



It's Not A Rave¹

Ce n'est pas un 'rave'



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Despite a contemporary understanding of "rave culture" as a hedonist, if not consumerist, capitalist, and escapist activity, "rave culture" remixed practices from anarchism to squatting, performance art to immediatism. The liminal edges of rave culture raise a series of questions as to what constitutes the nature of the "political," of the "social" and of the "subject" when such primary models are remixed through sound, movement, and bodily sensation. Rave cuts and filters these practices, strips them down to minimal components, and transforms what cultural studies usually denotes as reactive resistance to an affirmative experience of the sonic body.

Malgré un entendement contemporain de la 'culture rave' comme étant hédoniste, sinon une activité de consommation, capitaliste et d'évasion, la 'culture rave' a remixé des pratiques allant de l'anarchisme au squatting, de la performance artistique à l'immédiatisme. Les rebords liminaux de la culture rave suscitent des questions par rapport à ce qui constitue la nature de ce qui est 'politique', 'social' et 'sujet' lorsque des modèles d'ordre primaire sont remixés à travers le son, le mouvement et la sensation corporelle. Le rave sectionne et filtre ces pratiques, les simplifie à des composantes minimales et transforme ce que les études culturelles dénotent d'habitude comme résistance de réaction à une expérience affirmative du corps sonore.



dj Construct at <ST> Musikal Resistance, 2000, Vancouver. Photo by Tanya Goehring

First record – scratch the title and offer some explanation: what are the politics of a research that investigates an affirmative ontology of becoming through rave culture? At stake is the differentiation of such a project from narratives of celebration and the schematizing of “resistant” social and bodily practices. The majority of research performed upon rave culture enlists these dominant semiological models, primarily employing Bakhtin’s model of the Carnival and Kristeva’s notion of the semiotic through the application of a generalised semiological ethnology comprised of locating reversals of power and instances of resistant bodies. As an object of study, rave culture has been nominalized as “neo-tribal,” a “subculture” and “post-subculture” in a position of stasis to “established” cultures. As a “neo-tribal” formation it is identified with historico-archetypal “tribal” thematics that are analysed as performing a misappropriation and re-production of nostalgic tribal origin. While these schemas will no doubt bear upon what what follows, and while these schemas can be said to operate at a certain signifiatory level of rave culture, they need to be differentiated if one is to consider the following aspects:

1. The dancing-body as the event in motion.
2. The affect of sound.
3. The temporality of both event and body.

These three aspects of rave culture – focused as they are on the body in movement and of the event in movement in a temporary, sonic milieu – gesture toward a set of practices that continuously undermine structural understandings of the social, the spatial, the temporal, and the political. How does one

become sociable with sound, perform and act in sonic society, enter into the spun out world of the speaker? How do we understand a “politics of rave culture” when the very terrain of the political is remixed through the mobile dancing body and the transient event whose currencies are the ever changing refrains of repetitive beats? What are we to make of a politics that can only be called “political” insofar as it questions the static peripheries of the polis, indeed, of the material city and its laws, curfews, accepted places and sites of play and pleasure as well as its metaphysical and theological constructions? How do we turn an ear to practices that transform scratch the conditions of possibility and impossibility of the political, the community, and the building blocks of these discourses, the polis and the subject?

Floor Bomb

No doubt that in presenting such a series of bombastic questions, it becomes difficult to reconcile the philosophical and political stakes with what is mediatized today as “rave culture.” Is rave culture a privileged site of such an investigation and discourse? Or is it “just another subculture?” Yet what is a “subculture?” And why would such an objection serve to trivialize a practice of insurgency? Whenever “rave culture” is approached as a special object of academic research, it serves as a prop in the game of theoretical script-writing: a model of resistance, of carnival, of a resistant body. Like “subculture,” “rave” is reactionary and never affirmative. It may question but it does not produce – insofar as we understand “production” as the production of history, of permanent narratives, even if they are micronarratives and not the elaborated grand narratives of old. This theory play is not what we are attempting to do here. We are attempting to write an account of the alien production of the social, the political, and the body through sound, through movement, through tactility, through a temporary transiency – and in doing so, we are setting out to encounter philosophical problematics of the permanent, the static, the mobile, the subject and of the social, of the polis and of the “self,” through lived experience. And what better lived experience to think through and experience than an experience that seeks to live that which is other to the traditional, philosophical paradigms?

