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Review Article

Timeshards: repetition, timbre, and identity in dance music

Peter Jowers

Hillegonda C. Rietveld, *This is Our House: House Music, Cultural Spaces and Technologies*. Aldershot: Ashgate/ARENA, 1998. 276pp. ISBN 1-85742-242-2 £35 (hbk);
ISBN 1-85742-243-0 £19.95 (pbk)
Ulf Poschardt, *DJ-Culture*. London: Quartet Books, 1998.
473 pp. (pbk) ISBN 0-7043-8098-0
Simon Reynolds, *Energy Flash: A Journey through Rave Music and Dance Culture*. London: Picador, 1998. 493 pp.
ISBN 0-330-35056-0 £12.99 (pbk)

To anyone not versed in electronic dance music, the plethora of styles continually emerging within it might seem bewildering. No single author can fully encompass dance culture. These works discuss *the* most innovative form of contemporary popular music. Their respective strengths stimulate reflection on the temporal effects music provokes when sampled.

Part 1

The 'moment' of dance culture

Dance culture has been 'a genuinely significant cultural moment' (Hesmondhalgh, 1998). Dance culture is not the same as house or 'rave' music whose high point in Britain and Europe occurred between 1987 and 1994. I use the generic terms *dance culture* and *electronic dance music* to describe a specific popular musical *aesthetic*. Rave embodied a specific combination of electronic musical

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forms, technological development, the drug ecstasy and dancing spaces. I distinguish the aesthetic logic of dance music from the specific social and cultural form it took in the 'house' heyday. New combinations of technology, intoxicants and dancing spaces continue to emerge.

A brief overview

Rietveld offers an ethnographic narrative of the emergence of house music in Chicago, Britain and Holland between 1977 and 1994 coupled with an excellent account of the evolution of its associated musical technologies. Poschardt's technical discussion and specific account of DJ techniques developed in disco and hip-hop circles fills important gaps. His exploration of DJ techniques within the emerging hip-hop scene of the early 1970s vindicates the value of his linking DJ culture as a whole. Without it, Rietveld's isolated narrative elides a wider process. DJ Herc's discovery of the 'break', or the musical fragment 'that grabs you and makes you get emotional and wild', was a key moment in the evolution of dance music. Using two turntables he would repeatedly switch to the same break, on the other deck. 'He just kept that beat going' (Poschardt: 162). New forms of pleasure were thus created and intensified by *repetition*. Dance music aesthetics share modern art's deeper concern with reworking material fragments.

Rietveld emphasizes the centrality of clubs, the participatory and creative role of dancing crowds, where house music found its apotheosis. She links disco to house's emergence superbly but fails to include hip-hop. Her 1994 research also fails to engage with *trip-hop, jungle* and *drum'n'bass*, profoundly influential forms of electronic dance music. Creatively unique, they fuse early American-influenced house and its development into British and European 'hardcore', with traditions of black music-making. Multi-layered, with absent mid-range frequencies, frenetic percussive effects are laid over a more relaxed, 'chilled' bass. One of the many pleasures of this music is that the dancer/listener can shift attention between layers. It is the first purely indigenous black music created in Britain. Rietveld documents an epoch that seems an æon ago, painting a superb picture of a musical scene at its early, innocent, peak. Her work on Chicago house is excellent. Most theoretical issues she raises remain very pertinent.

Poschardt gains by offering a comparative overview. While his discussion of house music is thin, and his narrative of post-house cursory in comparison to Reynolds, he closes with an exceptional attempt at theorizing DJ culture's aesthetic and cultural meaning. He offers an almost obsessive, highly informative account of the technological developments associated with DJ culture grounded in his own working practices. The role of drugs within this culture is not discussed. It is central to Reynolds's account.

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Poschardt places discussion of DJ techniques within a wider tale of innovation. He focuses on the century-old interaction of recording and broadcasting technologies which opened with the first ever radio DJ, Reginald Fessenden, who broadcast music and song on Christmas Eve, 1906, near Boston. He chronicles the rise of the radio DJ from the German trenches in the First World War through to the 1930s and 1960s when cult DJs in the USA were immensely important cultural mediators. Connected in complex networks with local recording studios and local businesses, they acted as promoters, linking local to regional and national record companies and distribution systems (see Guralnick, 1995). Poschardt's fascinating account of the payola scandals of 1957–60 reveal the DJ as martyr to the insecurities triggered by the surge of rock'n'roll in the McCarthy-influenced 1950s. 'With Alan Freed, the establishment had put to death the man who had devoted himself entirely to rock'n'roll, a kind of music that had no wish to conceal its black roots and rebellious character' (p. 65).

