Auto-synthesis

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This article attempts to place the dynamic of popular electronic music, evident since the late 1970s and extending to the current situation, at the forefront of developing both a strategy of critique and a medium for critical reflection. The genres covered include electronic music in and around the time of punk rock, subsequent moves to the forcing ground of pop music with the era of synth-pop, the dynamic upheavals created through the surging form of techno, up to the prevalent genres of micro-sound and electronica. The essence of both the body of critique formulated by the music, and the critical reflection of such critique (as developed in works when a genre of music is said to have 'passed') is not pinned to a rigid model of assessment. Instead, the strength of popular music's ability to strategise and conduct a critique is considered in the self-same music's ability to subvert the definition and 'metric spaces' of critique as accumulated through previous genres.

Resistance and subversion can be considered as a primary and urgent form of a music-derived critique, whether this be an overt statement of political resistance and subversion, a more complex engagement with cultural models, or an abstract commentary on the music process itself. These dynamics have been developing within popular music in a more complex pattern since they reached a peak of visibility with the punk movement at the end of the 1970s. By a not-so-strange coincidence, this peak in visibility also coincided with the explicit marketability of such elements; the fascination with delivering an angry form (e.g. *thrash metal*) and/or an angry (or controversial) content (e.g. *gangsta rap*) now provides the music business with its most healthy areas of youth-orientated sales. The seemingly endless tirade of '*nu-metal*' acts dominate daytime radio, the pop-charts and whole chunks of dedicated cable TV channels - each act creating a seamless whole that peddles visible contours towards style (e.g. body piercing) to attitude (e.g. blasphemy or whatever else is deemed suitable to apparently raise the hackles of the parental generation).[1] To counteract this rather fatalistic world-view it is necessary to consider resistance and subversion to have both a more diverse range of strategies and techniques, and to have a wider arrangement of external (and internal) structures and monopolies it wishes to confront. Thus popular music genres can be considered outside of a simple form/content analysis, and their effects can be considered as acting upon a diverse range of metric spaces – from the physical geographies of culture and capitalism, to the rules of engagement in music production and consumption. It is from this vantage point that an analysis of critical dynamics in current electronic music can be catalogued.

1. FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS

Punk rock is considered for various reasons, even though it is not directly associated with electronic music. The dynamic of electronic music hovered around the fringes of punk rock, both predating its rise (with artists such as Kraftwerk) and helping to form the commonly held distinction between the more raucous 'pub-rock' based punk and the more difficult 'art school' punk. This aspect of punk rock, characterised by important artists such as Cabaret Voltaire, is considered in the next section. Punk is a useful starting point as it most clearly illustrates the limitations of a dogmatic approach to resistance and subversion – the understanding of which is then necessary to appreciate the subtle tactical differences employed by electronic music (even though electronic artists operating within the punk milieu were not

[1]Thrash metal emerged in both the US and Europe, though through different cultural conditions. The US thrash scene flourished on the back of a vibrant and continuous skateboarding scene that persisted through 'faddist' lulls in other countries. Important US skateboarding magazines such as 'Thrasher' worked in tandem with dedicated hardcore/punk magazines such as 'Maximum Rock and Roll' such that thrash music was adopted from both the punk scene (groups such as 'Black Flag') or the heavy rock scene (groups such as 'Metallica'). The UK and Europe thrash scene emerged in part from and in part against the phenomenon of 'anarcho-punk'. This genre flirted with a critique of both the banality and masculinity of punk rock, before giving in to the need to adopt the fast and furious approach practised by the US groups. In turn, US hardcore took on a version of anarchist philosophy with the creation of 'straight edge' – a strange hybrid that preached abstention from drugs, alcohol, sex, coffee. The complex development of the thrash scene is now primarily led by the US groups who pin affiliations to (and so create movements around) micro-issues such as satanism, anti-abortion, etc. Gangsta rap has complex roots in the development of rap music, though the emergence of the ultra-violent and confrontational gangsta genre seems to have transformed any notions of rap being a force for expression for the US black community. The marriage of thrash and gangsta rap was developed from both camps by artists such as 'Body Count' and 'Limp Bizkit', such that it now forms an important part of the youth market. This genre – christened 'nu-metal' – plays an important role in the expansive programming strategies employed by MTV.