Delimiting the Deck

What I wish to outline here as “rave cul-



ture" can be delimited to particular occurrences in rave's historical tapestry that made their mark when strains of underground dance music cultures – feeding from the sounds of Detroit techno, Chicago house, and UK Acid House – conjoined the AfroFuturist narratives of sonic resistance with the organization of Jamaican dub sound-system culture. From this nexus "crews" and "collectives" were born, secret sonic societies, highly mobile and aurally fed through the revolutions of wax. The writings of Hakim Bey became widely read as a handbook for the practices of the Temporary Autonomous Zone and the Tong. A network of collectives emerged that set into motion an anterior existence during sleeping hours. As opposed to club cultures, temporary points of gathering marked these "raves." Autonomous zones of aural affect. In the city, warehouses were broken into, squatted, or rented for the night while transient occupations haunted farmer's fields and backcountry forests. As the movement grew throughout the UK, ravers saw themselves as reclaiming long lost Common land. Events attracting tens of thousands went on for days in the early '90s UK countryside. As successful, anarchic and beautiful as these larger events were, they resulted in massive reprisals. The UK Criminal Justice Act of 1994² disallowed any gathering playing repetitive beats. An example was made of Britain's Spiral Tribe collective, who were banned from the country, and rave culture moved into the clubs, following what is already a recognizable trajectory of commercialization and the marketing of rave as a profitable venture capital scheme.

This reductive account of rave history moves from the late '80s into the '90s. Worldwide, rave culture has emerged with significant differences and timelines. Most scenes do not hold the same relation to '80s Acid House music and culture that set the base for the UK's larger outdoor festival scene. In most of North America, the Middle East, and parts of Europe, rave culture took hold with only a hint of Acid House. Although North America staged some of its own large events – mainly in conjunction with the rise of Burning Man and various hippie festivals including Rainbow Gatherings – rave culture was, before its subsequent commercialization, operating in a smaller form primarily divided between "promoters" and "collectives." Whereas promoters quickly grasped the commercial and industry potential of rave culture, collectives strove to

organize streams of singular, one-off events that broached various aspects of music and sexual subcultures. The "coming together" of queers, goths, electro and new wave freaks, cyberpunks, anarchists, activists, S&M scenesters, tattoo and body modification lovers and dancers marked the milieu of these early raves. There was, at this point, no such thing as a "raver." Nor was there a uniform "rave fashion." Events changed locations and required elaborate sets of instructions, phone lines, BBS bulletin boards and checkpoints to gain entry while the events themselves varied from bare-bones warehouse break-ins and sound-systems carted up logging roads in remote locations to elaborate and complete fantasies built for the occasion. Warehouses became spaceships, dark cyberpunk haunts of circuitry and fantastical and mythical places of ritual through detailed and complexly themed decorations and lighting that often drew upon the talents of local artistic communities to create murals, paintings, film loops and installations to transform the space into a time capsule. One stepped through the door into another world that was no illusion: it was as real as one's body for the night.



Agent T-X at <ST> Musikal Resistance, 2000, Vancouver. Photo by Tanya Goehring

The Invisible

Practices of collective rave culture continue as globally dispersed and disengaged from the dominant commercialization of the lifestyle. The distribution of historical markers in rave culture are not equal. Viral strains signal their existence and wholly alien event-histories. As recent laws passed in North America and throughout Europe have made non-commercial music gatherings a criminal offense, the edge of secrecy required for the organization of events remains elusive. Luckily a persistent misunderstanding of rave culture by police, politicians and the public has led to uneven attempts at enforcement. A 1994 *Vancouver Sun* article states that "City authorities have banded together in a bid to stop young people from raving" by putting into place the requirement of "temporary liquor licenses" that "will have to be purchased from the city a week in advance" (Parsons). Well! The effect of this license simply complicated BC's arcane liquor laws, while the tradition of alcohol-free raves continued unhindered. In fact, for two years following not a single article on rave culture graces the press – the Halcyon Days of Vancouver's rave scene. Although the police spent their nights chasing down echoed beats in lonely industrial districts, in the public eye raves had disappeared off the map of conservative concern until 1996, when the double-prong of a newly manufactured drug fear over Ecstasy and pressure from commercial promoters to legalize raves set forth a battle between law enforcement, commercial interests, ravers, the public, municipalities and civil liberties organizations. As of 2003, and whether legal or not under various constitutions, raves are criminal gatherings. Various laws either link raves to drug-operations and "crack houses" – such as with the US RAVE Act³ – or simply criminalize the act of freely gathering to dance to music, creating a corrupt, commercial, and permissive structure requiring many thousands of dollars in permits, extra police security, strip searches, certified and well-lit venues, and politician pay-offs in order to conduct a "safe dance event." Yet from its beginnings rave performs a continuous remix. We could say: from warehouses to Reclaim The Streets, or from farmer's fields to anti-globalization protest, from BBS culture to Indymedia.org, from underground DJs to sound-art-terrorism in the gallery and academic institutions.



dj tobias at Plush, 1998, Vancouver. Photo by Jane Weitzel.