He cautions against simplistic, romanticized uses of black tradition (p. 84). They often relegate 'these sources to the status of hallowed but primitive predecessors' while telling the tale of European house music (Hesmondhalgh, 1998: 247). Rietveld partly falls into this trap. Poschardt's discussion of black radio DJs in the 1940s reveals the potential for further research. Their contribution to the emergence of rock'n'roll, the burgeoning civil rights and black power movements needs reworking. Black DJs are noticeably missing from an otherwise superb new account of the interplay of black musical and social movements in the USA (Eyerman and Jamison, 1998: 74–105).

On disco

Poschardt helps situate Rietveld's excellent ethnographic material. His *history* of DJ culture deals with disco, hip-hop, and house. Combined, they provide a complex history of the elements which went into the making and reception of electronic dance music. Discothèques first emerged in basements in Paris when, during the German occupation, jazz was banned. Parisians fled to dark cellars. They installed record players to which people came to listen and dance (p. 101). 'At the end of the 1960's the only discothèques in existence were either for high society or had been taken over by the black, Latino and/or gay clubs.' The history of 'the innovative dance floor remains closely connected to 'semi-public, semi-legal parties' (p. 105). Within them, a new musical style was invented 'at the turntable'. If a crowd did not dance to a specific mix when one record was cued to another, (pp. 107–8) it was not subsequently recorded for sale. This participatory immediacy of the interplay between DJs and the crowd helps explain the seemingly rapid turnover of musical styles and forms within electronic dance music. It is central to its overall participatory aesthetic.

Club culture and gay militancy interlocked in a world of astonishing drug and

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dance fuelled excess in the innocent days before AIDS. 'Donna Summer's yearning groans years later were merely the pale echo of the unbridled sexual practices in the first disco clubs' (p. 110). Subject to police raids, New York's club The Sanctuary was closed in 1972. The sense of community forged by the music turned into rebellion. 'Disco became a token culture of the gay minority' (p. 112). Inside these clubs a protected zone was created where bodily and sexual identity could be explored.

Elements already present in New York were further elaborated in Chicago. At The Warehouse, 'the entertainment was specifically aimed at young, homosexuals, male and female . . . mostly from an African-American and Latino background' (Rietveld: 18). For the 'mainly urban African American youths, who liked to transcend the oppressing boundaries of a racist, homophobic and sexist world, these parties and clubs were a haven . . . where a sense of wholeness could be regained.' House music – only one form of electronic dance music – 'started as an effect of the positive power of community . . . it was also the effect of the negative power of racial and sexual segregation' (p. 25).

After 1977 and the success of *Saturday Night Fever*, record companies jumped on the disco bandwagon, which rapidly became second rate, more 'about trash than substance'.

> The slogan 'Disco Sucks', found on T-shirts and bumper stickers showed a general backlash . . . Frankie Knuckles (a key early DJ) remembers: 'there was a couple of radio disc jockeys in Chicago . . . who proclaimed that disco was dead and (in a baseball park) they took, like every disco record they could find in Chicago and they blew them up in the middle of the stadium.' . . . 'From that day on, disco was dead all over the country . . . its like the whole dance music scene . . . went completely underground.' (Rietveld: 115–16)

House music has often been called 'the revenge of disco'. Urgent explorations of denigrated identities linked both hip-hop and disco cultures in the early 1970s. Rietveld traces the transition between disco and house as DJs experimented with ever-new techniques to heighten the euphoria of the dancing bodies they 'controlled'. The desires and resistances of the club scene were encoded within the music, enabling their diffusion to a wider culture where questions of personal and collective identity maintenance became increasingly pertinent.

Clubs allowed anonymity and artificiality. Fantasy identities could be experimented with within the jumbled syntax of the night; oppressive identities could be cast aside, released from the rigidities of rationalized time. Reynolds detects a tension between a desire for self-expression and losing control of oneself within gay culture. It is torn between 'the politics of pride, unity and collective resilience, and the more hardcore "erotic politics" of impersonal sexual encounters, deviant practices and drugs' (Reynolds: 22).