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given special attention, preferring themselves to 'go with the flow' that punk afforded to them). Whilst punk developed a rigid (even if it was rigorous) attack on most aspects of capitalist society, its critical reflection became equally hindered with an equal level of dogma – primarily around its association with situationism. Thus, while punk seemed surprised and bitter at the amount of cultural capital it generated (and still continues to do so), by the same token its association with (and instant simplification of) situationism continues to generate a similar amount of academic material. A priority is then to strip away some of the perpetuated ideas that are still peddled across the music and style press, particularly around the perceived relationship between punk and situationism; namely that punk rock is seen to be somehow an expression of situationism that neatly encapsulates its central thesis. This in turn simplifies situationism into something that can somehow be understood as best expressed through the ideals and attributes of punk rock. In short, a way of making (undefined) trouble by recycling existing cultural forms and being seen to 'have fun' by playing the game of cultural misbehaving. Thus, in much the same way that punk rock crystallised resistance and subversion into a marketable form – its right to exist championed through its own belief in its lyricism, its dynamic diminishing to the recycling of its critique – then its enforced association with situationism has allowed a non-defined concept of situationism to prevail not only into refreshed academic circles but also into the language of promotion and analysis around today's crop of new electronic artists and pop-stars. Without hesitation, any new artist wishing to best promote themselves is described as having 'situationist gestures' in their practices or outlook . . .

This false consciousness of the radical should not be seen as anything more than a reference to the spirit of punk, which in turn provides no better understanding into the mode of critique practised by current operatives in electronic music. The force of situationism had dwindled following the Paris riots of 1968, an event for which the Situationist International were accused of having a central role. In reality, the fundamentalist approach adopted by the SI towards organisation and exclusion meant that the group impacted by the 1970s, leaving that decade to be inhabited by the spirits of the 'pro-situs' (particularly many disparate groupings in the US). The critical output of this decade amounted to many circulated tracts of self-reflection, inter-individual arguments, and a general wariness of cultural movements being championed in other areas of the left. The arrival of punk in the late 1970s prompted only critique from the heirs of the situationist movement, with the publication of *The End of Music*.[2]

Unfortunately, this pamphlet is often misunderstood (it cannot be misread because the actual item was scarcely in circulation) as an appraisal of punk, in that punk is celebrated as the 'end of music' (a good thing). What the pamphlet actually discusses is the opportunity created by punk to repopulate culture, to stylise and to create new journalistic opportunities. Put most bluntly it assesses the situation as follows: 'Punk is the admission that music has got nothing left to say but money can still be made out of total artistic bankruptcy with all its surrogate substitutes for creative self expression in our daily lives'.

Thus, while this puts to sword that myths that punk and situationism are tied up as an affront on culture, and that situationism has at its core a directive that promotes an 'anything goes so long as it involves cultural trouble-making', it also highlights the blind-spots that contemporary critique have harboured. These come to light with the popular genres that followed punk – particularly the rise of electronic music, the brief era of synth-pop, and the phenomenal rise of techno and rave culture. Whilst this latter category has been exposed to a dizzying amount of historical and critical appraisal, early electronic genres have avoided analysis and consideration towards their own contribution to resistance and subversion.

Synth-pop and early post-punk electronic music avoided the obvious connotations to resistance and subversion that punk exhibited. The reflective, analytical split between punk-as-pub-rock and punk-as-art-school-rock worked its way into the living dynamic of punk as the aggressive lyric/form of the emerging political punk drew close affinity with the working-class pub-rock tradition. Meanwhile, the art school tendency quickly went on to explore avenues of well-publicised stylisation (particularly the 'new romantic' genre) and commercial opportunism offered by the similarly ultra-stylised new pop genres. Whilst this strain of post-punk tended to carry electronic music along in its slipstream, political punk was entering the endgame of its own reason for existence. Political punk tailed off into a self-exiled hell that saw its critique of consumerism enacted through calls for more consumerism and lifestyle management (a critical point being Flux of Pink Indian's *The Fucking Cunts Treat Us Like Pricks* LP).[3] The viability of creating consumer goods, essentially part of a purchasable punk lifestyle package, to spread a message of the horrors of capitalism (of which consumerism was a vital part) began to crumble. The rawness and sense of purpose was taken up by a new generation of artists

[2]'The End of Music' was a privately circulated pamphlet written in 1978 by people associated with the political groups 'Solidarity' and 'Infantile Disorder'. It was initially intended as a discussion document between groups who had similar aims but differing viewpoints, and took the working title 'Punk, Reggae; A Critique'. It was re-pressed for wider circulation amongst the many different marxist, anarchist and situationist groups around at the time. The renewed interest in situationist ideas saw its reappearance in Stewart Home's *What Is Situationism? A Reader* (AK Press, 1996, 1-8713176-13-9).

[3]Flux of Pink Indians, *The Fucking Cunts Treat Us Like Pricks*, Spiderleg Records, no date.