Transform Scratching the Political

What can we learn from the events of rave history, in all their detail and nonlinearity? How does rave culture remix the presuppositions of permanency that construct both "history" and the "polis"? Rave culture has not only been tagged as immoral and dangerous by a conservative public, but also as unable to sustain a politics, most notably in the work of Angela McRobbie and Michel Gaillot. While Gaillot asks whether "politics" is the appropriate expression for the sonorous vocalizations of rave culture, and in the process erases a normative "political" aspect from the record, McRobbie argues that rave culture projects its own demise through an implicit neoliberalist work ethic. This failure of the "political" results from a lack of a fixed workplace as well as the dissemination of the singular occupation in work and life. While she sees as positive the multitasking facets of those involved in rave culture – the multi-tasker as DJ, curator, net.artist, web designer, writer, journalist, police negotiator, sound-system tuner, music producer, event organizer, graphic designer, cultural studies academic – she sees the lack of a fixed workplace – and thus a lack of a static sphere of discussion – as a primary



detriment to the formation of a quasi-socialist politics. Multitasking, variable work environments contribute to a neoliberalist ethic of self-imposed and limitless work. Although these claims should be given rigorous treatment considering the significant connections between the organization of raves and anti-globalization protest, and the rise of non-localized, horizontal and international networks of Internet contact, we can understand McRobbie's argument as echoing a certain aspect of Foucault's discourse of the self-regulated body. On the other channel, McRobbie simply assumes that all politics stem from a fixed locale – a politics of permanency that robs Foucault's analysis of its transformative impact. "Rave culture" has been primarily situated within this schema of permanency, of the "modern concept of freedom as subjective freedom" (Derrida 271).⁴ It is just this static assumption that rave culture remixes through its temporary politics. In returning to ask how rave culture samples and splices a politics of permanency – we could say of the polis – we explore the transient temporalities of the body and event in motion.

A number of questions arise: Can a "politics of difference" encompass an activist sonography of the dance floor? Is a theorization of fragmentation reconcilable to the temporal experience found in the repetition of the rave-event that acts as intensity nexus for a politics of excess? Is "rave" a scene at all, even in its apparent ambiguity, or does it bleed the mix of a dialectics of permanency? Is the "rave scene" incorporated into the scene of metaphysics, or does the rave incorporate the metaphysical scene as a track that remains on the third deck, strangely unremovable due to its incorporated necessity? How does rave culture scratch history in its sonic records? How do we open a fleeting moment? Again we say fleeting, as in passing by the permanent. Yet rave exteriorizes the politics of permanency. It exists for the moment: that moment is infinite in its experiential plane. And how do we sound out temporaneity without repeating an obvious transcendental gesture of the infinite moment of ecstatic abandon or the salvatory gestures of what Kodwo Eshun calls "CultStud...where theory always comes to Music's rescue"? (More 00 [-004])

As rave practices set into motion common concepts of the "political" as a static terrain of communication as well as remix the nature of what is the political, these practices cannot be reduced to Bakhtin's Carnival anymore than we can delimit sonic movements to a burst of the Kristevan semiotic. At the rave, the subject no

longer speaks, is no longer even "in process:" the subject has fled the scene of this rhythm. In the engagement with the repetition of the rave's permanent difference, the construction of the "subject" becomes transformed as it steps across the threshold of the warehouse and into a sonic temporality where relations of the body to sound and to echoed memory, to the temporaneity of the event itself, and to the unheard but tactile and touched other remap onto a score of movement the "self."