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Individualization processes release contradictory desires. Increased anonymity is sought where individuals can experiment with whom they aspire to be. Equally there is a compensatory desire for shared but ephemeral communality which can be abandoned if constraining. What was particularly intense for those on the margins in the early 1970s has become a more general condition. Experimental, emergent sets of social formations played out with diverse inflections within disco, hip-hop and dub reggae, evolved into a dominant form of popular culture precisely because they expressed wider social experience.

Encoding the margins

Social marginality, when musically encoded, translated into an enduring, radical, and intense de-centring of the traditionally core melodic and harmonic components of popular music. Rhythm and timbre shifted to the fore. Since then, focus within electronic dance music has turned to rhythmic continuity, repetition, 'break-beats' (see below), and visceral bass frequencies, played at volumes that bypass cognition and physically shake bodies. Such music 'communicates directly with the body . . . and lets its life and experiences flow into [an] ecstasy of perception'. The body as a material satellite of the psychical system actually brings with it its own memories and stories (Poschardt: 414). 'Music can be perceived with other senses than hearing.' Bass achieves 'a direct . . . connection between hearing and touch'. Written in connection with jungle, this emphasis was inherent in disco, funk and house.

Lyrics are used performatively. 'House . . . uses lyrics with ambivalent meanings or otherwise just a couple of repeated words or grunts which are not specific, but which carry perennial emotions such as hope, love, sex, anger and community but in a rather generalised manner' (Rietveld: 113). It can appeal to huge culturally differentiated audiences. 'Garage' is an exception to this rule. Almost all syntax and linguistic structure is eliminated from language as it is fragmented. 'Words break down and become a helpless echo of the beat' (p. 114). The human voice is . . . reduced to a shallow *effect*' (Reynolds: 22). *Deep house* or *garage* draws on soul and gospel traditions emphasizing humanism and salvation. It mirrors aspirations to community and provides a counterpoint to techno's impersonality.

Musical subcultures

Drawing aesthetic boundaries is common to all popular music subcultures.

> Fans (and musicians), just as much as academics, know that music both marks out their individuality and places them in social groups, know that the strongest feelings of difference are bound up with particular sorts of sociability. (Frith, 1998: 128)

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Youthful enthusiasm is almost always at the centre of innovatory scenes. Caught between dependency and responsibility, young people imagine their temporary liminality in utopian terms, wishing evangelically to spread their emerging cultural form to the culture as whole. Economic marginality stimulates creative recycling of cultural detritus. Pieced from cast-off, unfashionable shards of mainstream commodities, using limited, obsolescent technical means, marginal cultures draw upon a popular past. Using this bastard archive they reinvigorate it, often by way of bizarre blends, to hold out culturally variable utopias.

Excessive claims are made. Narratives, venerating key innovators, places and mythologized events are elaborated. Processes of definition result in the construction of an imaginary, oppositional, musical other. Subcultural 'intellectuals' and the cultural mediators, who follow them, generate a specific aesthetic. Certain practices are elevated. Previous forms of popular music are denigrated. Aesthetic boundaries are most policed in emergent phases. Rietveld's account shares the enthusiasms and blindness of such periods (see Thornton, 1995). Once established, relations with other musical forms relax. Frith (1996) notes that 'most dominant forms of popular music have originated at the social margins – among the poor, the migrant, the rootless, the "queer"' (p. 274). Dance music was no exception.

Music transcends 'separations of body and mind' failing to register 'essentialisms'. Music temporarily provides a 'utopian' space enabling participation 'in imagined forms of democracy and desire, imagined forms of the social and the sexual'. These 'utopian' effects stem from musically founded identities being simultaneously 'fantastic' and 'real'. Participation in music 'gives us a real experience of what the ideal could be' (p. 274), hence its affective power. It contains the potential for taking us 'out of ourselves'. ' Being 'lost in' music is a way of approaching limits. If identities are plastic, then at times their hardened carapaces have to be made temporarily vulnerable. The complex assemblage of dance music, intoxicants, technologies, musical fragments, and dancing spaces interlock to provide that possibility.