working on the fringes of the punk tradition, instead applying a dictum that what matters is not the mass circulation of musical/artistic production or thought, but its potential effect on future practice. Whilst groups or bands like Swans and Einsturzende Neubaten took some steps towards making themselves invincible to recuperation from the music business, their *modus operandi* still pivoted around a theatrical demonstration of why life (under capitalism) was so bad. The reliance on lyrics might have dissipated, but the use of concepts to be brought forward and presented as 'realisations of consciousness' in the name of performance continued in this new form. This can then be compared to electronic music's simultaneous engagement with and critique of new technologies, of which Kraftwerk were the most obvious example. That said, Swans certainly offered one of the few musical experiences whose self-lacerating fury felt adequate to realise the alienation of life, an alienation which is no longer formal but absolute, investing the most intimate fibres of personality. 'Adequacy' to such a situation certainly does not mean that the music is subversive in itself, but nor is it necessarily a conduit for cathartic release, facilitating adjustment to things as they are. Rather, some specific but still obscure conjunction of the music's violence and its relation to desire and pleasure is sometimes able to reinforce nascent or already existing collective and/or individual subjectivities. At some point in the 1980s Blixa Bargeld of Einsturzende Neubaten is reported to have said something like this when a corporate music journalist urged him to endorse the idea that 'radical' music is already revolutionary, 'changing the world' just by 'opening minds'. Of course not, he insisted, personal epiphanies are meaningless in themselves, but maybe sometimes music gives individuals (or, implicitly, collectives) the capacity to go on trying to do something. The value of that something remains wholly dependent on the concrete situation and particular subjective action the music is engaged in.

2. ARTIFICIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Whilst I have argued that it is important not to simplify punk's relationship with situationism, and in turn to think carefully about use of situationist allegories in the current cultural climate, this does not mean that punk and situationism were separate to the point of being reconstructed as a joint phenomenon. Certainly the punk-as-art-school current, which harboured the many electronic groups of the late 1970s, had intellectual connections to many cultural theorists. Whether connections to the situationist movement were roped in – bearing in mind that by the end of the 1970s the situationists were a dwindled force whose carcass was picked over by the neurotic pro-situs – is a different proposition. Malcolm McLaren claims heritage in the King Mob grouping, but McLaren's interests (as the pub-rock standards of the Sex Pistols proved) was primarily in the sound business management of shock value and fashion mongering. As a group of philosophers or cultural theorists (though they were never quite considered as revolutionaries), the situationists made an attractive proposition, predating punk by almost fifteen years in becoming the first 'punk philosophers'. This was most noticeable with their short-lived and short-fused forum at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) where they refused to entertain any more 'cuntish questions', so much so that both the practice of using bad language in a public place was taken to new heights with the Sex Pistols' appearance on the Bill Grundy Show, and the practice of using the ICA as a medium for nihilism was continued by both Coum Transmissions (Throbbing Gristle) with their 1970s 'Prostitution' show and the 1980s performance of Einsturzende Neubaten who attempted to drill straight through the building's concrete foundations.

Groups like Cabaret Voltaire, who were happy to move in the punk-as-art-school flow, had an extended methodology of tape montages, William Burroughs theory, and Dada graphics. This technique was used in an unpolished 'punk' fashion right up until the 1980 release of 'Seconds Too Late'/'Control Addict', tracks that symbolised the early 'punk electronic' sound. Whilst never explicitly declaring themselves as 'situationist' in their origins, Cabaret Voltaire were keen to utilise the concepts of 'ready-mades' such as the noise of the factory, radio and television. This fed directly from their reading of the Dadaist movement, a grouping that had considerable influence in the formation and orientation of the Situationist International. Even more interesting was Cabaret Voltaire's stated aim to get behind the sense of strict reality and try to reinterpret and descramble that reality. Cabaret Voltaire never fixated on a label, releasing their early output on the broad roster of Rough Trade, but other labels began to foster an (anti)aesthetic and strategy that drew from the situationist wellspring. Factory records attempted to destabilise the moment of consumption by pressing up drab, mock-corporate packaging, a tactic also realised by Scotland's Fast Product, and by Throbbing Gristle's strategically intervening Industrial Records project. Such icons of anti-consumerism inevitably became highly desirable; a non-twist in the tale that you felt was all part of the engineering. But this ironic assault on the geographies of consumption echoed the music released, and it was no coincidence that the bulk of material consisted of music that was both electronically produced and had a target on the pop market. Instead of punk's reliance on content (lyrical preaching) or 'content of form' (aggressive rhythms and speed), electronic music embodied the surrounding technology of the time in the way that the packaging on labels like Fast Product embraced the ultra-drab, corporate reality. Technology was imagined as an indefinable threat, or as something highly alienating and totalising, symbolised in both the Dadaist 'techno-clutter' collages of Cabaret Voltaire and

