of coherent market categories indicates only the pluralisation of the major usage. Minor music operates along more diverse routes, preferring secrecy to the false unity of the name. Never closed or finished, genres are not formulae to copy, but points of reference from which to depart.

The primary issue with commercialisation and so called 'reincorporation' by the major record labels is neither the profit motive as such nor the scale of production, but the fact that business considerations and commercial technologies come before the music. The music is suffocated, forced to fit the contours of marketing strategies and advertising campaigns. Risks are avoided, and a conformity to representational categories is sought. Fundamental to major music is the unity of the name and the refusal of undecidability.

Capital seeks and procures difference; but only so that it may be sold as a dead artefact. Difference is objectified such that it can be infinitely reproduced in the naked simulation of a preformed model. And in this neutered form the cultural object is then circulated and distributed in a system of equivalence. The difference between minor and major music is the difference between positive and negative production - which are the two opposing tendencies of capitalism. Capitalism operates by exploiting minor musics so as to open up new markets. But once a new market has been opened, it seeks to solidify it so that it may be mined for all it is worth. It turns the minor music into a major music in the pursuit of the maximum return. It is only when the market is flooded or the vein expended that it is ready to move on.

²⁹ In the phenomenon of 'trainspotting' we see an obsession with the original dressed as musical education.

³⁰ What has been referred to as 'house' above emerged from the interstice of these two traditions.

³¹ Colin Dale, quoted on album insert, *True People, React*, 1996.

In moving on (the positive production) it is indistinguishable from the productivity of HWH, the minor musical production which follows a nomadic line of exploration and innovation. But in HWH this exploration is no longer subordinated to a future stasis. A minor music can upset capitalism because it is perpetually in excess of the attempts to pin it down. House always risks being brought home, its floating domain objectified and pinned down by concerns extrinsic to the music. But HWH anticipates and prevents the realisation of this limit. Its first term is a destruction that subverts its own inherent tendencies towards identity. The production of rhythm is itself rhythmic, a matter of differential return, a power of discontinuity and transformation that induces a spasm or a strain in the music, and so breaks down the 'clichés' of our musical habits.

Dance music has proven resistant to the effects of capital because of its mediation by club and DJ, but also because of its disruption of the logic of identity. Produced by anonymous engineers³² and prioritising the record over the stage performance, electronic music is marked by a 'facelessness' that distinguishes it from the phallic posturing of rock.³³ And prevalent naming strategies favour a dispersal of identity, with artists operating under different names and in a variety of styles, and multiple, shifting allegiances replacing the stable 'group'. This tendency is accentuated by the material conditions of production and distribution. Disseminated through specialist shops and local distribution networks, house music is dominated by a mixture of anonymous one-off 'white labels' and the products of 'small labels': a system of minor musical production flourishing beneath the threshold of visibility of the majors.³⁴

This autonomous zone is threatened by the increasing influence of the media. Magazine record reviews (conveniently organised into market categories) now offer a guide through the morass of weekly record releases. This increases the availability of information, but at the cost of objectifying the sonic domain and taking the process of education out of the participatory contexts of the club and specialist record shop, rendering the addressee a passive consumer.

The scene of house was always partially conditioned by the media. But there was a qualitative change in the media's affectivity that went along with the increase in both scale and specificity of its coverage. It is the technologies of visibility of the media³⁵ that have replaced the anonymous DJ with the 'name DJ', reintroduced sexual hierarchies and stereotypes, and even made an abstract image of excess itself by reporting incidents such as club personalities 'biting peoples' legs'. This disseminates and cultivates house as much as it inhibits it. The startled rabbit stands up on its rear two feet and starts doing the can-can in the glare of the oncoming headlights.

But at the same time the two dimensional mediascape is disrupted by small-scale and minor media - fanzines, flyers given to clubbers, and posters lining the city streets. These are no longer the accessible, autonomous communication they once were (comparable to the punk small-press ethos): a minimum standard of design and production is often expected, and even the one-on-one interaction of handing-out flyers is being challenged by companies such as Renamo who offer a distribution service which collects different flyers together in a single,

³² Increased access to cheap technology and a pervading ethos of do-it-yourself have given birth to a new generation of sonic artists.

³³ For a discussion of the extent to which the record had already attained ontological priority in rock, see Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm & Noise: an Aesthetics of Rock*, (I.B. Tauris & Co, 1996).

³⁴ This is helped by the fact that the major corporations have consigned vinyl to history. Notwithstanding the music industry's recent trend towards fine focusing their investment strategies, the DJ record market constitutes a backwater resistant to the march of corporate thinking, a fold in the unbroken surface of capital.

³⁵ In a sense the CCTV debate was prefigured in the intrusion of 'journalistic vision' into club culture. The former is far more dangerous, however, because it is not a part of the culture which it exposes.

advertisement-adorned plastic bag. But nevertheless minor media offer dispersed and open channels of communication resistant to control and regulation.

At the close of the twentieth century even the major corporations are beginning to realise that talk of the 'mass market' is increasingly anachronistic, and that real economic growth lies in niche markets. Capitalism is becoming increasingly insidious, creeping into every corner as the corporate device is 'down-sized' almost to the point of being indistinguishable from local or 'street' culture. The question this raises is whether the fragmentation and miniaturisation represents a disruption or an extension of the logic of the commodity. Does it allow cultural practitioners to stand out from it, or does it pin them down even more tightly than before? Is it a decentralisation of control, or is it an intensification of control? This is not a question that can be answered once and for all, but is rather the nature of the enigmatic state of affairs that dance culture must confront if it is to keep the music on the move.

Recent developments - particularly the growth of corporate clubs, corporate magazines, and corporate in-house dance labels - might make us pessimistic about the future. But there are reasons to believe that it will take more than economics to put out the fire. At the *In The City 95* music industry conference, a business consultant specialising in corporate culture who had been shown round the 'superclub' Cream in Liverpool was invited to give his opinion on dance culture. But all he could report was that the people he saw seemed very passive and weren't interacting with each other. The corporate man could not see what was happening even when it was thrust in his face: the dancers' intimate relation with the music proved invisible to the corporate gaze. No instrument can as yet measure *ekstasis*. And you can't sell what you can't see.

So long as the ecstatic mode proves to be opaque, there will always be lines of flight away from the cultural death we have been prescribed. To sample George Bush,

*'Gonna be alot of wierd dancin' goin' on.'*³⁶

³⁶ Quoted in Dean & Massumi, *First and Last Emperors*, (Autonomedia, 1992), p.123. 'This was Bush's rallying cry in his first campaign swing around New Hampshire in 1992 (*Montreal Gazette*, 20 Jan 1992, B3).' (*ibid.* p.187, note 18)