Music and social identity

Music facilitates new identities through 'the experiences it offers of the body, time, and sociability, [which] enables us to place ourselves within wider imaginative cultural narratives' (Frith, 1996: 275). Eyerman and Jamison (1998: 161) concur, arguing that 'the construction of meaning through music and song is . . . a central aspect of collective identity formation'. Music stores, 'in the residues and margins of society', structures of feeling. This archival capacity makes music 'a powerful force in social movements and social life generally'. As a 'structure of feeling', music engenders common moods, facilitating common

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purposes (pp. 161–2). Musical experiences cannot be trivially 'reduced' to mere material determinants. Music is an independent variable, a cultural seedbed of change 'supplying actors with the sources of meaning and identity out of which they collectively construct social action' (p. 162).

Participation in collective rituals and performances transcends 'the boundaries of the self and binds the individual to a collective consciousness' (p. 163). Identity is 'a matter of ritual' (Frith, 1996: 275). Both individuals and groups can, by using music, 'get out of themselves' and transcend previous limits of daily routine, domination and restraint. Identity, always relational, can never be fully autonomous. Rituals – dance culture contains many of them – dramatize relationships. Opening up potentialities, throwing into question our sense of self, music draws attention to the fact that 'our social circumstances are not immutable' (p. 277). Not all music is made and used in this manner. Most is used as solace, reaffirming ossified identities in a dead round of unvarying repetition.

Dance dystopia

Reynolds links the dark effects of sustained ecstasy use and perennial social divisions within Britain, tracing a more dystopian and convincing account of the inner psychic and social meanings encoded in recent British dance music. I take what might initially seem an oblique approach to his account to lay the ground for later reflection.

Within the deeper trajectory of electronic dance music an intensifying focus upon the sheer materiality of sound has appeared. Vocal sounds are pulverized to reveal what is always and necessarily elided in most communication, the fact that we communicate by way of the physical properties of sound waves of varying frequency. These can now be electronically recorded, sampled and treated and combined with other sound. The voice recedes into the soundscape, morphing into signal towards noise, away from code. Fragments, released from their moorings, become parts of a strange inter-text, into which are read ever-shifting meanings as these shards are repeated, appearing in ceaselessly altering combinations. Potential meanings proliferate. A double process occurs.

> By never quite locking the meaning of the text into place, a desire to acquire a totality, an Imaginary is created . . . A dancer also may want to 'let go' of all desire to acquire a sense of totality. The result is that the subject 'loses it' and 'floats along with the currents of sounds and rhythms . . . with the shifting meanings of sound-bites. (Rietveld: 148)

Voices provide a humanist mirror; they confirm the 'listener's sense of self by providing an imaginary mirror'. The further dance tracks are removed from the voice, the more likely it is that 'trance-like' bliss can be achieved.

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But darker possibilities emerge. Loss of subjectivity can be experienced as anxiety. Jungle's treacherous rhythms are an 'education in' and an 'eroticisation of' anxiety (Reynolds: 362). Jungle is 'rave music after the death of the rave ethos' (p. 362), the come down after ecstasy. House music often returns via anthemic voices of disco divas to the voice, and the mid-range frequencies to which evolution has attuned us. Jungle began a process, further explored in drum'n'bass, of intensifying the disorientating absence of meaningful words and melody to the point where even the psychic security of rhythm becomes increasingly fragmented. Its only 'human' sounds are those that make 'fear' audible. The rhythms stop for long periods; into these gaps appear 'drops', atmospheric samples such as 'police sirens, the noises of space ships from science fiction movies, etc. . . . that bring forth the cities, clubs, living rooms of loneliness, the fights in back courtyards, fast driving on the motorway, into the sonic network of the pieces' (Poschardt: 413–14).

Reynolds traces the path taken by British dance music through to late 1997. His account of Ibiza, the mushrooming club scene in 1987, the summer of love, and the massive raves of that period, are incomparably fuller, wittier, and better written than those offered by either Rietveld or Poschardt. His fine grained, perceptive account is a delight to read. His discussion of Detroit techno, its middle-class black origins and strange combination of George Clinton's P-Funk futurism and Kraftwerk's strangely melancholic European electronic music, is compelling. At its core lies a searing commitment to forms of dance music which, to use Frith's felicitous phrase, have 'disruptive cultural effects'. He consistently recognizes the way in which profound social divisions founded on gender, race and class return to haunt the utopian potential within popular music. He finds music at its most aesthetically progressive when most democratic and 'hardcore'. This is when it is most hedonistic, committed to fun and remote from the record industry, 'intellectualization', 'musicality' in any traditional sense, or any creeping self-importance. (p. xvii). His democratic concern intersects with an extremely astute understanding of the long-term effects of using ecstasy and how this became inscribed within the music.