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the general move towards totally synthetic sounds. Commercial artists such as Kraftwerk and Gary Numan captured this uncomfortable aesthetic, showing that it wasn't something necessarily grounded in the punk-as-art-school movement. Kraftwerk played out a deadpan functionalism, whereby the machines began to orchestrate not only the music but seemingly the musicians in charge of the music. This interplay with the production line climaxed with Kraftwerk replacing themselves with robot substitutes. Tracks consisted of single subject anthems about individualised technological gadgets such as 'Pocket Calculators', or deadpan, neutral commentaries on the encroaching social condition such as expressed in 'Showroom Dummies'. They took the situationist's 1950s formulated analysis of the modern condition – life being typified as the choice between love and a garbage disposal unit – and animated it with a cacophony of bleeping and chirping garbage disposal units. For Kraftwerk, the choice no longer existed, but the smile of satisfaction was entirely manufactured. As well as the cracks appearing in their ironic celebration of technological totalitarianism, Kraftwerk also infected their music with subliminal glitches and tiny moments of (synthetic) discord. Gary Numan, seldom given any critical exposure due to his own fascination with decoding and destabilising the rules of the fame game, also provides further insights into the plight of the electronic musician trapped in a technology they feel uncertain about. Numan has a strong relationship to the written works of Philip K. Dick,[4] a writer who also immerses himself in the technologically dictated future. Dick's sci-fi work is underpinned by the frailty of human relations and the overpowering force of alienation, something that technology (by simply masking) eventually aggravates even further.

The post-punk electronic movement, with its particular relationship to the anti-consumptive strategies of labels like Fast Product and Factory, attempts a negation of functionality without ever engaging the nature of functionality as a geography of contention. Records on these labels were, like their rock and pop forbears, simply commodities to be taken home, listened to and to be used as sources of edification. Rock and pop music re-affirmed the totality of the status quo, providing niches of identity for the growing listener groups. Punk music had the same consumptive and circulatory processes, but equally tried to preach to the consumer about ugly aspects of capitalism (including, at times, consumption itself). Post-punk and electronic music (and packaging) continued the same mode of functioning, but instead presented the consumer with something that bore its anti-consumptive message in both the mock corporate packaging and entirely synthesised sound. This post-punk strategy had little time to develop before the commercial status quo shifted to embrace a new synth-pop fascination. This was a reflection of some of the dying embers of the punk-as-art-school movement who, reaffirming themselves as the punk-as-fashion movement, instigated the new romantic movement which quickly adopted synth-pop as its soundtrack. Once again the rhetoric of style supersedes all notions of critique and enquiry such that the new romantic scene setters demanded acknowledgement of style, stemming from the fact that (unlike punk) this movement was built entirely from commodities and so it needed to be itself consumed to be realised. Whilst labels like Fast Product and Factory saw themselves as emerging from punk ideology but with a tactical engagement with the pop system, the mainstream construction of commercial synth-pop allowed them to engage with pop music on a more exposed terrain. New labels such as Some Bizarre and Mute emerged to continue the tradition of Fast Product, but used an entirely synthesised sound to engage the industry's newly found fascination with new romantic and synth-pop. Early releases were as ironic and awkward as much of the intellectualised post-punk material, with The Normal's 'Warm Leatherette' and Mute's own Daniel Miller creating a technological pop concept with his Silicon Teens project. But the allure of commercial success created a focus of interest on artists such as Soft Cell, Human League and Depeche Mode who subsequently dominated the charts and played the rules of the fame game as best possible. The critical engagement with technology continued, but on a level that was never considered beneath the overwhelming glare of media stardom. The Human League furnished the charts with twisted love songs that remained synthesised to perfection, Soft Cell followed a line of enquiry into the seedy undergrowth of the sex industry, whilst Depeche Mode abandoned all notions of critical engagement to pursue a commercial pop/rock career.

Factory found an avenue of survival with both New Order and their investment in the nascent club industry, but the rest of the post-punk and synth-pop movement quickly vanished from the scene, making way for a fresh wave of electronic subversion.

3. AUTOMATED CONSCIOUSNESS

Dance music had pushed at the boundaries of physical geography long before techno and rave destabilised all notions of the metric spaces of production, consumption and circulation. Northern soul had begun the process of instigating 'weekenders' which were notorious attempts to push both the body clock and the work/leisure timeframe beyond its accepted limits, introducing new drug cultures to facilitate such endeavours. But in many ways northern soul followed the same loyalty to localism and place-specificity that rock music (and punk) had

[4]See Terre Thaemlitz, *Replicas Rubato*, Mille Plateaux CD71, 1999. This includes a well-written article on the Thaemlitz's understanding of the Numan phenomenon, and Thaemlitz's own re-interpretation of Numan's work.

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accepted, with shrines to the music erected at towns such as Wigan (Lancashire, UK) with the famous casino.

The radical break with such loyalty came with techno and rave, and it is possible to suggest that techno's assault on geography came as a direct result of its sound and sample structures. Rave music certainly manifested itself as a subversive menace primarily through its fluidity and disrespect of conventions of music consumption. The dance music scene asserted a degree of self-governance and autonomy that in turn determined how the dynamic of the scene unfolded. This autonomy was in part fostered through the DIY nature of the music – the lingering tradition of punk rock brought even closer to reach through the relatively low cost of producing tracks – but the consumption of the music quickly began to push against the established codes. The public consumption of the music flaunted both a mobility (all you needed was a space and a sound system) and a disregard to stubborn localism that often circumvented many other scenes. The peak of such autonomy became the music's downfall as government legislation was pushed through to counter situations such as the famous Castlemorton rave and the prospect of car loads of ravers hovering around the London's M25 motorway waiting for the signal. This obvious tearing down of the established geographies of music consumption ran further than a simple disregard for border rules with respect to property, capital, etc. The rave scene began to rewrite the geography of the city, reclaiming dead, ultra-functional spaces such as motorways, service stations and all-night garages as new areas of play, activity and excitement.