Movement Masochism

At the same time that we explore an insurgent inventiveness in the practices of temporary temporaneity—a kind of "community" built through the repetition of similar yet different events, organised in secrecy and operating under cover of darkness, taking the concept of Hakim Bey's Temporary Autonomous Zone as its mantra—we need to chart the dangers and trajectories of rave culture, to sketch the mechanisms which led to subcultural commercialization and the turn to consumerism, and to understand the dangers encountered by rave culture in attempting to reduce the dancing body, through sound, to a becoming-ear of the body, of attempting to encounter experience through a proliferation of volume, a proliferation of movement, a total immersion in a specific relation to sound and movement. We need to trace the possible microfascisms that arise in such an atmosphere. We need to listen and touch these dancing-bodies and bring them into close contact with the projects of power wired with amplified sound: the erotic and subliminal cut-ups of William S. Burroughs, La Monte Young's resonant frequencies, Psychik TV's cult performances of extreme volume – Hitler's loudspeakers.

There are several points we can mention here.

1. Rave culture does not escape a metaphysics of violence. Nor is it exterior to the polis. In fact, the polis provides a historical condition for the scene of rave culture – which is not to say that the rave might not offer a map fissured in its temporaneity and sonic modalities that operate as other to the sacrificial structures of the polis. The pure escape would either be absolute – madness, death, the real – or the metaphysical dream of transcendence. There is a hint of such escapism in the utopian dream of rave culture and its acronyms such as PLUR – Peace Love

Unity Respect – that drove the exuberant and naïve beliefs of a party generation blind to the ugly side of rave culture. For rave culture in this respect does not escape a metaphysics of transcendence. Models of the Carnival or aspects of semiotic creativity are often repeated as symptoms of resistance to power. To claim say that rave culture is reducible to a metaphysics of carnival and resistance as a reactionary force, an inversion of the dominant structure, is to mistake the model for the event. Although these structures may project their power across rave culture, the claim that these structures are the structures of rave culture fails to take into account the sonic temporality the dancing body and the event in motion.

2. With rave there becomes – not always, but at moments temporary – an affirmative spatialization of sonography. A sonography is a sonic map that takes into account a temporal and spatial milieu of the sonic. The pragmatics of a rave sonography involves dancing bodies engaged in practices incorporated within the structure of the polis that defy city-limits. These dancing bodies engage in masochistic and sadistic practices, aurituals, sonicities and sonivities. The whole of rave culture operates, in its historical arrival, as a stealth operation. Hakim Bey emphasizes the imperceptible as a secret society – a Tong or TAZ.

3. In the mix of these sonic topographies and concerns of the dancing body and a politics of the temporary are dangers and power struggles, the reinscription of sacrifice and salvation, of transcendence through transience.... Tendencies of control and fascism amidst the admixture of the fissured Temporary Autonomous Zone. It is not surprising that the possibilities of the TAZ and of the "rave" have been reduced to the other. Geert Lovink notes that the "TAZ was boiled down to a late 1980s concept, associating the Internet with rave parties" (239). Spin the inverse – that "rave" was, in kind, reduced to the TAZ. It is this reduction of the one to the other that mirrors the dangerous descent of the becoming-ear of the body to the emaciated body, the drugged body, the burnt-out and destroyed body. On the one channel the sonic body engages with what Deleuze reads as masochism, a reduction to a "Body without Organs" through movement and sound. On the other channel the abuse of drugs and the immersive immediacy into rave's lifestyle of speed threatens to dissolve not only the bonds of the social in a positive movement, but to dissolve the vestiges of the self itself – the burn

out. Rave's history is littered with the fallen bodies of spastic dancers engrossed with speed.

4. In other words from this record of sounds, the rave is not analogous to a city – it is not a microcity to the metropolis in a micro-macro relation. Rave is the black key to the city's virtual analogue, a virtual synthesis of sounds that reprograms harmony and discord to warp under the twisted bassline of acid squelches and echoed warehouse rumbles, a granularization of "culture" into clouds of fragmentation and isolation in their hallucination of being-together, agglomerate in crowds, masses, and populations, fissures that produces sonic meaning, ensembles of a sonic cartography of the dance floor that moves at the periphery of the city's prescribed methodologies of gathering and community. The rave is an-other site of the conditions of possibility and impossibility for the community, offering a possible conjunctive map to the city walls of the polis. Whereas the Situationists sought to map the "intense urban atmospheres," or "psycho-geographies" of the city (Sadler 69) raves seek to squat a dead zone and insonorate its environs in a temporal acquisition of space ripe for the actualization of a temporary sonograph – what Hakim Bey calls "psychotopography" (TAZ 103). While there is resistance to the power of authority, the driving force is the affirmative production of fissured time, and in that time, a sonic personage that exceeds the "subject" and a sonic space that exceeds the "polis." Can we open our ears to this sonic temporality that aurally spaces the conditions of possibility and impossibility for that which exceeds the subject? Which is not to say that the negative determinants of the subject have been negated, that a politics of difference has been erased, or that the problematics of the group, of fragmentation, borders and exclusions – ultimately, of authoritarianism and even of fascism – have been magically transcended. To an extent of the "same," they've been remixed to a different beat, skipped registers to the (h)ear and its fleeting temporality. Through movement these qualifiers have changed in nature. To spin a sample from Sylvère Lotringer, there is an "integrity" to the rave in that "only engagement really matters" (Doing 150).