Rietveld's theoretical contribution belongs to a moment when this music's proponents felt they had experienced the Holy Grail of the ultimate in musically induced pleasure. It smacks of a certain innocence before a darker side to club culture kicked in.

> There seems to be a moment, intrinsic to any drug culture, when the scene crosses over into 'the darkside'. In ecstasy subcultures, there tends to be a point where the MDMA honeymoon phase comes to an abrupt end . . . the descent into darkness occurs . . . The same shift from utopian to dystopian was reflected in the music . . . the life-affirming, celebratory aspects of rave [are] turned inside out, the smiley-face torn off to reveal [its] true nihilism. (Reynolds:188–90)

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Rietveld's account belongs to a period both when battles for subcultural capital (see Thornton, 1995) were at their most intense, and before the darker side of testing limits via repeated use of ecstasy became generally apparent. Her methodical if rather dry account of drug use seems to belong to another age, whereas Reynold's sizzles off the page, forming the dark star around which his analysis gravitates. The centrality of ecstasy for rave and house has to be dealt with. Different drugs contribute to the music's evolution. Hesmondhalgh (1998) claims that there has been a dearth of good writing on the culture both because of the centrality of illegal drugs and the lack of 'voice' in the music (p. 247). Reynolds and Rietveld understand the tight link that existed between rave and ecstasy. Rave 'evolved into a self-conscious science of intensifying MDMA's sensations' (Reynolds: xxvi). Producers used technological effects to trigger drug-like 'rushes'. 'Processes like EQing filtering, panning, phasing . . . are used to tweak the frequencies, harmonics and stereo-imaging of different sounds . . . making them leap out of the mix with an eerie three-dimensionality or glisten with a hallucinatory vividness' (p. xxvi). Worked out in the history of record engineering, dub-reggae and hip-hop cultures intensified their exploration. The aesthetic of electronic music explores these aural potentialities further.

Reynolds argues that 'in neurochemistry there is no free lunch'. Drug use comes with costs. *Energy Flash* is the most honest account of the long musical and social exploration of the after effects of a brief moment of euphoria.

Part 2

Plundersonics: electronic music, sampling, memory and time

Memory, recorded sound and sampling are central to electronic dance music. If access to archives was always guarded by those in power, the practices of 'sampledelia' (Reynolds: 364), or 'plundersonics', constitute a raid from the margins on the archive of 20th-century recorded sound and music. Such practices throw conventional notions linking musical memory and identity into deep flux. Effects noted earlier in connection with the loss of voice and free-floating surrender to rhythm become pertinent here.

Sampling gives a freedom to 'distort or re-imagine' (O'Brien, 1999: 48) in any way that suits us. History is a crowded closet from which we scrounge and salvage at will. Previous attempts to winnow some 'authenticity' from the chaff of the ersatz are blown to the wind. Any musical connection becomes possible. Sampling extrapolates fragments from pre-existing recordings, and either turns them into repeated figures or 'loops' (Goodwin, 1990: 265) – the sampled equivalent of the break-beat – or inserts them as individual sound effects, as

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'drops' in the mix (Poschardt: 414). This metaphorics of 'layers' only hints at the dimensionality of a 'mix' in which different sampled or recorded sounds can be foregrounded or made to recede, moved within the stereo image, be treated with different 'effects' to construct an ever-shifting and nuanced soundscape. *Any* part of a pre-existing recording, be it an extended passage or, as is more often the case, a mere fragment, can be sampled. Music is increasingly appreciated, 'out of order' and consumed in fragments or 'semiotic particles'.

Identity and the uses of music

DeNora (1999) argues that music is a technology of the self and a resource to which actors turn in their projects of self-construction. Memory, emotion and biographical work are entailed in this effort. Collective actors also use music to constitute shared identities. Modern agents 'are subject to increasing demands for flexibility and variation'. Welsch argues that we are living through a deep-seated aestheticization of contemporary life.

> Aestheticization reaches deeper . . . it affects foundational structures of reality as such: of material reality in the wake of new material technologies, of social reality as a result of its mediation through media, and of subjective reality as a result of the dissolution of moral standards by self-styling. (Welsch, 1997: 7)

Thrown into a variety of milieus, each with their unique forms of life and demands, actors experience increasing incongruity. Identity cannot be taken for granted. Its performativity becomes visible; reflexivity increases. Identities have to be reflected upon. Rendered, 'plastic', identities call for aesthetic 'consistency'. Actors monitor and regulate themselves yet also seek out times and places for relaxation, pleasure and entertainment. We negotiate between poles of necessity and preference (DeNora, 1999).