The function and the substance of the music itself obviously had a major part to play in this radical shift. Music as a sense of identity now functioned through the social crucible of its broadcast (i.e. the rave) rather than something you took home, listened to, and took on board all the signigfiers that made you feel part of a delicately manicured 'youth scene'. Patterns of record consumption were brought to a halt, with preferences for the mix tape (often bought from an emerging army of street sellers armed with little more than a large tape player, a suitcase of cassettes, and a street corner pitch with a good look-out) taking over as the need became not to rekindle certain tracks but to rekindle certain vibes and atmospheres. Allegiance to fashion snobbery was quickly dissolved with ravers championing the rise of the blatantly pirated clothing that mutated into children's clothing and bland beachwear. This interplay with the codes of cultural society was extended into the use of energy drinks, the consumption of which directly flaunted the fact that rave culture was tied up with a new drug culture, such that brand logos and phrases were incorporated into promotional material for raves and clubs.

Techno and rave music's link to early electronic music and synth-pop is important to consider, though analysis of this is often overshadowed by the more obvious aspects of the music. Techno and rave is often classified as the phenomena it became singularly through the physical functionality of the music. It is seen primarily as a vehicle for physicality and hyper-experience, with all roads to subversion leading directly from this vantage point. The structure and substance of the music is overlooked as a point of critical enquiry, both by cultural commentators and those activists wishing to maintain the spirit of the scene. Indeed, the fight was on between those activists within the scene and the forces of both law and commercial exploitation. The removal of the cultural capital from the greedy palms of the commercial operators created a tension between 'underground' and 'legal' that began to run parallel to the fight between illegal operators and the forces of the law acting under the fresh legislation of the Criminal Justice Act.[5]

This retreat from commercialism (and from the law itself) informed the music with new vigour. Problems emerged on two fronts stemming from the same lack of self-analysis that inflicted previous popular genres. Firstly, the tension between underground and commercial/lawful began to define the music's reason for existence, overshadowing the revisiting of the actual reasons why the scene was birthed in the underground in the first place. To be at odds with the state and the commercial forces was simply enough, to examine and extend the parameters of what it meant to be 'underground' became at best secondary. Secondly, the retreat from commercialism was seen to be achieved by making the music faster, harder and more unpalatable to commercial extractors – a tactic tried unsuccessfully by punk rock. The emergence of the stream from hardcore to gabba to harshcore and stormcore achieved only the effect of creating new commercial ventures and then eventually isolating the music from all but the most diehard of activists. In effect, when the brutality became unmarketable, the music became intolerable. The radical substance of the sound of techno had been forgotten in both the pressure to flee from the forces of law and the forces of commercial exploitation.

[5]The Criminal Justice Act was passed in 1994 and, although it contained serious reworking of legislation around arrest, holding and trial, as well as other implications towards protest forms such as demonstrations and picketing, it was also a direct affront on the perceived public threat of the rave scene. The rather surreal outlawing of playing 'repetitive beats' in certain social situations was something that had possible interpretations in many other perfectly innocent circumstances. The 'punk spirit' of the electronic music scene was soon to emerge with deadpan humour. Autechre's 'Anti ep' (Warp records, 1994) had a side of repetitive structured and a side of 'not-quite' repetitive music complete with the following warning: 'Although Flutter has been programmed in such a way that no bars contain identical beats, and can therefore be played under the proposed new law, we advise DJs to have a lawyer and a musicologist present at all times to confirm the non- repetitive nature of the music in the advent of police harassment'.

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Techno theory, such as the catalogue of work compiled by Simon Reynolds,[6] tends to fetishise the music in terms of the physicality and the associated battle with the law. Reynolds, who followed the scene through its ultra-hardcore channels like a harangued news reporter in a war zone, precedents the need to frame it in terms of speed (and calls upon popular theorists like Paul Virlio), making all references to sound and substance part of the grander scheme of a monopoly of flow. Hardcore techno is considered only as total flow, with Reynolds suggesting its meta-music pulse is closer to electricity than anything else. This hypothesis is valid as a model for discussing the techno movement as it entered its most aggressive and convulsive dynamics, but tends to overlook some of the key issues around the muddy formulation of the scene, namely the era of synth-pop and the post-punk electronic music movement. Thus, Reynolds neglects to mention the 1980s synth-pop scene (apart from the obligatory references to Kraftwerk in respect of their influence on the Detroit phenomena), instead referring to the 1980s decade in terms of its stifling, snobbish and decadent club scene. This does two things – firstly it celebrates dance music as pure physicality by setting it against the motionless posing of the new romantic scene, and secondly it serves as a key to describe techno and rave in terms of its communitarian and proletarian nature, thus making the documentation of the music's sound and substance into a documentation of how it manages to avoid the forces that pursue it. If rave and its descendants suffer both in practice and in academic theory from a mindless submission to the drug-culture economy, perhaps this should be seen as a perfectly rational part of the abstract machine whose other elements include the crowd, the music, and a briefly 'deterritorialised' space. While rock music has mythologised heavy muscular labour and/or the sheen of personal professionalism, electronic dance music as flight from and critique of this sweatshop did not simply transfer the scene to weekend leisure, the work-of-reproduction described by autonomist theorists of the 'social factory'. More than that: imagistic mediation was purged to the point where the fetishised, celebrated, liberating/imprisoning object became, in the guise of the sequenced beat, the time measure itself.