5. Deleuze suggests that books be treated like records (Dialogues 3). A DJ will tell you that even an experimental set is bound to the dance floor. Whether one clears the floor or pounds it packed, the floor is the necessary conjunctive, and not negative determinant, of the DJ. The floor is not imaginary, not a fanta-



sy, despite its practical immateriality in the warehouse as compared to the shiny dance floor of the territorialized club. A dance floor can be anywhere desire is attuned in the technological configuration of the "rave," of the event of the rave, of the time-event in its temporaneity, of the masochistic relations between the body, sound, the floor and the performance of an echoed memory – wherever these and others come to form the assemblage we nominalize as the event of the "rave." Rave has no grounds: it only deconstructs the floor. A register for dancing bodies to move upon. Rave's distance from the ground – and to the Grunde of Heidegger and others – is not only other, but alien and otherworldly. Rave cannot be disassociated from AfroFuturism in this regard, from a black musical history that samples its refrains from Sun Ra, George Clinton, Afrika Bambaata and Kraftwerk to form what is known as Detroit techno – a primary sound of the collective rave. Kodwo Eshun says that AfroFuturism has little to do with cultures of representation, with what he calls, in the case of hip-hop, "Trad HipHop's compulsory logic of representation and will to realness." The rave-event, like the Detroit techno collective Underground Resistance (UR), "abandons street knowledge altogether" (Eshun 117). Which isn't to say that alien otherness operates without the signals of its earthly deterioration, without UR's catastrophic inscription in the run-out grooves of the violent plight of modernist Detroit, the city in its physical and empty actuality, the cement and metal of an empty warehouse, the material conditions of the city. It is, on the other channel, to affirm the nonrepresentational sound of rave, its engagement, as Gaillot notes, with voice as sonority (17) as a register and not as authentic carrier of meaning: with sound as alien, bound to no earth. Scratch-sample Sun Ra: Space is the place. We can thus affirm a potentiality of a voicing in rave culture through sonorous sound. Rave has no need of a permanent and centralized position for dialogue. It organizes in ways clandestine and disseminated through temporal pockets of the Internet and geographical zones of indeterminacy. Rave sounds out its echoes and resonances in the creation of sonic milieus for moving bodies.

Endnotes

1. A full version of the original cut of this paper can be found in *FUSE* Magazine Volume 26, Issue 1, March 2003. Once the *FUSE* issue is no longer available, the article will be made available in .pdf format here: <[\[ing.org/papers.htm\]\(http://www.quadrantcross-\)>.](http://www.quadrantcross-</p></div><div data-bbox=)

2. "Powers in Relation to Raves: This applies to a gathering...at which amplified music is played during the night. [...] Music includes sounds wholly or predominantly characterized by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats. [...] If a Constable in uniform reasonably believes that a person is on his way to a gathering to which this law applies, he may stop that person, and direct him not to proceed in the direction of the gathering. If a person knowing that a direction has been given which applies to him—(a) fails to leave the land as soon as reasonably practicable, or (b) having left again enters the land within the period of 7 days beginning with the day on which the direction was given, he commits an offence and is liable on summary conviction to imprisonment for a term not exceeding three months or a fine not exceeding level 4 on the standard scale, or both." 'Chapter c. 33' in U.K. Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. (London), The Stationary Office Limited. <http://www.hmsso.gov.uk/acts/acts1994/Ukpga_19940033_en_1.htm>
3. For more information on this bill, go to <<http://thomas.loc.gov/>> and under "bill number" search for S2633.
4. Scratch-sample: "...an experience of freedom, an opening that also resists subjectivation, that is to say, it resists the modern concept of freedom as subjective freedom. I think we will have to come back to this" (Derrida 271).

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