Music is used to alter moods, feelings, motivations, desire, comportment, and energy levels. Specific properties of music are 'plundered' and used to stimulate the subjective states agents aspire to both individually and socially. Music is thus used *prospectively*. Music is used to choreograph an enormous range of moods.

Individuals pragmatically present themselves to themselves and others by constructing, reinforcing and repairing a 'thread' of self-identity. They both project a biography and by way of introjection, attempt to hold onto a coherent image of who they are. Music is used to spin a tale of who we have been and will become. This artefactual use of the archive works in different temporal directions.

Detroit techno used futurist music from Dusseldorf, which was fused into a 'cold synth dominated sound with drum machine rhythms' engendering 'a dominant mood of paranoia and desolation'(Reynolds: 9). Born within the

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destruction of Detroit's economy in the 1980s, middle-class, black DJs linked pervasive sci-fi themes, futurology and an ambivalent attitude to technology in their mix. They created one of the most pervasive sets of sounds and tropes within house music, its darker, future orientated, coldly mutant side, which plays on the pleasures of dread, fear and anxiety (Reynolds: 2–33). Fused with pervasive American sci-fi and popular science, such futures also appear in the heavily sampled work of George Clinton, Parliament and P-funk where iconography of salvation via star ships is linked to a philosophy of the healing powers of the 'pure groove'.

> The idea of liberation through funk is a memory of life before transportation . . . the 'mother ship', the space ship . . . breaks into the world of transported slaves, to rescue them with funk . . . From this point of view, the mothership connection comes from the *future*; [it] acts as a high-tech connection to the lost homeland of Africa. (Poschardt: 418–19)

This compensatory vision has deep roots within Black America. The Nation of Islam's creed – of Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X – contains exotic doctrines spun from the savagery of daily existence, junk history and millennarian science fiction (Kempton, 1999: 73). Chains of equivalence are established between the power of the bass to revitalize bodies and make whole 'souls' in preparation for salvation. Music can be used individually and collectively both *projectively* and *retrospectively* to 'mobilise and hold onto coherent images of who one knows oneself to be' (De Nora, 1999). We are all our own DJs, using music in complex ways.

The weight placed either side of the present varies. Eyerman and Jamison's account of the uses of music by social movements of the 1960s emphasizes the long continuities of populist, democratic aspirations (pp. 52–4), falling into a trap of linking music excessively to memory, available for reinvigoration by another social movement cycle. 'Tradition, the past in the present, is vital to our understanding and interpretation of who we are and what we are meant to do' (p. 161). As funk shows, for the truly oppressed and marginal, 'the future in the present', hope, has often been more important. Does the fecundity of invention and 20th-century centrality of black popular music stem from such future orientation? Electronic dance music uses artefactual memory embodied in the sound archive, transforming it, to open spaces for new and unknown identities yet to come. If identity is partly created by repeated use of musical fragments, these are not innocent of social coding. Reworking the archive, making new connections releases new 'musical' possibilities. By breaking the links encoded in music, sound reveals its materiality before being re-coded. In such spaces, new identities emerge.

Samples 'disorder'. Usually 'treated', their 'meaning' is stripped to waveform or frequencies. A 'phat' bass sound, so important in hip-hop and drum'n' bass, is built by layering frequency upon frequency within the same note.

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Timbre and memory

Gracyk argues that a key pleasure associated with popular music is that despite its apparent melodic simplicity, it often bears repeated listening. This derives from the ways in which we recognize sound. A song structure is an 'incidental framing device for something else, timbre' (1996: 60). Pleasures from repeated listening arise because 'we can hear minute differences between similar timbres while listening, but these nuances begin to be forgotten, a second after the sounds cease . . . Memories of timbres "fade" after a moment, becoming more imprecise with the passage of time' (p. 58).

Timbre is 'noise' within sound waves. It is the 'grain', character or quality of any sound understood as distinct from its pitch and intensity. It is caused by the proportion in which a fundamental tone is combined with the harmonics or overtones within a sound wave. Timbres are often the expressive basis of music. Combined with highly repetitive rhythm, they contain a key to dance music's aesthetic, particularly its capacity to convey encoded human affect. The 'mood' of a piece in part derives from the composition of a soundscape, the pieced-together fragments of specific waveforms or timbres evocative of 'worlds'. Dynamics of volume (intensity) and rhythm alter their force.