Whilst the model of the machine (and latterly the computer) is a key issue in understanding the patterns of subversion and resistance that techno formed, it is imperative to consider how analogies and interpretations of the machines actually changed. The visual codes and contours of the music – its reshaping of the rules of production, circulation and consumption – reflect not only their own struggle to express (and liberate) themselves, but also a changing attitude to technological society. This runs from early attitudes expressed around the synth-pop movement, where domestic technology is seen as something threatening and dehumanising, to an almost oblique fascination, acceptance and celebration of an ultra-technological society. This link to the machine (and the electronic commodity society) then provides a bridge back to the pioneers of electronic music and synth-pop, more importantly extending the previously discussed radical critique that nestles within the very body of the music. Tentatively, this suggests a schism in analysing the sound and substance of dance music, between a desire to mechanise the music and a desire to musicalise the process of (technological) mechanics. This then provides a natural progression of a quasi-dystopian engagement with technology that spans from synth-pop, through to early techno and electro, and up to the rise of the 'bleep' tracks that hit the scene around 1990. Whilst the bleep scene was often categorised as an aspect of renewed localism, such that pioneering bleep labels were based in Northern UK cities (e.g. Warp in Sheffield), these tracks were quickly accepted across the burgeoning dance-floors and rave-spaces throughout the country.

The partition begins to form in the actual dynamics themselves, between genres that work to mechanising the beat and the music (house, garage, etc.), and those genres that work towards making the sounds of the machines themselves (or the hubbub sound of a future controlled by machines) echo across the dance-floor. Key in this latter development is the sound of techno, a music that has been at the forefront of all the subversive aspects of dance music. And key to the essence of techno is the sound of the machine, a fact observed with the ritualistic fervour that greeted the classic bleep tracks such as 'Testone' and 'The Theme' whereby crowds ushered in the tracks with spasmodic hand signals and gawkish body movements. Thus, the increased velocity and intensity of techno, as it moved towards hardcore, can be framed in another dialogue away from the more obvious struggles against the forces of law and commercial exploitation. This obsession to the machine became a mockery of slavery, as the tempo increased to near critical point, the music becoming a data-rush punctuated by electronic signals and breakdowns. A key forcing ground in the music's illegality was in the mushrooming of the pirate radio scene, but it was with the hardcore stations that this bore its true relevance – the whole mode of production becoming a stream of processed signals, teetering on the edge of collapse.

The musical imagining of the machine became intermeshed with both the race to avoid commercial acceptance and the proletarian drug culture that was providing cheap and vicious cocktails of energy and hallucination.

[6]Reynolds work for the Wire magazine, particularly his 'active outings' into the 'Ardkore' (a form of post-CJA techno that pushes the techno and feeling towards an extremity) and 'Jungle' scenes are good references points here, though all of his relevant journalistic and theoretical work is collected in *Energy Flash* (Picador, 1998). This takes his compiled work as a 'master theory' rather than a series of observations.

The techno consumer moved away from being a sounding board for an array of machine bleeps and signal noises, into becoming a part of the machine itself – nourishing itself on energy, ecstasy and pure (processing) speed. An unprecedented freeing (from physical derivation) of sound and (from centralised corporate control) of practice was accomplished by immanent subordination of heterogeneous noise to mathematical measure and control through sequencing of beats: this does not seem like an isolated accident, for it coincides roughly with an analogous process in the wider world of production. The post-Fordist[7] regime of work sees a new usage of technology, with the necessary abstraction and exchange of labour penetrating the social and cultural processes. Creative social-intellectual activity is acknowledged as essential to production, but if that which is produced is still to have exchange value, this qualitative activity must be fully subject to the quantitative measure of abstract labour time. In practice, this leads to an exponential multiplication of administrative apparatus, for what must be managed and accounted for is not simply assembly-line labour, but life itself. Post-Fordist technology sees not only a development of productive technology, but an extensive reworking of the use of technology itself as it seeks to manage and manipulate all activity. The noise of the machine becomes distant to the whirr of the computer, a gentle grinding of data that permeates from every crevice of society.

4. ANTI-CONSCIOUSNESS

The dynamic of the overall scene quickly instilled great change. Gabba and its ultra-fast derivatives retreated to pan-European bolt-holes such as Rotterdam and Frankfurt (mutating then further into 'dark-core' genres), electro retreated to geographic-specific outposts such as the Bunker network in The Hague, such that the 'bleep' and the 'clonk' became almost nostalgic. The scenes that had cherished them and utilised them were either pushed underground or became extinct as they expired their commercial worth.

Synth-pop reappears in a wave of nostalgia, but its innocent expressions of techno-fear seem lost amongst the sleek digital generation (who seek to hide the fact that they are either struggling to hang on to a web-designer job for some high-street company, or slaving away in a data-filing temp job). And, of course, hardcore techno keeps its dedicated band of followers who struggle to find a sound and site for the execution of their anti-authoritarian virtues.

This hardened terrain of 'music in retreat', and the all-pervasive commerciality of 'regularised' dance music, created a hybrid sound of 'intelligent dance music' (IDM). IDM fluctuated in function and substance, with commercial avenues (such as the ill-fated ambient scene) being opened and flooded in a matter of months. The process of bringing into music the sound of the machine flickered briefly across certain tracks and labels (Autechre's 'Anvil Vapre' on Warp being a shimmering example of machine prowess), but IDM lacked the ability to make a stand against commercialism in general as opposed to the commercialism that dominated most dance music. It was not until the start of the twenty-first century that electronic music reasserted itself as something outside of the pre-existing rules of functionality. The 'microsound' scene reached a coherent whole when various disparate projects such as Vienna's Mego label and Frankfurt's Mille Plateaux label drew on a pool of shared 'sound-feelings' and shared 'intimations'.

Microsound genres present a drastic shift in the whole geography of the music sphere, from modes of production, modes of circulation, modes of consumption to the core functionality itself. The surplus of material, the close proximity of sounds and structures and the absence of an established arena of consumption suggests that popular music is finally realising and suppressing the concepts of subversion and resistance. Key to this is the diminishing of functionality, a concept that has harangued previous genres without ever gaining a foothold on the ladder to useful critique. Introducing itself primarily as a sound, to be understood as such, microsound arrived on the back of over ten years of dedicated dance music. If dance music had seen a shift in functionality from the 'buy-me, console-yourself' nature of pop music to an overt signal to physically engage yourself in the structure of the sounds (the social impact of the rave, the rise of ecstasy culture), then microsound cut through this accrued functionality once again. But instead of redefining it in a new direction, its essence became the diminishing of the concept. It is possible to take this as a reaction to both the rise of commercialised 'power genres' such as trance, where people react to the troughs and peaks in the musical atmosphere as opposed to the sounds of the music itself, and to the increasingly forced and false social nature of dance music (the rise of the super-club and celebrity DJ). Dance music began to place limitations on itself through blatant commercialisation and stagnation of its processes – not through any mythical drying up of the well of music. The emergence of established super-clubs hosting super-events, the filtering of dance music into every (commercial) crevice of society, creates an apathy in the reception of the music – the impact of the music, the rush of the drugs, begins to drift away. If house music can be defined in opposition to techno as the mechanising of the beat, then trance becomes a further derivative of this mechanising process – in effect a mechanisation of the mechanisation. A reaction to this is inevitable, and with seemingly no area of dance music left to develop out of view from the

[7]See *Post Fordism and Social Form – A Marxist Debate on the Post-Fordist State* by Werner Bonefeld and John Holloway (Macmillan Press, 1991).

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forces of commercialisation, microsound is the current manifestation of this reaction. What was spectacular, ecstatic and amplified now becomes almost coincidental, ultra-mundane and thinned-out. Like an episode of a soap opera always having to end with a point of high drama, the microsound soap opera celebrates a brutal mundanity, ending not with tantrum, a fatality or a visceral slice of action, but with a truncated piece of irrelevant conversation played out between two strangers or bored familiars in the bleak environment of a chip shop queue or the back of a taxi-cab. Microsound was initially remarked upon in terms of such a micro-processual-meets-mundanity technique, 'like watching the 100 m sprint final in tortuous slow motion, the video link decelerates to such a speed that the sprinters never leave the blocks, the camera lens falls on the details of tiny muscle flexes, ever present anticipations'.[8]