In repeated listening, timbre evokes rediscovery. We do not experience the aural materiality of the sound as a distinct *conscious* memory. Rather, a former, forgotten experience is rediscovered anew. 'Timbre has an expressive impact in direct experience that will be absent in our memories of it' (Grayck 1996: 60) Consequently, we experience the thrill of the unexpected when we re-hear specific timbres from an uncanny zone between memory and forgetfulness. We are 'reminded' of something forgotten. Dance DJs trigger euphoric re-recognition *and* repeat the bliss 're-membering' creates for a long as the crowd can take it.

Several consequences flow from this understanding of timbre. Timbres can be 'engineered'. Rietveld and Poschardt both show the gradual emergence and sophistication of DJ sets as technological exploration continued to deepen. From the use of double decks, tape loops, drum machines, simple synthesizers through to complex engineering technologies which became increasingly available as their price dropped, the democratic potential of the archive intensifies previous tendencies.

> Dance music dramatically intensifies the *trompe l'oreille* side of psychedelia: its fictitious psycho-acoustic space, its timbres and textures and sound-shapes to which no real-world referents attach themselves. [It] lures the listener into a sound world honeycombed with chambers that each have their own acoustics. (Reynolds: 368)

The plasticity of sound deepens. How does it intersect with both memory and pleasure?

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> It is the peculiar faculty of music to make each such first encounter, in retrospect, a snapshot of what the world was at that moment, as if sound were the most absorbent medium of all, soaking up histories and philosophical systems and physical surroundings and encoding them in something so slight as a single vocal quaver. (O'Brien, 1999: 48)

Specific musical experiences, most of which we have forgotten, lie in wait to ambush us as we re-member them. A 'world' floods in. 'Music . . . make[s] the sonorous force of time audible' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 182). Promising theories of distributed neuronal networks which might explain this phenomenon (see Cilliers, 1998), would take me too far afield here.

Sampling enables sound to reappear in strange juxtapositions, where we move within a particular complex of re-membered worlds. Electronic music experienced in real time, assembled elsewhere, evokes a virtuality of forgotten experiences reawakened, evanescent and often unplaceable. Familiar, strange and ephemeral, they are 'pseudo-events, something which could never have happened'. They carry 'traces' of the real, experienced in real time and yet 'different acoustic spaces and recording "auras" are forced into an uncanny adjacency . . . It's a kind of time travel, or séance . . . Sampledelia is a dead sound reanimated like the zombi' (Reynolds: 368). Time is warped. 'The bitterest insight is the incapacity of even the most perfectly captured sound to restore the moment of its first inscribing. That world is no longer there' (O'Brien, 1999: 49). And yet, it contains great potential for new connections.

The electronic avant-garde

Modernist aesthetics are separated from previous ones by their 'direct relation to *material-forces*'. Modern artists order material 'percepts', into (assemblages) grappling with their material medium to render it meaningful. The musician's task is to render material sound, audible as music. Art forms capture forces of 'an immaterial, non formal, and energetic Cosmos' (Deleuze and Guatarri, 1990: 342–3). Technicians of dance explore and experiment with the sonic interplay of different timbres and rhythms pushing technologies, their tools, to the limits.

Aesthetic dynamism and change are inherent to 'DJ culture'.

> [It] is thus to be connected with the practice of the innovative avant-gardes of classical modernism and the DJ avant-gardist be seen as the legitimate inheritors of Malevich, Duchamp or Warhol . . . [It] goes beyond them and shows new perspectives and possibilities of aesthetic practice. (Poschardt: 371–2)

It is self-reflexive and self-referential to its core. Each DJ creates their own integrative logic by means of which they render sonic material meaningful.

Comprehending such a new aesthetic order demands a combination of *imma-*

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nent critique linked to its inner logic developed on the basis of reflection on its own history and material practices, as well as *contextual* critique grounded upon the heteronomous practices within which aesthetic activity occurs. It is no surprise then that these works on dance-culture oscillate between focusing upon inner logic of the music and the cultural milieus within which the music is made. 'The confidence with which this music allows us to look into the future seems boundless . . . For staking everything on what we now know to have been the future, electronic artists have been richly rewarded' (Poschard: 483). Reynolds and Rietveld are similarly optimistic (Reynolds: 432; see also Rietveld: 210–12). Rave is dead, long live electronic dance music. This *unconscious avant-garde* focuses on releasing the inner potential of sounds stored within the archive. DJs are the Prince Charmings who reawaken frozen time, bringing it back to life with the kiss of their creativity.