The sound became at the same time concentrated and difficult to comprehend – a series of software events based no longer on hardware instrumentation but on software manipulation. The analogy 'between 0 and 1' was coined to contrast the difference between dance music's reach for infinity by cementing the mix of beats and loops to take the listener through an external and physical journey of endurance, as opposed to this new approach of imagining infinity as the chopping up of all the points between the integers 0 and 1. The listening experience is instead markedly internal and non-physical, a process of introspection verging on psychosis. Within this paradigm shift the emphasis on sheer volume continues to gather pace, expressing an almost ironic regard to its previous genres. If punk proposed the dawning of the DIY ethic, asking the consumers of the music to arm themselves with guitars and microphones and laying down the financial specifics of starting your own record label, if techno mutated such worthy ideals to the confines of the bedroom, promoting anonymity, sampling techniques, and the oh-so-slight deviation of sounds, samples and tempos from track to track (so long as it works on the dance-floor), then microsound pushes these ideas beyond their logical conclusions (if there ever were any?). Stripped of the functionality of dance music, microsound continues apace under new rules of engagement. Utilising facilities like the web and the MP3 format, the genre explodes functionality to the point of it no longer existing. Compilations arrive every week, packaged in clever greyscale shapes and functional boxes (harking back to the ironic aesthetics of labels like Fast Product), nodal 'share' and 'download' sites on the web become grid-locked with material. Microsound transgressed previous modes of functionality to became more a mode of communication, a permanent record of experimentation in which anyone can tap in at any particular tangent and take things any way they like. Ideas seemingly run dry and become manipulations of ideas, which are then played out on other ideas (and manipulated ideas); 'Clicks and Cuts' is a current manifestation of this process – spawning genres like micro-house, click-hop. New forms of experimentation in entertainment begin to emerge – self-organised and small-scale. 'Clicks and cuts' is but one of the musical manifestations of this scene (witnessed elsewhere through small no-fi labels like Lucky Kitchen, Diskono and Hobby Industries), and for a while remains tied to a process of communication (as opposed to pop's drive for popularity or dance music's drive for physicality). The social crucible for this music remains to be established, with some suggestions that socialising functions (as we previously knew them) are no longer in definition. Instead, the Internet becomes the locus – the registering of an encoded aural documentation somewhere in cyberspace with the chance that maybe (or maybe not) someone will find it . . .

Microsound has not been without its circus of theorists, seemingly making up for the drought of critical diversity directed at the rave scene. Prime mover label Mille Plateaux recently presented a triple CD ('Clicks and Cuts 2', Mille Plateaux, MP98, 2001) of 'clicks and cuts' with a bulk of theoretical work nestling in amongst the tracks. This attempts to justify the genre in both the tradition of electronic music and the tradition of engaged critical activity played out by the avant-garde. The click is discussed as being an essentially substitutive function within the music, having parallels in modern technological society. This then provides a framework for suggesting that the music is somehow engaging the listener on a critical level, encouraging them to re-interpret the codes and lines of society (the club, the street, leisure, work, . . .) through the mutated syntax of the click sound. In turn, this allows the music to expand from the original 4/4-based introspective deconstruction to a more widespread infection of other genres (they talk about 'click-hop', etc) to more disjointed tones and incursions into the conscience of the machine, aligning itself with the idea that the click is a third state between on and off, an ever-present suggestion or anticipation. This belies a strange parallel with Marx's ideas on the state of 'becoming' – a formulation to go beyond sociological analysis and reach for the dynamics of revolution. A more direct comparison would be with the situationist's call for 'psychogeography' – a practical technique for navigating physical and social structures using deranged or anti-functional maps.

The shift in the listening ritual of the music has been central to understanding the nature and diminishing functionality of the music, giving rise to the awkward situation in actually justifying it as something to be experienced. Collections are reviewed in terms of quirky journalism, a license to craft the most bizarre 'this sounds like . . .' type theories, whilst the question of 'what is a review?' (in reference to the specific function

[8]See 'Between 0 and 1' in *CTRL-ALT-DELETE* magazine, available from 51 Holtwood Road, Sheffield S4 7BA, UK.

of the music) is politely avoided. The glut of material across this scene has resulted in a few blanket criticisms of the music in terms of an accused lack of focus or, even worse, a complete lack of reason. Strangely enough, another lesser-known situationist practice comes to mind – their brief foray into creating 'industrial art' from the cranking jaws of a machine, seen as a direct assault on the banality of the then-burgeoning art market. It seems obvious that rules of engagement are changing rapidly, that the shift between pop music and dance music (its reason for existence, its notion of what is good and bad, the role of journalism) is now being opened up once again. Raster Noton's double CD, *New Forms: Contemporary Electronic Music in the Context of Art* (Raster Noton, GFKZL 001, 2000), includes an essay by art critic turned techno commentator Simon Pesch which sets out his ideas on the dynamics of the scene. Pesch suggests that pop formulae morphed into a black hole in the late 1980s, and that new types of music emerging demand new forms of reception and appraisal. 'Composition becomes ephemeral' in the context of the club – i.e. a tool for DJs to craft an atmosphere – which in effect seals the reception/judgement systems for dance music with a definite social arena. Pesch then suggests that 'New Forms' takes it a step further 'still standing in the tradition of techno, though scarcely having any connection with techno's cultural context . . . these new forms are deconstructing the concept of material . . . they problematise the conditions which make the production of music possible today'.

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