Deleuze and Guattari write of the artist's task being one of capturing 'forces, densities and intensities' (1990: 342–3). The synthesizer 'assembles modules (our particles/fragments?), source elements, and elements for treating sound' (p. 343). Artistry comes by assembly, by imposing upon 'samples' a 'degree of consistency'. Eschewing 'representation' – in music, melody and the voice – musicians deal with 'molecularized matter' or sound waves to which 'operations of consistency are applied' (p. 354). There is a tension between consistency, the role played by the repetitive, 'break beat' or 'loop' and the timbral qualities of 'treated' musical and sonorous fragments which find their aesthetic home mixed against repetition's consistency. It is in this space that electronic dance music finds its most demanding aesthetic.

Rhythm

The popularity of medieval plainsong, traditional folk music, African and world music, all signal a shift from 'musicality' founded on harmonic development. Dance music is but part of a deeper inner cultural logic of our age.

Rhythm is always developed and appreciated within cultural contexts. It should not regarded as a 'natural' essence. To link it merely to the body is fallacious. Linking rhythm to African music or black tradition smacks of ideological, not musicological analysis. Rhythms are complex in a different way to harmony. Frith notes that many rhythms can be 'sung'. African drummers vary the pitch, vibrato and timing of their sound (p. 135). Percussion and timbral texture are always interwoven, only separable analytically. Improvisational performance means that 'the musician's success depends upon an audience's response to his [sic] decisions' in a process which involves a combination of feeling, interpretation and evaluation' (Frith, 1996: 133–40). This holds for electronic dance music where the DJ is most conscious that he can lose the

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crowd or make the crowd 'lose it'! Rietveld writes of the DJ as being in control, using repetition to create a feeling of 'total loss' and then, using an anthem of 'love and togetherness' to facilitate the return to self (p. 195).

Such returns draw heavily upon the communality encoded in gospel and soul traditions as they were reworked and 'sexualized' in disco. 'Garage' has little truck with the rhetoric of futurism (Reynolds: 30). Polarities run through dance music. One draws on futurist strands emphasizing anonymity, melancholy and loss, while a more humanist futurism encoded in black tradition reawakes subjectivity, communality and hope. Participatory music events tend to be more rhythmically complex, while contemplative music is more harmonically complex (Frith, 1996: 142). Electronic music, as 'ambient' proves, can take either direction.

Repetitive rhythmic continuity foregrounds the body, inviting it 'to let itself go and dance, to yield entirely to the rhythm (Poschardt: 114) until a flood of release is introduced when anthemic uplifting fragments are introduced. The more this release is denied, the more relentless and anonymous music becomes. A more complex relationship ensues, where the dancers become 'slaves to the rhythm', placed in a 'masochistic' subject position' where they enter 'the enjoyable suspended pleasures of pre-phallic, pre-Oedipal re-fusion with the all powerful Mother figure' (Rietveld: 196).

Poschardt argues that DJ music searches for 'absolute sound and absolute music' (p. 386). A new pop music emerged from its own 'self-reflexivity and self-referentiality'. Aesthetic esteem comes from knowledge of the archive and its reworked incorporation in the 'track'. Loving its sources, open in its compositional structures, it seeks new sound quotations and undiscovered sources, new elements from the archive of perceptible sounds. It plays with both complexity and minimalism, working within popular music (pp. 389–92). 'All the difficult matters have now moved from the elite circle of galleries and universities, symposia and academic bookshelves into the pop charts' (p. 392). Poschardt's regard for black culture leads him to praise the miracle of human creativity and self-assertion that is ghetto culture which has conquered 'the whole of popular culture within a decade' thus bearing testimony 'to the great perception of pop and the correctness of its aesthetic' (p. 393).

DJ logic demands this track be torn from the deck, now!

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PETER JOWERS is in the School of Politics, Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences, University of the West of England, Frenchay Campus, Coldharbour Lane, Bristol BS16 1QY, UK.
[email: peter.jowers@uwe.ac.uk]

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